

Nuancing Gestures: Perpetrators and Victims in Reinhard Kleist's *The Boxer*

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Abstract: Reinhard Kleist's graphic novel *The Boxer* tells the story of Holocaust survivor Harry Haft and his participation in forced boxing matches in Nazi concentration camps. Throughout the work, Kleist works against clear delineations of right and wrong by offering what I term 'nuancing gestures'. Haft is a morally complex protagonist who works against the image of the heroic and sanctimonious survivor, and Kleist identifies other characters that challenge comforting notions of good and bad. The work uses visual correspondences between panels to highlight cycles of interpersonal violence, showing how issues of complicity are carried forward later in life. Furthermore, the graphic novel depicts in vivid detail how traumatic intrusions disrupt Haft's daily life. This article explores how *The Boxer's* particular stylistic rendering of moral ambiguity, complicity, and the longer lasting effects of trauma raises new insights about how the medium of comics can navigate a sensitive and complex Holocaust narrative.

Keywords: Holocaust, graphic novels, complicity, grey zone, *The Boxer*

Introduction

Reinhard Kleist's *The Boxer* (2014, originally published in 2011) tells the story of Holocaust survivor Harry Haft (born Hertzka Haft, also known under the names Hertzko and Herschel). Kleist based his work on Alan Haft's biographic account of his father's life, titled *Harry Haft: Auschwitz Survivor, Challenger of Rocky Marciano* (2006) and closely follows the main events in the biography. The graphic novel depicts Haft's experiences during and after the war, starting with the invasion of his native Belchatów by the Germans in 1939 and following his journey through several concentration camps. There is specific focus on his time in Auschwitz and his participation in forced boxing matches between prisoners that were set up for the entertainment of the Nazis. The monochrome black and white palette of the graphic novel evokes the visual documentation of the Holocaust and is in line with a (popular) cultural tendency to represent the events of the Holocaust without colour.¹ Kleist often uses large swathes

1 It is noteworthy that the cover shows both the title and Haft's boxing gloves in a red tone, a colour that evokes the famous use of red elements in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*



of black to define and demarcate spaces, and he increases his use of black tones in some of the more harrowing episodes, for instance in the panels that depict Haft's time as a member of the *Sonderkommando*.

Throughout *The Boxer*, Haft is positioned as a morally complex character who, in many ways, defies the readers' sympathy. Haft is not the only character that pushes against clear delineations between right and wrong. Kleist identifies more of these 'in-between' characters who challenge comforting notions of good and bad; these figures explore the spaces of grey of Holocaust survival and problematize the archetypal 'evil Nazi' that is a staple of popular culture.² One of the main strengths of the graphic novel is Kleist's use of what I term 'nuancing gestures': visual and verbal strategies in comics that are aimed at presenting a more complex, nuanced, and morally ambiguous view of perpetrator characters. These nuancing gestures do not absolve perpetrator characters of guilt, nor are they aimed at creating stories of redemption. However, these strategies counter a homogeneous view of perpetrators as singularly depraved in favour of a consideration of these characters as humans with a variety of motivations. In addition, the strategies that I investigate in this article also allow for a more comprehensive look at gradations of complicity during the events of the Holocaust, and they position the survivor character as a morally complex figure.³

In this article, I argue that *The Boxer* offers a nuanced perspective of perpetrators and victims through three characters: survivor Harry Haft, SS officer Schneider, and *Kapo* Mischa, who is an old acquaintance of Haft. Although these figures occupy three distinct positions in the events of the Holocaust, Kleist productively complicates the moral rigidity of these categories through his visual rendering of the characters and by exploring how these men and their motives interrelate. By foregrounding these three characters, Kleist aptly demonstrates how Holocaust survival can be predicated on the mis-

(1993). In her work *From Maus to Magneto: Exploring Holocaust Representation in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, Rachel Elizabeth Mandel notes a similar association in the use of red elements on the covers for the instalments of *X-Men Magneto Testament* (Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects, 2015), p. 32.

2 See, e.g., Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Caroline Joan S. Picart and David A. Frank, *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006); Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

3 For a broader, comparative look at 'nuancing gestures' in graphic novels that deal with genocide see Laurike in 't Veld, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels: Considering the Role of Kitsch* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

treatment of others. Furthermore, the character of Harry Haft works against the image of the heroic and sanctimonious victim in favour of a more complex and layered figure. Not unlike Art Spiegelman's depiction of his father Vladek in *Maus*, Haft is a character rendered 'warts and all'.⁴ Kleist considered rejecting the story because Haft 'is not a very likeable character'.⁵ This, however, did not prevent Kleist from ultimately taking on the story, and the artist does not attempt to redeem the protagonist. Rather, Haft's moral complexity is established through his experiences and actions during the Holocaust and in the immediate aftermath. In the second half of the graphic novel, Kleist explores Haft's life after the genocidal events, when he moves to America and starts a boxing career. Here, Kleist uses visual correspondences between panels to highlight cycles of interpersonal violence and he depicts in vivid detail how traumatic intrusions disrupt Haft's daily life, thereby adding further depth and context to the character.

This article brings together comics theory, Holocaust historiography, and perpetrator studies to provide an incisive reading of nuance and anti-Manicheanism in a Holocaust graphic novel. I explore how *The Boxer's* particular stylistic rendering of moral ambiguity, complicity, and the longer lasting effects of trauma raises new insights about how the medium of comics can navigate a sensitive and complex Holocaust narrative. Following perpetrator studies' commitment to engage with the moral complexities of perpetrators, I investigate how Kleist explores the spaces between perpetrator and victim in a way that does not absolve the perpetrators of guilt or positions all victims as complicit, or complicit in equal measure. Instead, *The Boxer* carefully depicts the 'zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness'.⁶ Furthermore, the focus on Haft's life post-Holocaust contributes to a complexity of character that rejects straightforward moral categories and investigates how issues around complicity are carried forward in life.

