

Littell’s “The Kindly Ones” and the ‘Aesthetic Moment’ of Max Aue: A Socio-aesthetical Approach¹

Daan Rutten
 Utrecht University
d.rutten@uu.nl

Almost three decades after the publication of ‘Male fantasies’, the fascinating cultural and psychological inquiry into the minds of German Freikorps officers in the interwar period by cultural sociologist Klaus Theweleit, the American-French author Jonathan Littell wrote the bestseller novel *The Kindly Ones* (original: *Les Bienveillantes*). The novel recounts the experiences of the fictional SS officer Max Aue and Littell is clearly well informed through former historical and cultural research, and especially through the research of Theweleit. Still, the novel *The Kindly Ones* rattled the cage after it was released in 2006. The book managed to win two important French awards, though multiple literary critics reviewed the book in shock, criticizing the novel with adjectives as monstrous and perverse. Why is the aesthetic fantasy, apparently, more forceful and appalling than the truth?

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What I want to do here, is to introduce a preliminary notion of 'the aesthetic moment'. It tries to connect authorship with aesthetics and society. It aims at giving a very basic alternative for two common conceptions of art and literature: namely Art as a representation of something else – such as social realism -, and Art or literature as presenting a fiction that can only be grasped with concepts such as 'the beautiful' or 'the sublime'. What does this 'aesthetic moment' look like and what are the conditions to achieve such a thing?

To illustrate this I will use Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly ones*, first published in French in 2006. This novel is interesting in this case because Littell did his absolute best to recreate a plausible world for his endeavor into fascist consciousness. It is reported that Littell had actually read hundreds of books on Nazi-Germany and "The Final Solution" before unleashing his protagonist Maximilian Aue, the SS-observant, on his trip through the *Third Reich*.

Though, it is hardly imaginable that Littell took the effort to write almost a thousand pages of fiction, just to make us readers aware of the polyphony in fascism-studies. In interviews, Littell warns us that Aue was never meant to be a realistic protagonist. It is also true, that Littell, as a writer, wanted to crawl into the mind of the perpetrator. I think that Littell wanted to test what the power of imagination and creation is capable of, within constructed fascist reality. That is why, I guess, the protagonist Aue became a very special perpetrator. He is a dandy, who loves to read Blanchot and is preoccupied with homosexual, transgressive escapism. He is a persecutor but also, as a professional observer, an outsider, a *Papiersoldat*.

I think this terrifying but also fascinating novel has another, somewhat obscene message to come out of the mind of a Nazi-officer: if the 'aesthetic moment' gets a chance, there are ways out of social ties, out of heteronomy, out of fixed images and rules. Aesthetics and art won't change the world in a blink of an eye, though it is, I believe, the first step that initiates social change or major scientific progress, if taken seriously.

In fact, the search for the 'aesthetic moment' is presented to us in the heart of some forms of scholarship as well. I think we can distill some of the conditions for the aesthetic moment from a Dutch sociologist, Willem Schinkel, who is pleading for a renewed critical sociology informed by post structuralism. His sociology is not aiming at what 'is seen' of society but what 'can also be seen' in a new mode of the social.

Schinkel urges for a critical operation as a scholar in order to try and see what is almost impossible to see from within society, while being in the actual construction of myths, politics, laws, language games and phantasms.

Of course Schinkel is not as naïve to believe that the true critical sociologist can rise up to a Archimedean point somewhere in the sky above, from where he can see the 'truth' about society. He rather adopts the figure walking the Möbius-strip. The Möbius-strip has no real inside or outside, as we know. This 'virtual' realm that is the essence of the Möbius-strip is a continuum that is only partly actualized; that means it is partly stratified and organized by and through contingent language games and images, morals, myths and societal structures. Outside the 'actual' is the pure realm of the 'virtual', that only can defined with terms such as complexity or amorphous, chaotic space.²

The realm of the virtual cannot be seen easily from within the realm of the actual. Though, there are markers, signifiers of the constant operation of actualizing and virtualizing of

² Deleuze & Guattari, 2008.

society. For instance, when society divides between what belongs within society, and what belongs outside society, we can see a contingent operation in order to confirm society as a whole, while excluding what does not belong to it. Because of this operation, that first of all functions as a language game, “positive” elements are being actualized and other elements are being “virtualized”. These elements are being excluded. This can mean, for instance, that some people lose their ‘actual’ status or identity and become partly virtualized. They become amorphous substance contained in some sort of a swamp: the “non-place” of society. These liminal spaces on the borderline of the actual and the virtual can be envisaged as prisons or refugee camps.

