

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

»Many healthy children« or »Mercy Killing«? Eugenic Propaganda in NS Popular Fiction

1 Introduction: classifying mental impairment in the NS era

This article is about the most horrendous episode in the history of disability and about the role that literary fiction played here: the NS-dictatorship between 1933 and 1945. Historians of medicine agree that the NS regime should be called a biomedical dictatorship – it was built and consequently operated by physicians.¹ And it showed its worst side, among others, in the violent atrocities against people with mental impairments; this had started with the sterilization law from 1933 and culminated in the industrial mass killings between 1939 and 1941, the infamous ›Aktion T4‹.² Its potential future victims had been classified by the sterilization law under heterogenous arbitrary sub-categories such as ›hereditary cretinism‹, ›schizophrenia‹, ›manic-depressive insanity‹, ›hereditary epilepsy‹, ›hereditary Chorea‹, ›hereditary blindness‹, ›hereditary deafness‹ (Fig. 1).³

Of course, the Nazis were immensely keen on objectifying classes of mental impairments in order to declare them all as organic and therefore hereditary; their classification system was deeply naturalistic and essentialist, but it was also an open system with porous boundaries. In other words: it would easily expand to absorb on the one hand new categories; on the other hand, the initially hereditary categories would turn gradually into more universal ones. In the infamous leaflet of 1939 that accompanied the registration form (›Meldebogen‹) for the mass killings, new categories appear such as ›all patients kept as criminally mentally ill‹, ›all patients who suffer from encephalitis‹, ›all patients who have been in an asylum for at least 5 years‹ and ›all patients with senile illnesses‹. Apart from that, ›hereditary cretinism‹ has now turned into ›cretinism of any sort‹, ›hereditary Chorea Huntington‹ into ›Huntington and other neurological end-stage conditions‹ (Fig. 2).

1 See Wolfgang Uwe Eckart: *Medizin in der NS-Diktatur. Ideologie, Praxis, Folgen*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2012, pp. 11–20.

2 The term ›Aktion T4‹ became common only after 1945 and refers to the address of the planning authority for the mass killings in Berlin, Tiergartenstrasse 4.

3 All translations of German sources, if not otherwise indicated, are by Martina King.

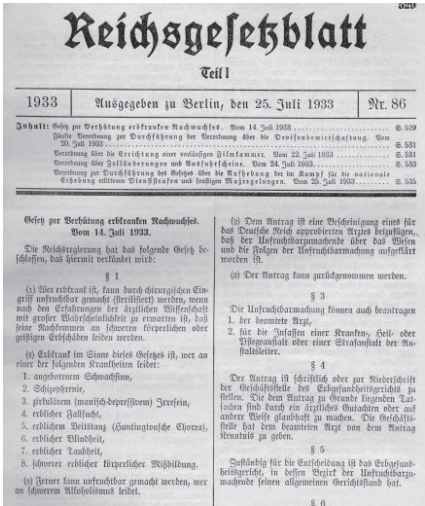


Fig. 1 Announcement of sterilization law 1933⁴

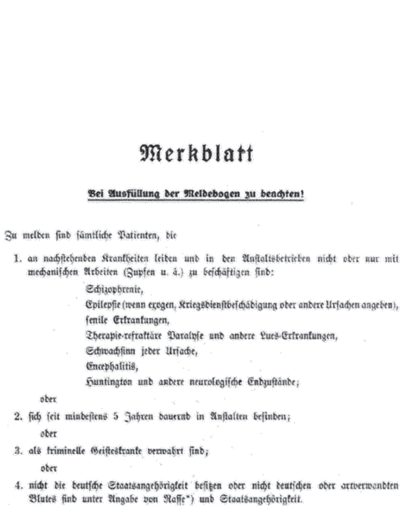


Fig. 2 Leaflet, with registration form, 1939⁵

While the aspect of heredity still dominates in the legal text from 1933, the leaflet of 1939 leaves this restriction behind. Like a manual, it somehow orchestrates the actual practice of killing an inhomogeneous group of people all subsumed as mentally disabled in asylums and psychiatric hospitals (>Heil- und Pflegeanstalten<). And in doing so, it opens up for simply everybody who, first, behaves differently than the normal individual—another vague, undefined biosocial category; and, second, for all those who are already kept in one of these institutions.

