Please Watch Responsibly: The Ethical Responsibility of the Viewer in Amélie Nothomb's *Acide sulfurique*

Avril Tynan

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AVRIL TYNAN

"Je n'ai pas du tout aimé ce roman": The Trouble with *Acide sulfurique*

The release of Belgian author Amélie Nothomb's *Acide sulfurique* in 2005 provoked polemic divisions amongst literary critics as a result of its controversial translation of the Nazi concentration camps into a reality television format, and a gross oversimplification of the Holocaust that undermined reader sensibilities to the history and memory of human suffering. In a round-up of that year's *rentrée littéraire*, the writer Pierre Assouline denounced *Acide* as "malsain," a reflection of the topics it evoked, and summarily dismissed the novel: "Je n'ai pas du tout aimé ce roman" (*Le Monde*, 8 September 2005). Pierre Vavasseur accused Nothomb of a "banalisation de la Shoah" and of an appalling publicity stunt—"un coup de marketing nauséabond" (*Le Parisien*, 1 September 2005)—while Baptiste Liger deplored the author's artificiality and holier-than-thou condemnation of contemporary society and criticized her pseudo-provocative attempts to titillate the reader by marrying reality television and the concentration camps: "le dernier Nothomb est un livre nul" (*L'Express*, 25 August 2005). Among the few high-profile supporters of the narrative, however, reviews celebrated the author's attention to modern voyeuristic culture as a sinister threat to complacent belief in human equality and compassionate reaction, and Frédéric Beigbeder, in a counter-critique to Liger, praised the text's significant and well-timed risks to suggest a viable future dystopia that would confirm the place of fiction in helping us to understand our reality "même et surtout quand elle est terrifiante" (*L'Express*).

In this paper, I discuss *Acide sulfurique* as a critique of contemporary

bystander behavior and question the socio-political responsibilities of the intra-textual viewer as a reflection of the genuine ethical demands placed upon viewers of suffering in everyday life.[1] Although *Acide sulfurique* sparked controversy at its release, it has established itself within Nothomb's vast oeuvre and among her considerable market of readers, and it plays upon a readily accessible allegory that shifts the reader's focus from the opposition of good versus evil to the morally ambiguous and seemingly exterior figure of the viewer. Framing the Holocaust through the recognizable format of reality television integrates the third-party viewer into the central actions of the camp as an omniscient and omnipresent but entirely external and invisible participant. Although offered direct access to the camps through the extensive networks of surveillance cameras, the viewer remains distinctly separate, and the sense of watching people "just like us," touted as the bedrock of reality television, is undermined by the insurmountable exteriority of the viewer. The stark division between self and other, where "you" are on one side and "I" am on the other, established by the television screen builds an indissoluble boundary of alterity that not only prevents an ethical face-to-face encounter, but shields the viewer from "getting their hands dirty," so that they feel morally acquitted of their murderous complicity. Of course, this is not to suggest that reality television formats can be blamed for inciting murder, rather that the mediation of human life through screens tends to problematize our ethical relationship to the other. Reframing the Holocaust through reality television thus provides an uncomfortable viewpoint from which to consider contemporary attitudes to ongoing events of genocide, displacement and mass racism across the world, particularly where these events are, in the majority, mediated by screens and by temporal or spatial distances that dilute our ethical relations between self and other.

Acide sulfurique follows the peace-time incarceration of random individuals in a simulated concentration camp filled with cameras and taking part—against their will—in the newest televisual craze, the aptly named *Concentration*. Participant-prisoners are subjected to abhorrent conditions, including malnourishment, physical and verbal abuse, exhausting manual labor and daily selections that determine who will be killed as live entertainment for the cameras under the orders of *kapos*—selected from willing participants by the show's organizers—and under the gaze of millions of viewers. Within this concentration camp setting, the narrative follows the frustrated love between one of the "participants," the beautiful, intelligent and virginal Pannonique or CKZ 114, who becomes the unwitting star of

the show, adored by the public, and the brutish and unintelligent *kapo* Zdena, who falls in love with Pannonique and becomes her eventual unlikely savior. *Acide sulfurique* aggravates the triangular relationship between the prisoners, the viewers, and the *kapos* and organizers who interact variously within their parameters as victims, bystanders and perpetrators. Nothomb returns repeatedly to emphasize the public success of *Concentration*, and the narrative reaches its pinnacle when the show becomes interactive and viewers are invited to vote for the prisoners to be killed the following day. Despite half-hearted objections and calls for boycotts in the media, this gruesome interactivity sends viewing and voting figures skyrocketing, and anticipates the novel's conclusion as an explosive revolution in national policy and human interaction.

