II. Kafka and Kitsch

Even though Franz Kafka (1883–1924) is better known as a modernist writer of the highest caliber, he was also fond of popular culture, especially the cinema. While many artists and intellectuals seemed almost to fear the new medium, Kafka was virtually obsessed with it. In time, going to the movies became the escapist activity for this (at times rather ascetic) writer. Film was able to tear him away from his desk, from the fever of literature, from writing as “a form of prayer.” Kafka even incorporated the newer media into his fiction. Preferring the cinema and popular Yiddish theater to the “legitimate” drama, Kafka moved from Prague to Berlin in the final years of his life, referring to the latter’s “easy life, great opportunities [and] pleasurable diversions.”

One might say the same of Maxim Biller, the contemporary German Jewish writer also born in Prague (in 1960) and now living in Berlin. In this chapter on Jewish cultural consumption in the new Germany, I examine a specific set of representations from Biller’s middlebrow fictions. One of the best-known contemporary writers in Germany, where he has resided since the age of 10, Biller is a celebrated and often reviewed author, a master of the short story form. Yet he also has written weekly for the Sunday magazine of the Frankfurter Allgemeine, has produced CDs of music and has an Internet presence on myspace.com. He thus instantiates powerful forces within the wide spectrum of cultural practices surrounding Jews, Germans and the Holocaust. His cultural production is very much part of the pervasive

popularity of—and continuing fascination with—“things Jewish” in contemporary Germany.

Here I juxtapose Biller’s self-reflective stories with Judith Butler’s theories of subjectivity and performativity, thus demonstrating how Biller’s writing draws attention to the constructed and consumerist quality of the post-Shoah negative symbiosis. More typically, German-Jewish writers between Kafka and Biller are viewed through a post-Holocaust lens, lending them an aura of tragic nobility. Indeed, even the tone of scholarly discussion about German Jewry has been rarely free of polemics. In the most infamous instance, Gershom Scholem diagnosed the “German-Jewish dialogue” as a one-way monologue spoken (if not “shouted”) by Jews at non-Jews in Germany. Yet what Scholem—himself a Zionist moderate—portrayed as a nearly masochistic fantasy of “German-Jewish symbiosis” has also been characterized as the essential progressive project of modernity and/or a core paradigm of secularization in the West. As Amos Elon concludes in the most recent historical survey of Jewish Germans: “For long periods, they had cause to believe in their ultimate integration, as did most Jews elsewhere in Western Europe, in the United States, and even in czarist Russia. It was touch and go almost to the end.”4 If we in the post-Holocaust era can acknowledge that the catastrophe was unpredictably uncertain, then the “assimilationist self-hatred” attributed to Jewish Germans—today and before 1945—can be exposed as a discourse and instrument of ideology.

In less particularist studies of consumer culture within “British” or “Birmingham School” cultural studies, resistance to acculturation is conceived not as triumphant or even as liberating, but simply as a recognition that hegemony was rarely total. To Raymond Williams, the founder of this approach, there was always struggle and contestation even when the dominant culture proved victorious. In contrast to the total dominion implicit in (overdetermined) ideological concepts of base and superstructure, Williams conceived of alternative and oppositional cultures as part of a hegemony which continually had to be reiterated to face new challenges. According to Stuart Hall, William’s de facto successor, popular culture “is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to