4 Art Spiegelman in 'Schindler's List: Myth, Movie, and Memory', *The Village Voice*, 29 March 1994, 24–31 (p. 27).

5 Paul Gravett, 'Reinhard Kleist Interview', *Paul Gravett*, 6 July 2014, <http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/reinhard_kleist_interview> [accessed 30 July 2018].

6 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 58.

Power, Complicity, and Ambiguity: Three Characters in *The Boxer*

In an attempt to help his older brother escape the German registration lines, Harry Haft is taken away by the Nazis at the age of 16. Throughout the text, Haft is drawn with distinct furrowed eyebrows; they characterize him as an earnest, determined, and often angry boy/man, but they also function as a distinguishing element when his curly hair is shaved off in the camps. Over the course of five years, Haft is taken to Poznań, Strzelin, Auschwitz, Jaworzno, Flossenbürg, Gross Rosen, and Amberg. His experiences in Auschwitz and his boxing matches in Auschwitz and Jaworzno are the most distressing episodes in the graphic novel, as they powerfully demonstrate the lengths Haft has to go through to survive the genocide. In Auschwitz, he is briefly assigned to work in the crematorium, burning the prisoners' bodies in the ovens. This infernal scene is depicted by Kleist in an abstracted manner, as he uses billowing clouds of black smoke and stark white flames to obscure a full depiction of the horrors.⁷ The darkened and hellish surroundings of the crematorium create stark shadows on Haft's anguished face, rendering him almost unrecognisable. Kleist creates a vivid image of the horrors faced by the *Sonderkommando* through a moment of defamiliarisation of the sensitive content and the image of the protagonist: the artist depicts Haft's task of burning the bodies in the ovens in a manner that is recognisable but not necessarily photographically realistic.⁸ This stylistic choice allows for a compelling rendering of the horrific event and the emotions experienced by Haft, while the partial obscuring of the scene suggests that a traumatic experience like this cannot be represented adequately through a more photorealistic visual mode.

The panels that show the staged boxing matches communicate most poignantly Haft's precarious position in the grey zones of the camps. Primo Levi's seminal work *The Drowned and the Saved* (originally published in 1986) carefully examines how the structure of the *Lager* enables and fosters zones of ambiguity wherein prisoners are encouraged

7 Reinhard Kleist, *The Boxer: The True Story of Holocaust Survivor Harry Haft* (London: SelfMadeHero, 2014), pp. 50–52.

8 For more on how comics can defamiliarize sensitive content, see Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), p.103; Hillary Chute, 'The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"', *Women Studies Quarterly*, 36.1/2 (2008), 92–110.

or forced to become complicit in the totalitarian mechanism. This complicity is a layered construct, and it establishes itself in various forms and with different degrees of responsibility. Using the microcosm of the camps to create a perverse form of subjugated complicity is, according to Levi, 'National Socialism's most demonic crime'.⁹ After breaking down and refusing to work in the crematorium, Haft is, quite miraculously, saved by SS officer Schneider (this name is made up by Haft as he cannot remember the officer's real name), who reassigns him to the *Kanada Kommando*.¹⁰ When Haft is transferred to the Jaworzno camp, where he is forced to work in the coal mines, he is reunited with Schneider. The officer proposes Haft participates in the camp's boxing matches; for Haft, this is an opportunity to gain some privileges and he agrees. At the start of his first boxing match, Haft quickly realizes the meaning of Schneider's statement that 'the fight's finished when one of you can't fight any longer'.¹¹ Over the course of eleven pages, Kleist details what these matches consist of: emaciated and 'half-dead opponents' are brought forward to fight Haft. He quickly learns the 'rules' of this game and his own survival as he performs drawn-out cat and mouse games to keep his public of Nazi officers and soldiers interested. Figure 1 shows Haft fighting his first opponent, an emaciated and clearly frightened prisoner who has been selected by the Nazis. The two men are surrounded by laughing and cheering Nazi personnel, drawn sketchily but recognisably animated in the first panel, and highlighted in more detail in the smaller, second panel. The absence of uniforms highlights the leisurely atmosphere for the Nazis, and the plump figure of the bald man in the smaller panel is contrasted with the gaunt appearance of the prisoners. The panels that depict the punches thrown by Haft demonstrate he has the upper hand, as the force of the blows and their impact on his opponent is underscored by the spikey lines, cloudlike shapes, and the little specks that are drawn around the opponent's body. In these four wordless panels, Kleist conveys the pressure exerted by the audience as well as Haft's understanding of what is demanded of him in order to survive.

⁹ Levi, p. 53.

¹⁰ Alan Haft's biography erroneously states that Harry Haft was assigned to sift through clothes as a member of the *Sonderkommando* after his work in the crematorium. Kleist has corrected this to the *Kanada Kommando* in his graphic novel. Though it is never mentioned explicitly, Haft's work in the crematoria was done by the *Sonderkommando*, of which very few members survived.

¹¹ Kleist, p. 62.

FIGURE 1. *The Boxer*, Reinhard Kleist ©SelfMadeHero.

Just before he lands his final blow, on the bottom half of the page, Haft's narrative voice is featured in a caption stating 'I was sure they'd shoot me if I refused'.¹² He realizes the privileges that come with this sickly form of entertainment – extra rations of food and less demanding work – are tenuous. Subsequently, his survival strategy cancels any empathy: 'I never thought about the men being killed. Only about surviving'.¹³ Haft's position, at the mercy of Schneider while simultaneously brutally reigning in the boxing ring and being forced to negate human compassion, lays bare the precarious in-between positions that were created in the concentration and extermination camps. A pernicious component of the totalitarian system is that it 'degrades its victims and makes them similar to itself'¹⁴; not satisfied with destroying its purported opponents, the Nazi reign makes its victims complicit in this endeavour. Haft's participation in the boxing matches exemplifies how the camps would enable and encourage complicity, forcing prisoners to emulate some of the perpetrators' practices.