Despite its infelicities, *Acide sulfurique* clearly evokes a number of themes and conventions common to Holocaust literature and to general Francophone knowledge. Prisoners are rounded up in random "rafles" (9) and are transported to the unspecified camp location in "un wagon à bestiaux" (9), while the role of "*kapo*" (12) is attributed by the show's anonymous organizers. Upon arrival in the camp, prisoners are assigned a uniform and their names replaced by "un matricule" (29), an assortment of letters and numbers which is tattooed on the skin. Violent punishments, derisory rations, and inhumane working conditions continue to link the Nazi camps to the setting of *Concentration*, while links with Auschwitz in particular are established through the narrative's detailing of selections every morning, in which "les sélectionneurs inspectaient les contingents pour décréter lesquels étaient devenus inaptes au travail et seraient envoyés à la mort" (22). Nothomb's clear point of differentiation between the site of *Concentration* and the original camps is the addition of surveillance cameras, which film every moment from the prisoners' arrest up to—and including—their excruciating murders in the camp. With this notable change, *Concentration* conforms to the hybrid conventions of reality television formatting, purporting to show the "unscripted behavior of 'ordinary people' " (Bignell 1), typically using documentary techniques including extensive surveillance footage and one-to-one question and answer interviews with participants—in *Concentration* this is only the *kapos*—blended with constructed editing techniques to lend a narrative storyline to the events.[2] Nothomb's choice to present the Holocaust through the lens of reality television has been the cause of much of *Acide sulfurique*'s controversy, since the global meta-genre is itself a subject of gross disrepute. Synonymous with such terms as "trash TV," "télé-poubelle," and low culture,

promoting "awful ordinary people" (Holmes and Jermyn 9) and anticipating "la fin du monde" (Segré), reality television is an unlikely setting from which to draw parallels to the Holocaust. Yet, reality television is a global phenomenon, a political tool, a barometer of social tendencies, even a means of career success—or resurrection—and financial gain, achieving much of its notoriety and triumph through the ways in which a global package can be conveniently adapted for local markets.[3] Reality television, low-budget and low-culture as it may be, has a considerable relevance in and to contemporary society, and the fictional construction of *Concentration* produces a "mobile subjectivity" (Bignell 48) that opens up the possibilities of socio-political interaction beyond the boundaries of time and place.

This paper begins by tracing the roots of *Concentration* in European—and international—reality television programs and considers how this genre establishes a sense of spectacle that separates those who are viewed from those who are viewing. This separation transforms the viewer into a bystander who is complicit in the murders committed by others but whose physical and psychological distance from the events provides a moral acquittal. Ultimately, *Acide sulfurique* challenges us—the readers and assumed viewers of *Concentration*—to question our ethical responsibilities as co-participants in the memory of the Holocaust and ongoing suffering of others.

Big Brother, Loft Story, Concentration

An array of reality television programs emerged in the late twentieth century, and in the last two decades, the number and popularity of these shows has erupted, spawning an accompaniment of behind the scenes footage, debate and talk shows, spin-offs, and media accessories. *Acide sulfurique* resonates with the cacophony of conflicting emotions that followed the diffusion of *Loft Story*, the French adaptation of Dutch-owned *Big Brother*, in the early summer of 2001, in which the show was widely condemned for the parallels it evoked with the Nazi concentration camps. Jean-Jacques Delfour criticized the perversity of this "machine scopique, scrutatrice, totalitaire" (*Le Monde*, 19 May 2001), and Gabriel Segré, amalgamating the critical responses to *Loft Story*, noted in particular references to "une *prison de luxe*, un *enfer branché* [. . .] un *petit camp de concentration*, un *Drancy télévisé*" (527) that threatened established democracy with perverse fascism. *Concentration*, then, is only the dystopian realization of the social fears