In accordance with the leading biomedical doctrine, the mentally ill were considered as >unworthy lives< that weakened the collective body (>Volkskörper<); their removal from the gene pool would lead to racial enhancement.⁶ Hence, about 400,000 people underwent coercive sterilization after 1933 and

4 Reichsgesetzblatt: Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses vom 25. Juli 1933, in: Wikipedia, de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Gesetz_zur_Verh%C3%BCtung_erbkranken_Nachwuchses&oldid=253231972 (02.03.2025).
 5 Merkblatt zum Meldebogen, Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (M17): Euthanasie im NS-Staat: Grafeneck im Jahr 1940 – Baustein, www.lpb-bw.de/publikationen/euthana/euthana34.htm (02.03.2025).
 6 See Jürgen Peter: Einleitung, in: Public Health, Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus. Gesundheit und Krankheit als Vision der Volksgemeinschaft, Frankfurt/Main 2018, pp. 7–24, here p. 7f.

6,000 lost their lives during the sterilization process; in January 1934, the *Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring*, in short: sterilization law, had come into force which regulated this practice until 1945. The next step of escalation was the ›Aktion T4‹: following an informal decree of Hitler, addressed to the physicians Philip Bouhler and Karl Brandt,⁷ 80,000 people were killed between 1939 and 1941 in special institutions, mainly psychiatric hospitals and asylums—by gas poisoning, sleeping drugs or starvation, among them about 5,000 children.⁸

Now this is not only the darkest chapter in the history of disability; it is also the darkest chapter in the history of German literature. I will argue that literature, precisely popular fiction, played a substantial part here. It pushed the general public to accept this new, brutalized NS-world where disabled people had no right to live by systematically euphemizing and embellishing the principle of eugenic purification. Central to this process was a newly emerging, highly popular genre: the medical novel (›Arztroman‹). It became a major propaganda tool for eugenic doctrines, their ›legal‹ foundations and

7 See Gerrit Hohendorf: Ideengeschichte und Realgeschichte der nationalsozialistischen »Euthanasie« im Überblick, in: Fuchs, Petra/Rotzoll, Maïke/Müller, Ulrich/ Richter, Paul/ Hohendorf, Gerrit (eds.): *Das Vergessen der Vernichtung ist Teil der Vernichtung selbst. Lebensgeschichten von Opfern der nationalsozialistischen »Euthanasie«*, Göttingen 2007, pp. 36–52, here pp. 39f.; Andreas Frewer: »Schiefe Ebene«, Zensur und Selbstzensur: Zur Geschichte der Sterbehilfe-Debatte in der Zeitschrift Ethik, in: *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 35 (2000), pp. 335–360, here p. 335.

8 The research literature is vast, therefore just some seminal works: Götz Aly: *Aktion T4 1939–1945. Die ›Euthanasie‹-Zentrale in der Tiergartenstraße 4*, 2nd ed., Berlin 1989; Ernst Klee: *Was sie taten – was sie wurden. Ärzte, Juristen und andere Beteiligte am Kranken- oder Judenmord*, Frankfurt/Main 1990; Maïke Rotzoll /Gerrit Hohendorf/Petra Fuchs/Paul Richter/Wolfgang Uwe Eckart (eds.): *Die nationalsozialistische ›Euthanasie‹-Aktion T4 und ihre Opfer. Geschichte und ethische Konsequenzen für die Gegenwart*, Paderborn 2010; Thomas Beddies: *Im Gedenken der Kinder. Die Kinderärzte und die Verbrechen an Kindern in der NS-Zeit*, Berlin 2012; Margret Hamm: »Lebensunwert«: *Zerstörte Leben. Zwangssterilisation und »Euthanasie«*, Frankfurt/Main 2005; Christof Beyer/Petra Fuchs/Anette Hinz-Wessels/Gerrit Hohendorf/Maïke Rotzoll/Hedwig Thelen/Jens Thiel (eds.): *Tiergartenstraße 4. Memorial and Information Point for the Victims of National Socialist ›Euthanasia‹ Killings*, Berlin 2016. For significant contributions from Anglo-American disability studies that examine the discursive and cultural dimensions of Nazi euthanasia policies, see: Emmeline Burdett: *Disability, Nazi Euthanasia, and the Legacy of the Nuremberg Medical Trial*, Boulder, CO 2023; Sharon L. Snyder/David T. Mitchell: *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Chicago 2006 (Chapter 3: »The Eugenic Atlantic«); and Harold Braswell: »Euthanasia«, in: Adams, Rachel/Reiss, Benjamin/Serlin, David (eds.): *Keywords for Disability Studies*, New York 2015, pp. 79–81. These Anglo-American perspectives offer critical analyses of the rhetorical strategies and cultural contexts that enabled eugenic ideologies, complementing the historical research tradition predominant in German scholarship.