¹² Kleist, p. 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Levi, p. 68.

As argued by Doriane Gomet, boxing formed an important part of Nazi ideology, as boxing matches 'helped establish the theory of racial superiority [...] while also offering the masses a state-controlled outlet to let off steam'.¹⁵ This propaganda of racial and physical superiority that was displayed through boxing matches found its way into the concentration camps, where 'inmates were only a medium at the service of ideology-filled entertainment and activities rife with ideology which were an integral part of the body culture of the "master race"'.¹⁶ The matches were also a spectacle that displayed the weakness of the inferior Jews. Following Giorgio Agamben, Gomet argues that the prisoners were *Homo Sacer*, bodies at the disposal of the Nazis that could be killed with complete impunity. Although it is clear that the popularity of the sport and its ideological inflection led to its introduction into the camp setting, there seems to be more at stake when we consider boxing in light of Levi's 'grey zone'. Not only did the boxing matches make a spectacle of the physicality of the Jews and other prisoners, they clearly accommodated an ambiguous zone where one prisoner's survival came at the cost of the other's death. The boxing ring was a space where the SS 'had the opportunity to transform some privileged inmates into devoted accomplices capable of horrific violence against their fellow prisoners'.¹⁷ Within the structures of the camp, the boxing ring constituted an even smaller microcosm in which complicity, privilege, and violence found an expression. In the case of Haft, boxing allows him to regain a sense of identity, something that distinguishes him from the unknown and unnumbered masses of prisoners. Nicknamed 'The Jewish Beast from Jaworzno', Kleist details a sense of pride when Haft fights a French heavyweight champion and manages to win.

Haft's relationship with Schneider is characterized by a thoroughly uneven sense of *quid pro quo*. It is not entirely clear why Schneider first saves Haft from his work in the crematorium, but as the narrative develops, the SS officer uses Haft for various schemes, including taking valuables from the discarded clothes when Haft is a member of the *Kanada Kommando*. In addition, Schneider is revealed to treat Haft marginally better as a way to gain some post-war insurance. After finding Haft in

15 Doriane Gomet, 'Between Survival Strategy and Bloody Violence: Boxing in Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps (1940-1945)', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 33.10 (2016), 1-17 (p. 4).

16 Ibid., p. 4.

17 Ibid., p. 10.

Jaworzno, he brokers a deal: 'If I help you survive, you'll be in my debt. I want you to tell them that I'm not like the others. Would you do that?'¹⁸ Although Schneider is clearly using Haft to better his position – Haft steals valuables for him, wins fights for him, and could be his jail free card – the character is a far cry from the more overtly sadistic and demonic Nazi characters in many popular cultural texts.

This nuancing of the perpetrator figure takes place both on a narrative and an aesthetic level. On a narrative level, Schneider is positioned as an opportunist rather than a malicious sadist, someone who is driven by self-preservation and navigates the system of the camp looking for lucrative and self-enriching schemes. Kleist makes it clear that Schneider's compassion is a direct consequence of this self-preserving determination. When saving Haft from the horrors of the crematorium work, Schneider appears as a dark, shadowy, and faceless figure that states 'I can use him'.¹⁹ By portraying Schneider's appearance to Haft in this obscure and dark form, Kleist positions Schneider as a *deus ex machina* as well as a sinister and ominous figure. For Schneider, favours imply a debt that can be recalled at any time, as his next words to Haft – 'You owe me, Jew' – demonstrate. At the same time, when Schneider saves Haft from a beating given by *Kapo* Mischa, the serendipity of their encounter and Haft's resilience seem to impress the SS officer. This is emphasized by Haft's reading of the sudden reunion: a caption box with Haft's narration states that '[f]or Schneider, surviving was a distinction'.²⁰ This Darwinian take on survival and strength as a commending quality is further explored a couple of pages later, when Schneider equates his position as an SS officer as being with 'the wolves' rather than 'the sheep' (see figure 2).²¹ The perpetrator draws a direct line between himself and Haft as he commends him for being a tough guy and 'not like the others,' while also advising him to learn German because '[i]f you want to howl with the wolves, then speak their language'.²²

18 Kleist, p. 59.

19 Ibid., p. 52.

20 Ibid., p. 58.

21 Ibid., p. 63.

22 Ibid., p. 63.



FIGURE 2. *The Boxer*, Reinhard Kleist ©SelfMadeHero.

The character of Schneider is not positioned as a devious or cruel figure. He is not a 'cipher for unassimilable evil'²³ nor is he characterized by sexual perversions or sexual sadism, like many perpetrator figures in the 'Nazisploitation' film genre and in more mainstream and critically acclaimed popular cultural texts like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) or Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006).²⁴ Like Haft, Schneider's position is morally complex. He saves Haft out of some precarious situations, and he genuinely seems to have some sympathy for the protagonist.²⁵ This sympathy also extends to relatives; when Haft discovers his brother has arrived in the camp, he too is granted extra privileges.

23 Jenni Adams, 'Introduction', in *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. by Jenni Adams and Sue Vice (Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), pp. 1-9 (p-1).

24 See, e.g., Julian Petley, 'Nazi Horrors: History, Myth, Sexploitation', in *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema*, ed. by Ian Conrich (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 205-226; *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, ed. by Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012); Eric Sandberg, 'This Incomprehensible Thing': Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* and the Aesthetics of Excess', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 43.3 (2014), 231-255.

25 Kleist has omitted an episode from the book where Haft breaks his foot – which would usually result in a prisoner's immediate death – but is again saved by Schneider and allowed to stay and work in the camp hospital during his recovery.