provoked by *Loft Story*, a social experiment grounded in the study of human behavior and the psychology of power that has already seen precedents in the controversial adaptations of such studies as Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford Prison experiment—itself an adaptation of Stanley Milgram's 1963 study of obedience to authority—televised as *The Experiment* and broadcast in the UK by the BBC in 2002. The progression to a program such as *Concentration* may be perverse, but it is not inconceivable.

Much of the criticism that greeted the diffusion of *Loft Story*, however, was levied against the viewer, whose voyeuristic support for the show's pornographic sadism was complicit with the abjection and objectification of the "candidates." In voting to eliminate candidates from *Loft Story*, the viewer's significance as a consumer and co-participant in the development of "unpredictability" was firmly established.[4] The "pseudopopulist fantasy of interactive democracy" (Andrejevic 17) thrust upon the viewer by the producers conveyed a sense of participation in the creation of the show that engaged the viewer to—allegedly—influence the outcomes of the program and its participants.[5] Viewer participation becomes central to the plot of *Acide sulfurique* too, and to the significance of *Concentration*. Despite becoming "le plus grand succès de l'histoire de la télévision" (131), *Concentration*'s production team are troubled when their viewing figures begin to stagnate after six months, realizing that "le seul défaut [. . .], c'est que ce n'est absolument pas interactif" (155). Relinquishing control to the audience, the producers invite the viewers to nominate, via a free teletext service, the prisoner selected for death each day. This idealized democratic relationship between the viewer and the producers—in which the *kapos* continue to "do the dirty work" despite their loss of authority—sets up an unequal relationship of power between the viewers and the prisoners. Within the constructed pseudo-world of *Concentration*, the viewer is able to effect change, to make key decisions that influence not only the unscripted outcomes of the show, but the course of human lives.

Despite calls in the media to boycott the first public vote, the rate of abstention was "inversement proportionnel à celui des dernières élections législatives européennes, [. . .] ce qui fit dire aux politiques que l'on devrait peut-être songer, à l'avenir, à remplacer les urnes par des télécommandes" (158–59), an ironic attack upon shifting democratic priorities that only mirrored the extra-narrative state:

> May 2002: 37 percent of ages 18–24 abstained in the first round of votes for the French presidential elections, convinced that it would

> change nothing in their lives, but they voted massively to decide the fate of contestants of a constructed reality, *Loft Story*. (Jost 31)

Social disaffection for politics and democratic transparency feeds the interactive temptations offered by reality television and, in this case, by the extreme realization of the commercialization of totalitarianism in *Concentration*. Of course, it would be overly simplistic to claim that this leap from viewer to murderer is reliant only upon the invitation offered by the producers; rather, interactivity in *Acide sulfurique* represents only the final step in a slow process of alienation created by the mediation of human life through the televisual spectacle. Reality television, despite the claim offered in this term, actually serves to de-realize the actions presented onscreen, distancing the viewer from the other. Creating a spectacle of the Holocaust, *Acide sulfurique* shows how mediated realities problematize our ethical responses to otherness.

Spectacle and Moral Panic: The Commodification of Social Outrage

"Vint le moment où la souffrance des autres ne leur suffit plus; il leur en fallut le spectacle" (Nothomb, *Acide sulfurique* 9). *Acide sulfurique*'s opening line lays the accountability for the scenes that follow firmly in the hands of the generic viewer, establishing the consumer base for the pseudo-world of the narrative. *Concentration*—the spectacle of the other's suffering—represents not only a vulgar popularization of the Holocaust, but the ultimate commodification of misery and injustice. Following Guy Debord, the spectacle is the radical result of social commodification by media-driven ideals and the fetishization of the visual image that has come to pervert our view of the world and our relations to one another. These spectacles contribute to a derealization of social reality and a depersonalization of human interaction, mediated by screens and images. The pseudo-world constructed in and by *Concentration* is not simply a representation or a spectacle of the Holocaust but is itself a representation of the "new" suffering it claims to present. As spectacle, the "reality" of *Concentration* presented to the viewer is in fact only a portion of the reality taking place in the camps, packaged and televised in a convenient format to appeal to the consumer.