Schinkel argues that the sociologist needs to identify with this ‘non-place’ to see and construct a new, critical image of the societal. He needs to embrace the virtual, chaotic world, because otherwise, he would actually reproduce the laws and morals of the state. So he is an outsider on the inside, a Baron Münchhausen who jumps in the swamp deliberately to “liquidate” and soften the fictions and fixations that are inscribed onto his placid body by contingent language games. And he pulls himself out of the swamp by designing new images, though he is always paradoxically aware that his new images are selections and will create new blind spots.

He is, after all, a drifter on the Möbius-strip. Walking towards the border, always means that some space of the strip unfolds and something else is veiled again. And if that all looks rather tragically, it absolutely is, thankfully so.³ Softening subversion, liquidating humor and satire are the tools of the Münchhausen-sociologist to keep the notion of chaos alive in a fundamentalist world longing for deadly seriousness. Chaos functions so to speak as a black box that, when kept empty, can never be territorialized by state-apparatuses and social ties. It is the realm of freedom.

I think that exactly this paradoxical Münchhausen-operation towards a new way of seeing by liquidating fixed images in order to let the knowledge of the virtual in, is basically the language game of aesthetics since the beginning of modern arts. Art is to “drill a hole in the wall and let the sun in”⁴, to quote Thierry de Duve and that is a true ethical position if we add that the sun is the view of the specific or singular, and the drilled hole within the actual is always kept empty in order not to block other lucid potentialities of the virtual.

Even the specific attitude to life of Schinkels Münchhausen-sociologist reminds us of the various conceptions of the artist. The aesthetic moment, as a simultaneous liquidation of an image and a new imaginary actualization, is so to speak most likely to be set in motion by the figure of the vagabond, the dandy, the outsider, the bachelor machine. These figures are capable of grabbing the forces of chaos or the virtual to destruct and deconstruct fixed images, and to give a new actualization of the Möbius-strip. This operation is basically what I would call the aesthetic moment.

Let’s go to the aesthetic moment in Littell’s *The Kindly ones* to give a somewhat more graphical image of what I am trying to say. But before our character Aue reaches this moment, it needs to be said that Littell tried absolutely everything to make us drown in the social ties of fascist reality. Even as a reader I got pulled into the mad, intellectual discussions in the novel. I followed the exchange of various arguments, chose my position, chose my own stances, almost forgetting that the conclusion of every discussion necessarily boils down to the destruction of the Jews. I think that when you will read the novel, you will be convinced that the Jew is constantly being killed, and first of all in language itself. The Jew is constantly

³ Willem Schinkel on the essential role of humor for eidetic sociology in Schinkel, 2007: 441.

⁴ De Duve, 1996: 462.

being virtualized, while being in kept in this ‘non-space’ as a signifier, as a stopgap that holds fascist reality together.

The caesura that runs through the heart of the novel, that actually divides between normalcy (=fascist reality) and the dirty, transgressive sex life of Aue, also functions to submerge the reader in a position where he does not want to be. The price you pay for rejecting Aue’s nightly escapades and violent orgies is a tacit confirmation of his daily life, his fascist life. Is there an aesthetic way out? For sure, the Beethoven and Bach-lovers in the novel are not that much of a help either. Aue’s brother-in-law fancies the Jew Schönberg and Strauss with a Jewish daughter-in-law. Because: “Music is different. You just have to close your eyes and listen to know right away if it’s good or not.”⁵ Sure, autonomous art, close your eyes and just listen, why not?

What we want of course, is to open our eyes. But the true aesthetical moment of envisioning slowly unfolds on the subterranean, psycho physiological level of SS-officer Max Aue. The conditions for this development are set up by the writer. Aue’s skepticism en fatalism, his homosexual and transgressive escapism, his love for Flaubert and Blanchot, his Flaneur-like behavior and his being as a professional observer and clumsy inability to play the political game like a Nazi should do to climb the military ranks swiftly, are hybrid qualities that both make him have a *Sehnsucht* towards acts of transgression, but also make a schizoid outsider out of Aue, someone on the border of constructed fascist reality and the complex, raw, unstructured reality outside the militaristic and fascistic horizon. This is the realm of the virtual.