As pointed out by Guenter Lewy, the camp personnel could be divided into roughly three categories: 'sadists, those who simply followed the brutalizing routine of the camps, and a very small number of guards who actually refrained from abusing inmates or even occasionally helped them.'²⁶ Schneider seems, at first glance, to fall into the third category. The interaction between Schneider and Haft makes it clear, however, that Schneider's friendly gestures are, first and foremost, for his own benefit. There are no qualms about putting Haft (or any of the other, less trained, prisoners for that matter) in the boxing ring to fight to the death. In that sense, Schneider combines the latter two of Lewy's categories; the majority of the camp personnel would be placed into this second category, as 'cruelty was the routine of the camps and therefore expected'.²⁷ Schneider is not positioned as wickedly evil, but as working the system for his own benefit. His identification with being a wolf demonstrates Schneider's opportunistic stance – he'd rather act and lead like a wolf than be submissive and follow like a herd of sheep – while the animal metaphor also alludes to the 'predatory' character traits of the SS members; the brutality and terror they enacted in organising the genocidal killing. Furthermore, these remarks poignantly expose the systems of complicity that enabled a marginally better treatment. 'If you want to howl with the wolves' does not only mean Haft needs to learn their language, it also means he needs to emulate practices of mistreatment to ensure his own survival.

The visual rendering of Schneider is an important element in the construction of the character as one that defies a quick labelling as aberrant or malicious. It is appealing to render the perpetrators as distinctly different from the victims and to clearly establish moral opposites through their visual appearance. In this way, depravity can be clearly read from the perpetrators' menacing appearance. This possibility of creating a clear visual distinction between perpetrators and victims is aided by the SS attire. As argued by Susan Sontag in 'Fascinating Fascism' (originally published in 1974), the total power of the SS members was partly communicated through their apparel. Sontag points out that the sheer brutality of the SS coupled with the rigid cut

26 Guenter Lewy, *Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 14. In Lewy's work, his emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust results in a relativist stance towards other instances of organized and premeditated mass violence, including the Armenian genocide. Although his work on Nazi perpetrators is valuable for this article, I feel compelled to explicitly distance myself from his scholarship on other genocidal atrocities.

27 Ibid., p. 17.

of the uniform, the high boots, and hats with the eagle and skull and bones insignia can become fascinating, and even erotically charged: '[i]f the message of fascism has been neutralized by an aesthetic view of life, its trappings have been sexualized'.²⁸ These frightening but fascinatingly adorned figures are plentiful in our cultural landscape – from films and television series like *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Holocaust* (1978), and *Schindler's List* (1993), to video games like *Wolfenstein*, and Holocaust graphic novels like *Auschwitz* (2002, translated to English in 2003) – perpetrators are rendered as powerful, cold, sadistic, and impeccably dressed (at times portrayed with distinctive paraphernalia). This type of representation arguably provides a comfortable sense of moral detachment. We recognize these figures as archetypal evil Nazis and do not have to engage with questions about their reasons for participation or their humanity: they are all clearly monsters. Moreover, they can even become fascinating because they are so wholly othered.

In *The Boxer*, Schneider is not rendered in a caricatured or hyperbolic manner, nor is his uniform particularly highlighted. Kleist has drawn the character as a generic man, not unlike many other characters in the graphic novel. This does not mean that perpetrators and victims are not contrasted in terms of their visual appearance: Kleist has taken pains to accurately depict the camp prisoners, drawing them with a gaunt appearance and pained expressions. Figure 2 clearly shows the juxtaposition between victim and perpetrator; Haft's emaciated and half-naked appearance is established through the use of heavy lining and use of black surfaces; his malnourished, shaved, and hunched figure demonstrates the processes of dehumanisation in the camps. Schneider, on the other hand, appears relatively healthy and well fed, wearing a dress shirt and a tie. The scene starts with Schneider in full attire, but when he teaches Haft some boxing tricks, he takes his jacket off and rolls up his sleeves. This has a double effect: the removal of the uniform makes Schneider less of a menacing and archetypal Nazi figure, while the fact that his jacket is still visible on the bench behind the men subtly reminds us of the power dynamic. Haft's facial expression in the last panel of figure 2 seems to demonstrate his full understanding of the selfishness of the scheme proposed, while Schneider's face displays a calculated kinder approach which is further underscored by his motivational exhortation that Haft should show them what he can do (who is meant by 'them' is kept purposefully vague by Schneider).

28 Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Vintage Books, 1981), p. 100.

Although the differences between these men and their positions are clear, neither of these characters is drawn in a wholly inhuman or caricatured manner. Visually, they inhabit the same drawn universe, and Schneider is not depicted in a more remarkable or menacing manner than other characters. Coupled with Schneider's position in Haft's story, this visual rendering aids a consideration of the perpetrator's humanity. Schneider is a dubious, faulty, and in many ways despicable figure, but he is also clearly rendered as a human being.

The Boxer's depiction of Schneider ties in with a larger cultural interest in providing a narrative perspective on perpetrators of genocide. A narrative perspective, in this context, refers to an insight into the motivations, thoughts, and feelings of the perpetrator.²⁹ This interest in exploring the moral makeup of perpetrator figures is seen in cultural texts like *The Kindly Ones* (2006), *The Reader* (2008), and in scholarship on (the representation of) perpetrators.³⁰ Investigating the perpetrators' motivations remains a controversial feat. By focusing on the inner workings of the perpetrator, there is a danger that the systematic destruction of the European Jews and the violent brutalities carried out by perpetrators in the camps will be underrepresented or even omitted. Furthermore, there is a fear that focusing on the perpetrator might not only lead to a rationalization of the horrors – 'to understand may be to justify'³¹ – but that the recipient might ultimately become 'infected' and morally thwarted. This 'contagion anxiety'³² often precludes a more comprehensive look at perpetrator characters.

How does the character of Schneider fit in with other contemporary cultural texts that investigate perpetrators? *The Boxer* does not provide much of a narrative perspective on Schneider. Aside from the wolf/

29 See Erin McGlothlin, 'Narrative Perspective and the Holocaust Perpetrator: Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* and Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. by Jenni Adams (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 157–177.

