

FT WEEKEND MAGAZINE - BOOKS ESSAY: Immoral earnings?

By Bertrand Benoit, Financial Times

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The jerky, black-and-white footage, the women's blonde locks, the men's shaved necks, the lederhosen and sun-drenched pastures: all of it screams "Nazi propaganda". But that does not quite describe the grainy home movie that Thor Kunkel, one of Germany's most feted young novelists, is playing for me on his Apple laptop computer in downtown Berlin.

Suddenly, barely a minute into the silent film, something incongruous happens: the athletic protagonists undress and start having open-air sex. The flickering images may be 70 years old, but the choreography has not aged a day. When the plot reaches its natural climax, Kunkel, a former advertising copywriter, clicks an icon and up pops the next piece of vintage-fascist, hardcore pornography.

This never-released footage is the raw material of *Endstufe* (Final Stage), Kunkel's 591-page third novel that hit German stores last week. Without the films, there would have been no book - and without the book the German literary scandal of the year would not have erupted.

The furore began just over two months ago when Kunkel - who won one of the top German-language literary prizes for the first chapter of his debut novel, *Das Schwarzlicht-Terrarium* (Black Light Terrarium) - discovered that his publishing house, Rowohlt Verlag, had decided to drop his much-anticipated new book from its schedule weeks before its planned launch, because of what it called "content and aesthetic matters".

Pressed to explain the decision, Rowohlt's head, Alexander Fest, told *Der Spiegel* news magazine that the book was a work of "cheerful, at times over-indulgent immorality".

He also claimed that Kunkel harboured hidden fascistic views and was "Parsifal reborn as rightwing thug".

Endstufe - now being published by Eichborn Berlin - is the second part of a trilogy that began with *Das Schwarzlicht-Terrarium*, and it does cover sensitive ground. Opening in 1941, it unfolds through the eyes of Karl Fussmann, a young biologist with a day job at an SS-run hygiene institute. A careerist and hedonist, Fussmann joins an affluent clique of decadent amateur filmmakers who shoot pornography alfresco in their spare time. The hobby ends up spawning an industry as the films become war currency to be traded for oil and iron.

Kunkel based his story on the research he did on the films in his laptop, which he obtained from a private collector, Werner Nekes. Nekes bought the original prints, known among connoisseurs as the Sachsenwald series, in the mid-1970s as part of an archive of early erotic material in Hamburg.

Pornography was officially banned in the Nazi era, but Kunkel says his research on Nekes's films revealed they were not only made by Nazi party members and used for their private entertainment, but were also bartered for wartime goods. He says he tracked down one of the films' actresses to a retirement home and interviewed her, allowing him to date the footage from 1941.

But it is not clear whether Kunkel's conclusions about the films are correct. Nekes, for example, says they appear to have been made by professionals some time earlier than 1941. "I would have dated it to 1939 myself," he told me in a telephone conversation.

Indeed, the banana that features prominently in one of the films would have been a rarity in 1941. If it had made it past the British embargo and food rationing, the lucky

owner is more likely to have chosen to eat it. Nekes also says he is not sure who directed the films, or whether they were really used for wartime barter.

But the Kunkel controversy is not chiefly about authenticity or sex. Rather, the objections are political - and potentially damaging to the writer's reputation.

Rowohl's Alexander Fest says he discerned a revisionist agenda in the novel when he first read it last summer but let himself be persuaded by one of his editors that it could be salvaged. Six months later, he says he was still unhappy with it and decided to pull the plug.

Fest bases much of his criticism on some text Kunkel wrote that did not make it into the final manuscript. The text depicts a journalist researching Nazi pornography who rails against Jews and the US and asks: "How often has Germany commemorated the victims of National Socialism? It does not look like the Jews have any intention to forgive."

Fest says the text was a nonfiction account of Kunkel's own research and reflects the novelist's personal views. But Kunkel insists it is fictional material which was discarded during the editing process and has nothing to do with his own views on Nazi Germany.

Sipping Darjeeling tea in a cafe, metres from the Anne Frank Museum in Berlin's Scheunenviertel, the 40-year-old writer cuts an earnest figure behind his blond mop of hair and seems genuinely pained by the controversy that is certain to make his book a bestseller.

Asked about the text Fest criticises, he claims to have "based this on real encounters and real things I found. But then it has all these fictional parts in it. I'm sure Fest knew this. Obviously he could not find anything objectionable in the book or he would not have had to fish this out of the wastebasket."

Michael Zollner, who runs the Tropen Verlag publishing house in Cologne and is one of the few people to have seen early manuscripts of Kunkel's book, supports the novelist.

"The fact that he is not explicit about the evil of Nazism does not mean he denies it. He concentrates on very few characters; he does not zoom out, he takes a very small piece of the prism, and that's not questionable politically."

But Henryk Broder, the Spiegel columnist who interviewed Fest and also read the Rowohl manuscript of Kunkel's book, disagrees. The author, he tells me, "attempts to rehabilitate Nazi ideology. He is a devoted literary neo-Nazi."