Concentration is not a social experiment, it is a television program, dependent upon the loyalty of its viewers, and the organizers never hesitate

to promote the ideals of their consumerist agenda: *kapos* with youthful bodies and striking, childlike faces (11 and 31) are selected by the organizers to appeal to the public, while Pannonique, elected by the eye of the camera as the telegenic symbol of "cette humanité torturée" (22), becomes the star of the show, so that her maltreatment by the *kapos* is regulated by the organizers' agenda to arouse emotional responses from the viewers. Pannonique's outbursts (66 and 123) are greeted not as an eruption of natural human emotion, but as televisual feasts that delight the audience and the organizers—"Cette petite avait le sens du spectacle" (69)—and when *kapo* Zdena is intercepted by the organizers beating EPJ 327, she is reprimanded not for her actions, but for the discretion of her actions: "Tu fais ce que tu veux, kapo Zdena, mais devant les caméras!" (39). Despite the reality of the prisoners' suffering, the reality presented to the viewer is little more than a myth, since the events are manipulated, structured and packaged in order to exploit audience sensibilities, a criticism applicable to most reality television shows that face accusations of scripted reality and performance. In *Acide sulfurique*, however, the question of the representation of the real weighs more heavily upon what is *not* shown to the viewer, and in particular, the rape of a twelve-year-old girl by the organizers (94–103). Taking place outside the range of the cameras, this violation is never presented to the viewer and the girl, PFX 150, is killed before the true reality is able to filter out. In effect, *Concentration* presents regulated and falsified images of human depravity, offering the viewer a spectacle of certain condonable evils. The sexual abuse of a child—as opposed to incarceration, torture and murder—risks exceeding the audience's tolerance to cruelty.[6]

Concentration thus presents a self-sufficient spectacle of human suffering, packaging socially acceptable forms of evil to provoke moral outrage in order to engage the viewer. Throughout *Acide sulfurique*, public disgust for *Concentration* only drives its success and highlights the hypocritical moral indignation of the viewer. Politicians, journalists, real prisoners, drunks, lovers, parents and children; swathes of the population criticize the immorality and inhumanity of the show, and yet it reaches 100 percent of the population. Even those who do not own a television and brag of being "les derniers réfractaires et les pourfendeurs de la télé-poubelle" (164) watch from a neighbor's house: "Quand je vois ça, je suis content de ne pas avoir la télévision!" (193). From the very beginning, then, *Concentration*'s success is promoted by the "moral panic" it elicits from the general public, a reactionary response to the threat the show apparently poses to

socio-political stability and order. Establishing the term in sociological discourse, Stanley Cohen writes that:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to [. . .] Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself. (1)

Concentration sparks a moral panic: viewers are indignant about the horrors seen onscreen, and the media pontificate about the demise of social morality and values. Yet viewing figures continue to rise. The moral panic surrounding *Concentration* generates, rather than dissipates, public interest. As we see today in cultural as well as political arenas, there is no such thing as bad publicity, and onscreen controversies, enflamed by hysterical media responses, fuel popularity and audience ratings.

The manipulation of human suffering, invariably criticized by "right-thinking" moral guardians, is harnessed and exploited by the media as an inexhaustible promotional tool. From the initial "casting" of *Concentration* and throughout its controversies up to the final live broadcast of Pannonique's nomination for death, it is the media that determine public opinion and engagement. When the organizers meet to discuss the stagnation of their viewing figures, their primary concern is the loss of media attention and the need for a telegenic scandal: "les médias ne parlent plus de nous. Ils ont passé des mois à ne parler que de 'Concentration' et, maintenant, ils ont changé de sujet. Si nous voulons à nouveau attirer l'attention, il faut trouver quelque chose" (154). There are parallels once again with the moral panic that followed—and fuelled—the success of *Loft Story* in France, where "programme-makers were well aware that they had to create a web of very different discourses around the programme, including attempts to

whip up or simulate a panic," going so far as to tease and urge "for problems with moral guardians and with regulators in order to get media attention" (Biltereyst 107). *Concentration*, therefore, becomes a by-product of the moral panic it generates, a consumerist spectacle fed by mediatized scandal.