30 See, e.g., Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), Jenni Adams and Sue Vice, *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations, and Dynamics*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (Oxon: Routledge, 2018). See also contributions to the *Journal for Perpetrator Research* such as Kjell Anderson, 'Who Was I to Stop the Killing? Moral Neutralization among Rwandan Genocide Perpetrators', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 39–63; Sybille Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony?', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 85–104.

31 Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 82.

32 Jenni Adams, 'Reading (as) Violence in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*', in *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. by Jenni Adams and Sue Vice (Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), p. 26.

sheep analogy, we do not learn about his motivations, nor do we receive much backstory or insight into Schneider's thoughts and feelings. This is, of course, caused by his position within Haft's biography. He is an important figure for Haft's survival but peripheral in the larger arch of the narrative. Schneider is, however, a figure that aptly demonstrates Levi's observation that '[c]ompassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic'.³³ What *The Boxer* demonstrates well is that this compassion is not necessarily loving and selfless but one mostly driven by self-preservation. Schneider is merciful because he can use Haft for his own betterment. Schneider's pragmatic and utilitarian stance towards Haft – one that does not negate the brutalities that Schneider inflicts on him and others by extension – allows readers to consider the perpetrator as a layered and ambiguous figure, without absolving his crimes or delving in to his psyche. Although *The Boxer* does not provide a comprehensive psychological investigation of Schneider, it offers some subtle and tentative suggestions as to why Schneider is a perpetrator. These suggestions point towards a person that takes pride in being at the top of the hierarchy and exerting power in that position, while also constantly looking for ways in which he can improve his position further, even if this undermines the ideological framework of National Socialism. The fact that Schneider is drinking in figure 2 (he offers Haft a swig from his flask as well) is interesting in this context: does the alcohol help to blot out some of his actions, is he trying to 'buy' Haft and ease him into the boxing scheme he has set up, or is the drink a part of his SS persona? Notwithstanding the importance of these nuancing gestures, the graphic novel ultimately underscores that the SS character has the power to decide over Haft's fate and highlights the precariousness of the situation for Haft at several points – most clearly when Schneider sets Haft up to box for him, and when he easily discards Haft and takes off when the camp is attacked.

The other important figure that functions as a means to show the grey band of the concentration camps is Mischa, an acquaintance from Belchatów that Haft meets again in Jaworzno. In Alan Haft's biography Mischa is described as a 'hoodlum' who takes pleasure in the cruelty he inflicts. Although Kleist does not refer to his criminal past, Mischa is immediately positioned as a harsh *Kapo* who finds joy in repeatedly beating Haft. Like many other prisoner-functionaries, Mischa uses excessive

33 Levi, p. 56.

violence to exert terror on the other prisoners while proving his worth to the Nazis.³⁴ As described by Levi, functionaries like *Kapos* 'were free to commit the worst atrocities on their subjects as punishment for any transgressions, or even without any motive whatsoever'.³⁵ Kleist reserves a page to show Mischa's mistreatment of Haft, showing how the *Kapo* responds to Haft's question – 'why are you helping these pigs?' – with instant and excessive violence that continues for days.³⁶ The confrontations between Harry and Mischa echo Inga Clendinnen's observation that 'Jewish and Gentile survivors alike have testified it was the immediate, gratuitous assaults by fellow-prisoners that most destroyed hope and fortitude'.³⁷ Both the graphic novel and the biography underscore the cruelty enacted by the *Kapo*, and the pleasure Mischa seems to take from it. The post-war confrontation between the two men is highlighted more extensively in the graphic novel than in the written biographic account. This episode, which takes place over three pages, lays bare the moral complexities of the in-between positions in the camps. When Haft recognizes Mischa back in Belchatów, he corners him into an alley and pulls his gun, intending to shoot the former *Kapo*.

In this scene, Kleist literally and figuratively draws out the inverted power structures, with Mischa crouched on the ground, desperately pleading for his life, as Haft towers over him in the last panel (see figure 3). When compared with figure 2, we see how the power dynamic between the two characters is rendered through their spatial positioning. In figure 2, Haft occupies more of the lower space of the panel, as he is crouched down while Schneider remains standing. In figure 3, the roles are reversed, and Haft now occupies a standing position while Mischa is positioned lying down at the bottom of most of the panels. There are more visual correspondences between the two situations: in the second panel of figure 2, Schneider is drawn as a standing, shadowy figure who has Haft's life in his hands. In a similar vein, the first panel of figure 3 depicts Haft as a standing figure in the shadow, equally imbued with the power over Mischa's life or death. Before Haft draws a gun, he uses

34 It is important to note that '[t]here are many witness statements and publications [. . .] which support the portrayal of *Kapos* as brutal sadists, and just as many which praise their courage and humanity in the face of adversity and danger. See René Wolf, 'Judgement in the Grey Zone: The Third Auschwitz (*Kapo*) Trial in Frankfurt in 1968', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9.4 (2007), 617–635 (p. 617).

35 Levi, p. 46.

36 Kleist, p. 57.

37 Clendinnen, p. 36.



FIGURE 3. *The Boxer*, Reinhard Kleist ©SelfMadeHero.

his boxing skills to work Mischa down to the ground, the impact of his punch reflected by motion lines and specks of blood in the preceding panels. Mischa desperately attempts to thwart his death sentence by stating that he, like Haft, was just trying to survive: 'I thought they'd spare me if I acted like them [. . .] The only thing that mattered was staying alive, you know that as well as me! Who was the Beast of Jaworzno, huh?!!!!'.³⁸ Mischa's attempt to implicate Haft in a sense of complicity in the death of others ultimately falls on deaf ears, and he only narrowly escapes when Haft's gun falters.