In his Spiegel article, Broder also attacks the novel: "Nowhere is there any distance from the protagonists. There is no irony in the way Nazi vocabulary is used. This second level is missing. National Socialism is presented as a leisure society."

This makes Kunkel fume: "Everybody knows there was militarism, everybody knows the Nazis were masters of propaganda. I didn't think I had to remind people. It's like telling you the space above our head is full of air."

"In 1941, nobody seriously doubted that Germany would win the war. My characters were young, elite careerists, scientists, actresses, people in their thirties. Their whole reality was probably a little bit like today's America: 'We are at war with the whole world but within German borders not a single bomb is falling'... In the eye of the hurricane there is dead silence."

"What is scary, though, is that the more you read about the period the more you understand how difficult it would have been for an intelligent young man who wanted to make a career, who wanted to make money, to ignore the chances offered to him by the system."

Kunkel says his crime was not to provide an ideological filter in his novel. "Germans are grown-up people... If you are a good person you know what to think about such characters. You do not need to be told."

It is hard not to see the fury surrounding Kunkel's book as a very German, very contemporary version of the oldest literary debate. Fiction writers may enjoy the privileges of being allowed to describe obscene, immoral, or repulsive events, but where are the limits to this freedom?

These limits clearly ebb and flow. Works of fiction have generally tended to challenge conventions more aggressively in recent years, partly in reaction to the fashion of political correctness, and partly because of the pressures publishers feel to improve their profit-and-loss accounts.

Yet Michel Houellebecq's novel *Platform* caused an uproar in France two years ago, not because of its pornographic content or its hurried, bland writing, but because his main protagonist held unacceptable views about Islam in a country home to western Europe's largest Muslim community. In Germany, for the past 60 years, the experience of the Third Reich and of the Holocaust have defined the bounds of the acceptable. But here too, these limits have been fluid.

The writer W.G. Sebald caused an uproar a few years ago when he questioned why, beyond isolated instances, it had taken 30 years for German fiction writers to tap the wartime experience of the Allied bombings. Gunter Grass shocked with his 2002 book *Im Krebsgang* (*Crab Walk*), a novel about the sinking, in January 1945, of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a German ship carrying more than 6,000 refugees.

But time had subtler effects too: for instance, allowing writers to treat the Nazi years on a more intimate scale. One example is Bernhard Schlink's 1997 novel *The Reader*, whose protagonist's lover turns out to be an illiterate concentration-camp guard. Recently authors such as Tanja Duckers, Uwe Timm and Ulla Hahn have delivered deeply personal treatments of the war years, focusing on family histories. So why did Kunkel's book touch such a nerve? The author Feridun Zaimoglu, whose 2002 novel *German Amok* caused a scandal of its own because of its alleged pornographic content, says the Kunkel uproar can be explained by the shadow the Nazis cast on German literature, making it difficult for novelists to produce work without a moral dimension. This taboo, he tells me, has proved far more difficult to breach than the self-imposed ban on depicting Germans as victims.

"People are extremely suspicious of nasty first-person stories here. We have renounced immorality in literature. We have succumbed to the narcosis of mediocrity. Kunkel is guilty of mixing Nazism, porn, and a particularly German form of decadence together. That went too far."

That said, Kunkel, a man who proclaims that "in our modern world there is no good nor evil", is no humanist. Nor is he as "apolitical" as he claims to be. He holds neither US politics nor US culture in high esteem; he feels "insulted" by what he says is the systematic Hollywood portrayal of Germans as dim-witted villains. He also admits to some impatience at the "celebration of the label 'Holocaust'" by the descendants of survivors.

"The Holocaust is a fact. Why would anyone with half a brain deny a historical event is beyond me. All I'm saying is it means nothing to me. It is abstract. I know it from history books, I know it dramatised. I must have seen a couple of hundred films about the Third Reich and the Holocaust... Watching *Schindler's List*, to me, is not like reliving the Holocaust. It is about watching a Steven Spielberg film."

Anyone with experience of Germany knows how untouched by political correctness its society can be. Germans often define themselves and others in terms of their "race". Disparaging stereotypes about gays are routine comic devices in advertising.

A Social Democrat politician, now the defence minister, raised his glass after a football victory against Congo in 2002 and promised that, come election day, his party "would beat the blacks [the conservatives] like we've beaten the blacks tonight". Even if Kunkel is no "thug", his pronouncements suggest, at the very least, a lack of empathy that goes well beyond a simple rejection of political conformity. Should this get him banned from the stores even though, as most critics agree, there is nothing in his novel that puts it squarely beyond the pale?

"No novel should ever be forbidden," says Volker Weidermann, who edits the Sunday features section of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and largely absolves Endstufe. "My duty as a critic is to raise the alarm. If a piece of anti-Semitic fiction comes out, I will denounce it. That is not to say I think it should be banned. I just think people should not buy it."

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Endstufe (Final Stage)

Eichborn Verlag

124.90, 591 pages

Das schwarzlicht-Terrarium (The Black Light Terrarium)

Rowohlt Verlag

110.90, 639 pages