In the first chapters his experience of the ‘outside’-reality of the death camps seems to be transformed in Aue’s body into strange dreams, symptoms of temporary sickness and mental breakdown, indifferently abided by our dark passenger. But there is one more event to come that symbolizes Aue’s opening up for lucid imagination. From then on he sees Adolf Hitler speech in the guise of a Jew, an image ‘nothing dreamlike about it’. He visits Auschwitz and in an epiphany he envisages the death camp Auschwitz as the underlying structural design of the completed daily fascist reality itself. Fascism as a cold, ordered world designed for useless happiness. On another occasion, he feels seduced by the beauty of the word *Endlösung*, that becomes just a word for Aue, a word with the beauty that can fill ‘the black hole of the mind’.⁶

This event that triggers Aue’s imaginary deconstruction happens in the third chapter. Aue visits the battle for Stalingrad as an observer again after being excommunicated thanks to his clumsy way of doing politics. He gets shot in the head by sniper fire. He still lives and is transported to Berlin for a surgical procedure and to recover, and this is where he sees his wound in the head for the first time in the mirror.

This peculiar hole in his forehead can be understood purely somatically: his *pineal gland* is damaged and that is why all these strange, uncanny imaginations start to pop up in Aue’s brain. There is another possibility. It also can be understood as to ‘drill a hole in the wall’. Aue’s reality gets liquidated partially, and that is why things start to get liquid again in his head. It is the opening of a literary space where Aue – Littell- stops being only a ‘scanner’ but where the aesthetical writer within Aue sets in motion the literary space of Blanchot within fascist consciousness. Aesthetic visual moments of partial reality, obscured by the recombination empowered by chaos, nestle onto the retina of the protagonist. The Führer as a Jew, the camp as a representation of fascist society itself, the belief in the extermination of the

⁵ Littell, 2010: 496.

⁶ Littell, 2010: 631.

Jews as just a play of words. These fantasies advance the most peculiar, magical moment in the in end of the otherwise very realistically structured novel: Aue meets Hitler and bites him in the nose. Maybe, we can understand this action as a micro political action that is made possible by his disruptive imagination, his aesthetic moment.

The artistic reopening of a black hole goes directly against a system that is constructed on steady notions such as *Volk*, nation, blood and soil. But the major problem with totalitarian systems is that the black holes are being stuffed with fixated fetish objects. That is where the difference between the game of the social system and the game of art lies. The politics of art is to try and keep the hole a blind spot or to reopen the hole and let the sun in. Literature has the power to open ‘the other of any world’⁷, quoting Blanchot. The Flemish philosopher Frank Vande Veire stresses that we must not understand this other world of Blanchot as a more free, happier or darker place, but first of all as a ‘re-entry’⁸ into the moment of ‘beginning’⁹, a road to the open space as such. It is the mandate of art to keep ‘the empty place that is left a void when the Gods had abandoned it, ‘pure and empty.’¹⁰

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⁷ Quoted in Vande Veire, 2002: 264. Original: Blanchot, M. (1955) L ‘Espace littéraire, Paris: Gallimard: 309.

⁸ I thought I could use the Luhmann-notion of ‘re-entry’ without problems for describing the sociology of the writer/artist while reading Rossmann, 1993.

⁹ Vande Veire, 2002: 264 / 245-270.

¹⁰ Blanchot quoted in Vande Veire, 2002: 261. / 245 – 270.

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SELECTED PASSAGES OF “THE KINDLY ONES”, JONATHAN LITTEL, 2010

Passage where Aue, back in Berlin after being shot by a Russian sniper at the Eastern Front, discovers is hole in the head...

- *Reason raised its skirt from me, revealing that there was nothing beneath. I could have said the same thing about my poor head: a hole is a hole is a hole. The idea that a hole could also be a whole would never have occurred to me. Once the bandages were removed, I could see for myself that there was almost nothing there: on my forehead, a tiny round scar, just above my right eye; at the back of the skull, scarcely visible, they assured me, a swelling; between the two, my reemerging hair was already hiding the traces of the operation I had undergone. But if these doctors so sure of their science were to be believed, a hole went right through my head, a narrow circular corridor, a fabulous closed shaft, inaccessible to thought, and if that were true, then nothing was the same again, how could it have been? My thinking about the world now had to reorganize itself around this hole. But the only concrete thing I could say was: I have awakened, and nothing will ever be the same again.¹¹*
- *I had the feeling that the hole in my forehead had opened up a third eye, a pineal eye, one not tuned to the sun, not capable of contemplating the blinding light of the sun, but directed at the darkness, gifted with the power of looking at the bare face of death, and of grasping this face behind each face of flesh and blood, beneath the smiles, through the palest, healthiest skin, the most laughing eyes.¹²*

When Aue bullies his neighbors in Berlin, and discovers that it becomes harder to keep up the appearances...