The figure of Mischa and the confrontation between Haft and Mischa raise pertinent questions about levels of complicity, the use of sadistic violence, and Holocaust survival. Although Mischa's brutal violence is made apparent, *The Boxer* tentatively allows for a more complex reading of this violence as one that is partly motivated by the power structures of the camp. Haft's narrative voice posits that 'Mischa seemed to enjoy beating me in front of the guards'.³⁹ This wording suggests that Mischa puts his violence on display for his

³⁸ Kleist, p. 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

superiors, and this notion is also repeated in his post-war appeals to Haft. *The Boxer* thus asks readers to consider the option that Mischa's cruelty is not 'simply' or wholly sadistic but rather constitutes a form of survival. This consideration does not mitigate the severity or impact of Mischa's actions as *Kapo*, nor does it absolve him of guilt. However, it does allow for a grey space in which his actions are not solely motivated by a sense of enjoyment but rather by a complicity with a corrupted and perverted system that encourages, and to some extent rewards, the use of violence by prisoner-functionaries. In their post-war confrontation, Mischa clearly positions himself as a victim in his pleas to Haft, drawing a connection between the two men in an attempt to level their use of violence. This positioning of himself as a victim is visually underscored in the confrontation between the two men because Mischa is helplessly lying on the floor, at the mercy of Haft. At the same time, Haft's horrific experiences make his retaliatory actions towards Mischa understandable. The depiction of the post-war confrontation creates a nuancing moment in which readers are asked to consider both sides, or at the very least to tentatively consider Mischa's complicity as one that is created by the camp system. Is Mischa's use of violence more despicable than Haft's? And if not, where does that leave Haft in the grey bands between victim and perpetrator? Although these questions might come to mind, they are also partly voided because Kleist shows that a desperate Mischa will say anything to escape his death sentence. The confrontation between the two men foregrounds, again, how self-preservation is a primary, and primal, drive in life-and-death confrontations.

Cycles of Violence and Traumatic Intrusions

Haft's position as a morally complex character is further highlighted in the pages that deal with the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and Haft's post-war time in America. In the final days of the war, Haft kills several people in order to go unnoticed and survive. When Haft manages to escape a death march, he hides in the forest and kills an SS soldier who is taking a swim. Dressed in his attire, Haft stays the night with a German couple but when they start asking critical questions, he shoots them. Although these murders are shocking, they are still understandable within the framework of a desperate and downtrodden Haft who is attempting to survive in the treacherous final days of the

war. However, the graphic novel omits another murder: Haft shoots a German woman point blank and tells a young teenage boy, who is hiding in the closet, to stay put. In an interview with Kleist, the artist stated that

[t]here was a scene during his escape from the death marches where he killed some people. No one will ever be able to verify these events. So in this case, I decided to leave one of the truly brutal killings out. It would have been too much. But nevertheless, it does not make him nicer.⁴⁰

Indeed, another murder might have been 'too much' to depict in the graphic novel, but there is also something thoroughly upsetting about Haft's decision to spare the boy but leave him after having just killed his mother. Although Kleist has decided to omit this particular murder from his work, our sympathy for the protagonist is tested in the graphic novel nonetheless. This complication of a straightforward sympathy undermines 'trauma culture's romanticized survivor figure'⁴¹, a figure Anne Rothe links to Elie Wiesel and assigns to American Holocaust discourse specifically, but one that's arguably more pervasive in global popular cultural depictions of the Holocaust. Judith Doneson argues that Jews in Holocaust films often feature as weak, passive, and feminised figures who need the protection of a strong Christian/Gentile character (*Schindler's List* is a primary example of this type of depiction).⁴² This particular trope of the Jews as powerless and weak is dependent on stark binary oppositions between the Jewish victims and Nazi perpetrators. This strict moral division leads to a portrayal of the Jew as completely powerless and without any narrative agency, and a depiction of the Nazis as all-reigning and wicked. In this, often melodramatic, set-up, the Jewish characters thus function as 'the mere foil that drives the good versus evil plot'.⁴³ Not only does the figure of Haft not conform to the depiction of Jewish character as weak and passive, his character also works against 'notions that suffering generates spiritual purification'.⁴⁴

40 Alex Dueben, 'Reinhard Kleist Stings Like a Bee in "The Boxer"', *CBR.com*, 13 May 2014, <<https://www.cbr.com/reinhard-kleist-stings-like-a-bee-in-the-boxer/>> [accessed 1 August 2018].

41 Anne Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), p. 40.

42 Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

43 Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 60.

44 Rothe, p. 14.

Throughout the graphic novel, Kleist positions Haft as a resourceful character who is constantly attempting to find ways to improve his situation, giving him a clear sense of narrative agency. Haft arguably fits some elements of the aforementioned trope of Jewish characters in that Schneider partly functions as the Gentile character who protects and helps him. However, as mentioned above, Schneider's protection is self-serving, so that the trope of the strong Gentile who saves the day is immediately complicated within the narrative. Schneider's protection is an important part of Haft's survival, but it is clear that the protagonist is also constantly placed in jeopardy by Schneider's decision to put him in the boxing ring. Furthermore, *The Boxer* clearly works against a sentimental Holocaust story through the depiction of Haft, a character that undermines a melodramatic setup of the victim as an ennobled and romanticized figure. The graphic novel negates the notion that suffering somehow leads to a moral sanctification of the victim as Haft has not come out of the war an exalted and purified man. An important visual strategy that demonstrates the refusal to position Haft as an ennobled figure, while also simultaneously allowing for a sense of sympathy, is the way in which Kleist underscores the presence of violence in his life.