Yet moral panics are episodic, building upon the spiraling interactions between the media, public opinion, interest groups and the authorities, and eventually dying out as a result of intervention from relevant established institutions or simply because, after a period of time, the media tire of the central issue and public interest recedes. In *Acide sulfurique*, the moral panic is ultimately quelled by constitutional change—a contract signed by the defense minister promising state intervention in the event of future programs like *Concentration* (201–02)—but the narrative also makes clear that the longevity and success of this inhumane spectacle is the result of the ongoing commodification of social outrage. Without the spectacle, without the media attention, without the viewers especially, moral panic invariably subsides, and the promotional agenda of the show will be extinguished. As Debord, in his 1988 commentary argues: "Ce dont le spectacle peut cesser de parler pendant trois jours est comme ce qui n'existe pas" (27). Pannonique, sensitive to the hierarchy of evil that rules the camp, recognizes that only intervention in this cycle of totalizing commodification will undermine the power of the spectacle, and calls upon the viewers—rather than the *kapos* or the organizers—as the agents of the prisoners' panoptical[7] incarceration to help bring an end to their suffering:

> Spectateurs, éteignez vos télévisions! Les pires coupables, c'est vous! Si vous n'accordiez pas une si large audience à cette émission monstrueuse, elle n'existerait plus depuis longtemps! Les vrais kapos, c'est vous! Et quand vous nous regardez mourir, les meurtriers, ce sont vos yeux! Vous êtes notre prison, vous êtes notre supplice! (123)

Acide sulfurique's social critique targets the viewers as the enablers of evil, their eyes feeding the production of the suffering they observe. The viewers of *Concentration*, although not active in the killing of inmates or even the planning processes as the *kapos* and organizers are, are nonetheless complicit in the manufacture of onscreen injustice. The viewer is never innocent or neutral but always ethically implicated and *Acide sulfurique* invites us to question our acts of viewing as ethically implicated subjects in the spectacle of human suffering.

Framing the Bystander

Acide sulfurique's criticism of the viewer has ethical and historical significance as a means of bringing the "bystander" back into focus. In *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, Raul Hilberg argues that "most contemporaries of the Jewish catastrophe were neither perpetrators nor victims. Many people, however, saw or heard something of the event" (xi). These were the bystanders, individuals—or often whole governments and institutions—who "were not 'involved,' not willing to hurt the victims and not wishing to be hurt by the perpetrators" (xi). This third category is a deeply contentious issue in Holocaust studies, and the motivations and actions of "bystanders" varied significantly, not only between bystanders, but within a single bystander over time, according to changing events and individual situations. Of course, the bystanders to the Holocaust were not viewers in the way *Acide sulfurique* manipulates this third, non-victim, non-perpetrator role, or perhaps rather, they cannot necessarily be defined by what they saw.[8] However, the viewers of *Concentration* are, or rather, *believe themselves to be*, bystanders to the suffering of others. In clear distinction from the prisoners—the victims—and the *kapos* and organizers—the perpetrators—the viewers fall into the ambiguous category of bystanders whose responsibility—to the inconvenience of any theoretical judicial proceedings—eludes clear-cut definitions of criminal guilt. In other words, the viewers of *Concentration*, despite their interactive participation in the murders of "participants," preserve their moral ambiguity on the sidelines of the interactions between perpetrators and victims. As if this needed expounding, *Concentration*'s viewers love to hate the *kapos* (17) while admiring—yet failing to intervene in—the tortured beauty of the prisoners (21), clearly placing themselves beyond the more defined binary between victims and perpetrators.