- *My action appeared to me like playacting, prompted by a genuine, obscure feeling, but then distorted, diverted into an outward show of rage, conventional. But that was precisely where my problem lay: see myself this way, constantly, with this external gaze, this critical camera, how could I utter the slightest authentic word, make the slightest authentic gesture> Everything I did became a spectacle for myself; my thinking itself was just a reflection, and I a poor Narcissus showing off for himself, but who wasn't fooled by it.¹³*

Aue visits a speech of Adolf Hitler in Berlin...

- *After the introductory speeches, the Führer made his appearance. I opened my eyes wide: on his head and shoulders, over his simple feldgrau uniform, I seemed to see a large blue-and-white striped rabbi's shawl. The Führer had started speaking right away in his rapid, monotone voice. I examined the glass roof: Could it be a play of the light? I could clearly see his cap; but underneath it, I thought I made out long side curls, unrolling along his temples down over his lapel, and on his forehead, the tefillin, the little leather box containing verses of the Torah. When he raised his arm, I thought I could make out other leather straps bound around his wrist; and under his jacket, weren't those the white fringes of what the Jews call the little tallith showing through? I didn't know what to think. [...]*

¹¹ Littell, 2010: 436.

¹² Littell, 2010: 443.

¹³ Littell, 2010: 447.

Aues views a film in cinema wherein Adolf Hitler appears...

- *Maybe, I said to myself, panic-stricken, it's the story of the Emperor's New Clothes: everyone sees how it really is, but hides it, counting on his neighbour to do the same. No, I reasoned, I must be hallucinating, with a wound like mine, that's entirely possible. Yet I felt perfectly sound of mind. I was far from the platform, though, and the Führer was lit from the side; maybe it was simply an optical illusion? But I still saw it. Maybe my 'pineal eye' was playing a trick on me? But there was nothing dreamlike about it.*¹⁴
- *I bought a ticket and found my seat. Soon the lights went out and they played the news, which opened with the Führer's speech. The film was grainy, it jumped and went blurry at times, they must have rushed to develop it and print the copies. I still seemed to see the large striped shawl over the Führer's head and shoulders: I couldn't make out anything else, aside from his moustache; impossible to be sure of anything. My thoughts fled in all directions, like a school of fish in front of a diver; I scarcely noticed the main film, a flimsy Anglophobic thing, I was still thinking about what I had seen, it didn't make any sense. That it was real seemed impossible to me, but I couldn't believe that I was hallucinating. What had the bullet done to my head? Had it immediately blurred the world for me, or had it truly opened a third eye, the one that sees through the opacity of things? Outside, when I exited, it was night, time for dinner, but it didn't want to eat. I went back to my hotel and locked myself up in a room. For three days I didn't go out again.*¹⁵

Aue dreams while visiting Auschwitz...

- *During the day, I felt fresh, alert; at the Haus, I ate well, and in the evenings I thought with pleasure about my bed, with its clean sheets; but at night, ever since I had arrived, the dreams came in vast gusts, sometimes short and abrupt and soon forgotten, other times like long worm uncoiling inside my head. One sequence in particular repeated itself and expanded nightly, an obscure, difficult-to-describe dream, without any narrative meaning, but that unfurled according to spatial logic. In this dream I was travelling, at different altitudes, but always as if in the air, I was more like a pure gaze or even a camera than a living being, travelling through an immense city, without any visible end, its topography monotonous and repetitive, divided into geometrical sectors, its way animated with an incessant flow. Thousand of beings came and went, entered and exited identical buildings, walked along long, straight avenues, plunged underground through subway entrances to emerge at some other place, constantly and without any apparent aim. I I, or rather the gaze I had become, went down toward the avenues to examine them close up, I noticed that these men and women weren't distinguished from one another by any special characteristic; they all had white skin, light-colored hair, blue, pale, lost eyes, Höss's¹⁶ eyes, the eyes of my old orderly Hanika, too, when he died in Kharkov, eyes the color of the sky. Railway tracks crisscrossed the city, little trains came forward and made regular stops to spew out an instantly replaced wave of passengers, as far as the eye could see. During subsequent nights, I entered some of the buildings: lines of people moved*

¹⁴ Littell, 2010: 467.

¹⁵ Littell, 2010: 470.