In *The Boxer*, Haft is positioned as someone who is both on the receiving end of violence and the person dealing the blows. There are a multitude of panels that depict violence in a variety of settings: in a familial environment, in the various camps, and in the context of Haft's professional boxing career. These panels often show characters with their fists raised, and when punches are thrown these are often accompanied by motion lines and spikey forms that indicate the impact, like in figure 1. Occasionally, Kleist also uses onomatopoeia to further underscore the effects of the violence. The connections between these panels throughout the graphic novel call forth Thierry Groensteen's notion of 'braiding': the visual correspondences between non-adjacent panels in a comic that can become meaningful because they form a network.⁴⁵ Violence is present right at the beginning of the story, when the family dynamics of the American Haft family provide evidence of a deeply troubled man. In the opening pages, son Alan Haft recounts his father's volatile and hot-tempered demeanour. 'I was often scared of him' – a caption states while Kleist draws Harry raising his

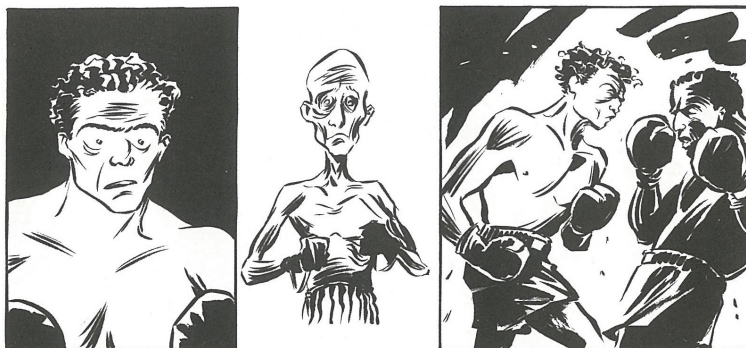
⁴⁵ See Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) and 'The Art of Braiding: A Clarification', trans. by Ann Miller, *European Comic Art*, 9.1 (2016), 88–98.

hand at his son as he towers over him – '[m]om would try and make up for his outbursts by telling me about his terrifying past. I didn't want to hear about it. The now was bad enough'.⁴⁶ When the narrative moves back in time to 1939, the use of physical violence is transported to Harry Haft's upbringing, when his older brother Aria takes up a disciplinary role after the death of their father. Two panels depict a fuming Aria punching Haft in the face and kicking him as he is lying down on the ground. This violence takes place right until the moment Harry is big and strong enough to retaliate and threaten his brother, after which Aria backs down. However, violence continues to structure Haft's life, from the horrors of the Holocaust to his post-war boxing career that ends with a fixed fight against Rocky Marciano.

In drawing connections between these violent encounters throughout Haft's life, Kleist works to achieve two things. Firstly, these non-contiguous panels form a visual network that functions as a blueprint of Haft's life: here is a character whose experiences are constantly shaped by physical violence. And secondly, by underscoring how violence continues after Haft's Holocaust experiences, particularly in a family setting, Kleist tentatively suggests that victims are not necessarily above moral approach, and that they can become perpetrators in other situations as well. By opening *The Boxer* with a panel that shows Haft as an aggressive and violent father figure, Kleist immediately positions his protagonist as a complex and deeply scarred man. However, the end of the story, which loops back to Haft's post-war family life, offers some nuancing: Harry Haft takes his son to visit Leah, his fiancé from Belchatów whom he lost touch with during the war, and whom he has been trying to find ever since (his post-war boxing career is partly established in the hope Leah might see his name in the papers). He has finally found her in Miami, suffering from cancer and in her final days. Kleist's depiction of their reunion shows a compassionate and tearful Haft, an image that complements and nuances the hardened and brutish figure that the character has become.

Another way in which Kleist navigates the complexity of Haft's character is through the representation of traumatic intrusions in his American life. In line with the 'classic' Freudian psychoanalytic model of trauma, *The Boxer* emphasizes the haunting nature of trauma. Echoing Freud's notion of the intrusive and repetitive nature of traumatic experiences into everyday life, Kleist inserts several panels in

⁴⁶ Kleist, p. 6.

FIGURE 4. *The Boxer*, Reinhard Kleist ©SelfMadeHero.

the post-war story that depict some of Haft's distressing Holocaust experiences. These panels, often showing one or multiple moments from Haft's boxing matches in the camps, poignantly communicate how his memories intrude upon the present. Throughout the work, Kleist interchanges panels with and without lined borders as a way to create a dynamic page lay-out. All of the panels that include flashbacks are also borderless, and in addition to contributing to the lay-out of the page and signalling a clear division between past and present, the absence of a lined border also conveys a sense of how these memories are neither neatly contained nor 'boxed off'.

Figure 4 shows how the image of a starving and frightened opponent temporarily startles Haft, who is in the middle of a post-war boxing match. As he continues his fight against his American opponent, Kleist repeats the image of the prisoner as he receives Haft's blows in a past time, ending up defeated on the ground. Kleist draws this final image from the point of view of Haft, his bloodied fists sticking out at the bottom of the page. The juxtaposition of the two matches poignantly visualizes Cathy Caruth's designation of the 'double wound' that trauma imposes, the 'oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival'.⁴⁷ The flashbacks of the Holocaust boxing matches are a very literal visual manifestation of the unbearable nature of the event and Haft's survival – to have lived while others died. At the same time, their insertion in an episode of

⁴⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 7.

Haft's post-war life and his dogged determination to end the fight underline his firm wish to move on and pursue his boxing career.

As pointedly argued by Harriet E. H. Earle, 'comics uses its arsenal of formal representational techniques to produce affect in the reader and, in doing so, mimics (some part of) the feelings and experience of trauma'.⁴⁸ Although the medium of comics cannot fully grasp the experience of trauma, its formal techniques make it possible to communicate something 'beyond the purely factual'.⁴⁹ These representational techniques include, but are not limited to, the use of perspective, the gutter, and the process of 'closure'⁵⁰: the way in which the comics reader imaginatively connects the different panels into a continuous narrative sequence. In figure 4, there is no real, defined gutter, as the middle panel blends into the white space around the other two panels. This middle panel stands out between the two bordered panels, and the absence of a defined gutter, in conjunction with the incongruity of the prisoner figure within the narrative sequence of the post-war boxing match, further aids our reading of this image as one that represents a previous point in time and is only visible to Haft. By alternating between different points in time, the graphic novel conveys how the painful experiences come to haunt Haft at a pivotal moment. In addition, Kleist plays with perspective to increase the emotional impact of the image, as the prisoner is looking right out of the page, not only staring back at Haft but also at the reader. The subsequent panels that depict Haft's (bloodied) fists strengthen this notion of a first-person perspective that implicates the reader. In this sequence, the traumatic images do not include dialogue or captions, which connects to Judith Herman's observation that 'traumatic memories lack verbal and narrative context, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images'.⁵¹ By showing how these vivid Holocaust memories intrude in Haft's life, the sequence stimulates an affective response towards its protagonist, which in turn fosters a sense of understanding and sympathy.