It is this conception of the bystander as an external co-participant in the victim-perpetrator dynamic that is of interest to this discussion because *Acide sulfurique* presents this evolution as a mediatized spectacle that significantly distances the context of the novel from the historical specificity of the Holocaust. Through the television screen, the viewer/bystander maintains a crucial spatial—and at times temporal—distance from the events presented onscreen. Although this is not to suggest that the spectacle so grossly undermines our abilities to conceptualize the existence of suffering as to suggest "perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world" (Sontag 99), the representation of suffering within a televised format alienates the viewer from the possibility of an ethical

encounter with the other. Within the spectacle, the mediation of reality has succeeded in separating those who watch from those who are watched, so that the other's suffering is derealized:

> Dans le spectacle, une partie du monde *se représente* devant le monde, et lui est supérieure. Le spectacle n'est que le langage commun de cette séparation. Ce qui relie les spectateurs n'est qu'un rapport irréversible au centre même qui maintient leur isolement. Le spectacle réunit le séparé, mais il le réunit *en tant que séparé*. (Debord, *La société du spectacle* 30)

This distinction between inside and outside—inside the camp, inside the screen, outside the camp, outside the screen—draws the viewers further away from the events mediated through the spectacle of "reality," and ultimately from their interrelations with others, faced now with an insurmountable alterity.

The lives destroyed in *Concentration* are not "real" for the viewer. Presented on a screen, the victims are derealized and depersonalized through an immense spectacle: voting to nominate a mediated commodity to "leave the show" is not analogous to first-hand murder. Yet this fictional derealization of the other encroaches upon a very urgent issue. "If violence is done against those who are unreal," argues Judith Butler, "then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. [. . .] The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (33). The representational separation of the spectacle means that the lives terminated in the course of *Concentration* are not real lives, since they are so unrecognizable to us, so distinctly other, that they never existed to begin with. Mediated by the screen, the lives presented to the viewer are insurmountably other, and even the image of Pannonique's face as she pleads with the viewers to turn off their televisions, later plastered over the front pages of the newspapers, fails to elicit a response. Today, when screens dominate such vast elements of our day-to-day lives, we are faced with an ethical dilemma: how are we to encounter the other when the screen inhibits our interrelations? Is it even possible to respond when the face-to-face encounter is so profoundly mediated that it fails to take place?

Acide sulfurique problematizes our ethical encounter with the other through the mediation of suffering offered by *Concentration*. As a bystander, the viewer's failure to see the face of the other, even when it is presented live on screen, speaks of the derealization and commodification

of human life. Framing the bystander, *Acide sulfurique* questions the ethical responsibility of the viewer to respond, or even to recognize, the suffering of others. The ethical responsibility of the bystander has historical and contemporary significance, because it not only opens up our understanding of bystander responses during the Holocaust, but frames our understanding of our own responses to suffering and atrocity today. In their discussion of the ongoing significance of the bystander debate, David Cesarani and Paul Levine write that:

> The moral concern about bystanders comes out of the rather complacent assumption that few of us will become perpetrators, and an equal optimism that we will not become victims, while at the same time we are aware that in an age of almost instant global communications, we are all co-presents witnessing, even if only through the media, the genocides, ethnic cleansing and other manifestations of extreme racism that besmirch the contemporary world. (60)

As contemporary bystanders, our responsibility is not only to respond to the suffering of others, but to recognize, in the first place, the other and the other's suffering, and to challenge the complacency of viewing.

"As if they were watching the whole thing on television": Towards an Ethics of Viewing

This is not the first time Nothomb has questioned the responsibility of the viewer to the suffering of others. In *Métaphysique des tubes* the young narrator, Amélie, remembers an unpleasant governess in Japan, Kashima-san, smiling as she fell into a carp pond in the family garden without intervening to help: "Il n'y a pas plus fascinant que l'expression d'un être humain qui vous regarde mourir sans tenter de vous sauver" (149). *Acide sulfurique* takes this fascination and invites us to question our ethical responsibility to the other, even—perhaps especially—when those others are mediated by screens. Modern globalization has frustrated our opportunities to encounter otherness and to respond to the other's ethical demands. Of course, our ethical duty to respond to others' suffering has always been complicated, and analysis of bystander responses to the Holocaust present numerous opportunities to consider the problematics of viewing. On a visit to the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, Steven K. Baum notes that in photographs taken during the Holo-

caust, the looks in the eyes of those captured in the images show distinctly different responses to suffering:

> The eyes of the perpetrators had a mocking and gleeful quality to them. By contrast, the eyes of others who were helping the victims held an alertness, alacrity, and kindness. And a third group's eyes remained a mystery; they appeared to be staring into space as if they were watching the whole thing on television. The victims' eyes were all the same—sad and scared. (1)

A viewer of the viewer, Baum's distance from the other demonstrates the perversion of the ethical encounter through the screen—whether real or imagined—that is problematizing our response to otherness. *Acide sulfurique* challenges the reader to consider their ethical responsibilities as a contemporary viewer of suffering. If Nothomb's dystopian critique is correct, and the mediation of otherness not only leads to complacency and indifference, but may facilitate a final move towards active complicity in the derealization and dehumanization of human lives, then how are we to position ourselves as viewers in order to respond to these new demands? Are there alternate viewing positions that offer more responsible and self-conscious ways of looking and of acting upon what we see? Or do we need to use our imaginations, through fiction as Nothomb does, to respond to an ethical demand that is inherently external, foreign, and other?

Much of the criticism that greeted *Acide sulfurique*'s release was, as we have seen, levied against the apparently asinine and obtuse attempts to transform Auschwitz into *Loft Story*. Yet the novel's cultural value comes from the ways in which it draws our attention to the ethical problems posed by the increasing prevalence of mediated viewing practices. The increasing temporal distance from the Holocaust risks inhibiting our understanding of bystander behavior, yet *Acide sulfurique* demonstrates how the same notions continue to invade socio-political spaces today, and how our viewing practices must undergo some sort of transformation if we are to respond ethically as co-presents in the suffering of others. How else, *Acide sulfurique* asks, are we to question our ethical responsibilities to the memory of the Holocaust and to ongoing acts of atrocity and state-sponsored discrimination than through fiction, and through the illumination of our own perverted ethical responses to present-day mediations of otherness.

Royal Holloway, University of London

Notes

1. Throughout this paper I use the terms "viewer" or "audience," rather than "spectator," as I wish to emphasize the role of the "real," embodied people who create meaning actively in response to visual images. Although the terms "viewer" and "spectator" are often conflated, film and spectator theory has sought to distinguish the "spectator" as an idealised subject position that is created by the visual image. In the case of *Concentration*, the spectator is the oppressive and sadistic subject position created by the images of human suffering and subjugation to inhumane orders. The viewer is the at-home human-being who could respond to such suffering but chooses—in this case—only to aggravate that injustice. See Aaron 1–2.

2. See Holmes and Jermyn 1–8; Andrejevic 1–12; Bignell 1–13.

3. See Darling-Wolf 128–31.

4. See Andrejevic 12–13; Bignell 9–10.

5. Andrejevic (1–17), and Shaw (61–62), dispute the true influence of the viewer, claiming that the audience is often manipulated or simply ignored by producers, constituting part of a wider "myth" of reality television.

6. Conversely, *Acide sulfurique* does not present everything that *Concentration* shows, and the scenes of grotesque murder in the camp, which are a visual delight for the viewers, are obscured in the narrative, ostensibly maintaining the taboo, familiar to Holocaust literature, against entering the gas chambers (see 183, for example, where Pannonique blocks out detailed descriptions of her anticipated death).

7. Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century Panopticon was an institution designed to house inmates under the observation of a single inspector who could observe the inmates at any time, but would be invisible to them. Inmates did not know if they were being watched at any given moment or not, but Bentham surmised that they would act at all times as if they were, a situation that could prove economically beneficial. This idea can be seen in its modern manifestation in George Orwell's slogan "Big Brother is watching you" from *1984*, and the name of *Acide sulfurique*'s central character, Pannonique, suggests these strong visual and penitentiary influences.

8. Klee et al. have, however, identified incidents during the Holocaust that clearly fall into a discussion of viewership and even "execution tourism," primarily in Eastern Europe (107–35).

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