¹⁶ Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, may 1940- November 1943. Hanged 1947 at the Warsaw Trials.

between long communal tables and latrines, eating and defecating in a row; on bunk beds, others were fornicating, then children were born, played between bedsteads, and, when they had grown big enough, went out to take their place in the human waves of this city in perfect happiness. Little by little, by dint looking from different points of view, a tendency became apparent in the seemingly arbitrary swarm: imperceptibly, a certain number of people always ended up on the same side, and finally went into windowless buildings, where they lay down to die without a word. Specialists came and collected from them whatever could still contribute to the city's economy; then their bodies were burned in ovens that served simultaneously to warm the water distributed by pipes throughout the sectors; the bones were ground up; the smoke, coming from the chimneys to form a long, calm, solemn river. And when the dream's point of view took on altitude again, I could make out an equilibrium in all this: the quantity of births, in the dormitories, equaled the number of deaths, and the society self-reproduced in perfect equilibrium, always in movement, producing no excess and suffering no diminution. When I woke up, it seemed obvious to me that these serene dreams, void of all anguish, represented the camp, but a perfect camp, having reached an impossible point of stasis, without violence, self-regulated, functioning perfectly and also perfectly useless since, despite all this movement, it produced nothing. But upon thinking more about it, as I tried to do while drinking my ersatz in the dining room of the Haus der Waffen-SS, wasn't it a representation of social life as a whole? Stripped of its tawdry rags and its pointless agitation, human life was reduced to scarcely more than that; once one had reproduced, one had fulfilled the purpose of mankind; and as for one's own purpose, that was just an illusion, a stimulus to encourage oneself to get up in the morning; but if you examined the thing objectively, as I thought I could do, the uselessness of all these efforts was obvious, as was the uselessness of reproduction itself, since it served only to produce more uselessness. So, I came to think: Wasn't the camp itself, with all the rigidity of its organization, its absurd violence, its meticulous hierarchy, just a metaphor, a reductio ad absurdum of everyday life?¹⁷

When Aue undergoes his linguistic turn...

- *I thought about the decision we had made, the extraordinary idea of killing all the Jews, whoever they might be, young or old, good or bad, of destroying Judaism in the person of its bearers, a decision that had received the name, now well known, of Endlösung: the "Final Solution". But what a beautiful word! It had not always been a synonym for extermination, though: since the beginning, people had called for, when it came to the Jews, and Endlösung, or else a völlige Lösung (a complete solution) or also a allgemeine Lösung (a general solution), and according to the period, this meant exclusion from public life or exclusion from economic life or, finally, emigration. Then, little by little, the signification had slid toward the abyss, but without the signifier changing, and it seemed almost as if the final meaning had always lived in the heart of the world, and that the thing had been attracted, drawn in by it, by its weight, its fabulous gravity, into the black hole of the mind, toward the point of singularity: and then we passed the event horizon, beyond which there is no return. We still live in ideas, in concepts, we believe that words designate ideas, but that's not necessarily true, maybe there aren't really any ideas, maybe there's really nothing but*

¹⁷ Littell, 2010: 621-622.

words, and the weight peculiar to words. And maybe thus we had let ourselves be led along by a word and it's inevitability. Within us, then, there would have been no ideas, no logic, no coherence? There would have been only words, in our oh so peculiar language, only that word, Endlösung, its streaming beauty? For, really, how could one resist the seduction of such a word? It would have been as inconceivable as resisting the word 'obey', the word 'serve', the word 'law'.¹⁸

When Aue is getting medaled at the Führerbunker...

- *The ceremony was repeated for the next man: Müller barked out his name, rank and service, then the Führer decorated him. Thomas was decorated next. As the Führer approached me – I was almost at the end of the line – my attention was caught by his nose. I had never noticed how broad and ill-proportioned this nose was. In profile, the little moustache was less distracting and the nose could be seen more clearly: It had a wide base and flat bridges, a little break in the bridge emphasized the tip: it was clearly a Slavonic or Bohemian nose, nearly Mongolo-Ostic. I don't know why this detail fascinated me, but I found it almost scandalous. The Führer approached and I kept observing him. Then he was in front of me. I saw with surprise that his cap scarcely reached my eyes; and yet I am not tall. He muttered his compliment and groped for the medal. His foul, fetid breath overwhelmed me: it was too much to tame. So I leaned forward and bit into his bulbous nose, drawing blood. [...] Thomas, behind the crowd, was observing me in silence, looking both disappointed and mocking. They dragged me toward a door at the back of the room. Then Müller interrupted in his loud, harsh voice: "Wait! I want to question him first. Take him to the crypt."¹⁹*

¹⁸ Littell, 2010: 631.

¹⁹ Littell, 2010: 960.