Although the graphic novel demonstrates that traumatic experiences return to haunt Haft – perhaps because they haven't been processed in the same manner as other experiences – these panels do not obstruct the overall telling of Haft's story. In this sense, the 'verbal and narra-

48 Harriet E.H. Earle, *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017), p. 43.

49 Ibid, p. 43.

50 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), p. 45.

51 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 2001), p. 38.

tive context' that Herman observes as absent in traumatic memories is nonetheless offered in the story. Both in the biography and its graphic adaptation, Haft's story is characterized by its straightforward and chronological unfolding. Although the veracity of some of the episodes in the story can be questioned (there is an episode of cannibalism in Flossenbürg that cannot be proven by historical documentation), their truthfulness is not in question for Haft. He does not doubt his own experiences and seems to have no problem going through the events in a straightforward chronological fashion. Counter to classic trauma theory's insistence on the 'unspeakability' of trauma – the proposition that traumatic events cannot be processed straightforwardly, resist representation, and thus depart from an absence – Haft's traumatic experiences are for the most part presented as 'speakable'. What this means in terms of visibility is that the work depicts most of the main events in Haft's life, and particularly the boxing matches during the Holocaust, in a visually comprehensive manner, showing them in detail, from different points of view, and placed within a chronological timeline. The horrors Haft endures are detailed in a narrative mode that focuses more on the unfolding of the events rather than on Haft's feelings and reflections, thereby moving the reader through the actions and consequences rather than providing ample space for rumination or reflection. The caption boxes that list Haft's narrative voice are mostly descriptive and anchor the images because they contextualize and explain what we see in the panels. In this regard, the story does not depart from a sense of not knowing, and the graphic novel echoes more pluralistic trauma theories that stress the fact that trauma is an individual experience that leads to different responses and does not necessarily result in dissociation or speechlessness.⁵²

At the same time, the panels that depict how painful memories return aptly show the intrusive and debilitating nature of trauma. These images form a visual counterpoint to the more linear episodes in the graphic novel because they present the entanglement of past and present on the page. This temporal collapse emphasizes that Holocaust experiences leave indelible marks on the survivors' psyches. It is important to note that the written biography only briefly refers to Haft's traumatic hauntings, as Alan Haft states that his father 'lived with

52 See Michelle Balaev, 'Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered' in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

nightmares his entire life'.⁵³ Kleist visually addresses these nightmares in order to explore the longer lasting effects of traumatic experiences on an individual, while these panels also foster a sense of sympathy for the protagonist. Furthermore, Haft was silent about his experiences for many years, so a sense of unspeakability of his experiences does apply. The opening and ending of the graphic novel include a panel in which Haft promises his son Alan to tell him everything one day (a day that arrived years later). The reasons for this long period of self-imposed silence are not entirely clear; guilt, trauma, and a desire to leave things behind and not dwell on them could have played a part. The presence of Haft's story is thus complemented by the knowledge that a long absence preceded it.

Conclusion

When considering perpetrators, victims, and forms of complicity, it is pertinent to take heed of Christopher Browning's words:

Perpetrators did not become fellow victims (as many of them claimed to be) in the way some victims became accomplices of the perpetrators. The relationship between perpetrator and victim was not symmetrical. The range of choice each faced was totally different.⁵⁴

Although *The Boxer* connects the three characters Haft, Schneider, and Mischa through their drive for self-preservation and survival, it demonstrates clearly that the meaning of survival and the range of choices each of these characters faces is completely different. The perverse complicity that is fostered within the camp system forces Haft to engage in life-or-death violence against fellow prisoners in order to ensure his own survival. Mischa arguably has more space to negotiate his violence against other prisoners, and his actions are therefore more clearly up for moral judgment. In contrast, Schneider's perpetrator position allows a wealth of choices. As a member of the SS, Schneider can be opportunistic, navigating the camp system to fit his needs. For Schneider, violence is ordered, enacted, but never received.

Notwithstanding Browning's caution not to approach perpetrators and victims in a similar manner or presume a degree of symmetry, it

⁵³ Alan Scott Haft, *Harry Haft: Survivor of Auschwitz, Challenger of Rocky Marciano* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), p. 170.

⁵⁴ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 187.

is also equally important to complicate overly rigid categorizations between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, in order to more fully address the in-between areas that are part of organized mass violence. As posited by Timothy Williams, 'people can often be more aptly located in the "grey zones" between these categories, or in more nuanced positions.'⁵⁵ Haft's story nuances clear-cut categorizations of perpetrators and victims by demonstrating how survival can be predicated on violence that is perpetrated amongst prisoners in order to gain privileges that can constitute the difference between life and death. Through his linework and use of spatial positioning, Kleist draws the distinct (power) differences between his characters without positioning the Nazi perpetrator as monstrous. Furthermore, Kleist's visual emphasis on the disruptive effects of Haft's traumatic experiences and the persistence of violence in his life stimulates an affective response towards the protagonist while also showing that Holocaust survival does not necessarily ennoble the victim. Haft is a flawed and problematic character, but he is also deeply human. The graphic novel thus clearly demonstrates that moral complexity does not stand in the way of an emotive Holocaust narrative.

55 Timothy Williams, 'Agency, Responsibility, and Culpability: The Complexity of Roles and Self-representations of Perpetrators', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 39–64 (p. 39).

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