practical consequences, in other words for the public acceptance of coercive sterilization and mass killing; and it did so by offering thrilling plots, soft entertainment, distraction and finally a happy new world.⁹ Now if we want to understand how all this came about, how literary fiction and criminal practices worked hand in hand, we have to start at the interwar period.

2 Preconditions in the interwar period

What were the preconditions in the Weimar Republic for the ensuing systematic violence against the mentally disabled? In the years after the treatise of Versailles, mass poverty and economic crisis – 1922, 1929 – dominated the young republic. In this context, thousands of people in the overcrowded mental asylums were considered as socioeconomic burden: unwanted, useless eaters, social parasites, ›human ballast‹.¹⁰ Many people, politicians, doctors, lawyers, thought that paying for their living costs in the asylums was something that the economically wretched Weimar state could not afford. These economic arguments met with eugenic ones, both converged perfectly well.¹¹ The pioneering Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler for example believed that all sorts of mental diseases, especially schizophrenia, were hereditary and would weaken the ›Volkkörper‹. In 1922, in the fourth edition of his famous *Textbook of psychiatry*, he writes the following phrases:

If we do nothing but make mental and physical cripples capable of propagating themselves, and the healthy stocks have to limit the number of their children because so much has to be done for the maintenance of others, if natural selection

- 9 See Martina King: Helden, Heilige, Menschenzüchter: NS-Arztroman und biopolitische Diktatur, in: Weindling, Paul/Brandt, Christina/Fangerau, Heiner/Meinel, Christoph (eds.): NS Medicine: Cultures, Structures, Personal Histories. NAL Historica. Wissenschaftshistorische und wissenschaftstheoretische Schriftenreihe der Leopoldina, Halle 2026.
- 10 Cf. Dirk Blasius: »Einfache Seelenstörung«. Geschichte der deutschen Psychiatrie 1800–1945, Frankfurt/Main 1994; Heinz Faulstich: Hungersterben in der Psychiatrie 1914–1949. Mit einer Topographie der NS-Psychiatrie, Freiburg im Breisgau 1998, pp. 69–101; Stephanie Neuner: Politik und Psychiatrie. Die staatliche Versorgung psychisch kriegsbeschädigter nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Deutschland 1920–1939, Göttingen 2011.
- 11 Gerhard Baader: Rassenhygiene und Eugenik. Vorbedingungen für die Vernichtungsstrategien gegen sogenannte ›Minderwertige‹ im Nationalsozialismus, in: Peter, Jürgen (ed.): Public Health, Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus. Gesundheit und Krankheit als Vision der Volksgemeinschaft, Frankfurt/Main 2018, pp. 119–129.

is generally suppressed, then unless we will get new measures our race must rapidly deteriorate.¹²

With ›mental cripples‹, Bleuler meant already both the inborn ›idiots‹ and the ›mentally insane‹ – he considered the two classes both as genetically inferior, in historical semantics ›a life unworthy of life‹. Now within the rigid logic of eugenics, one had two possibilities to deal with Bleuler's ›mental cripples‹: either one prevented them from reproducing or one extinguished them. The first idea, mass sterilization, was widely popular in the Weimar Republic, supported by officials, theologians, lawyers and doctors; Bleuler is a prominent example. So even coercive measures, in other words violence seemed acceptable.

However, the second idea, extinction by euthanasia, was still very unpopular in the interwar period; but it had already come up in a notorious book. In 1920, the lawyer Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche published their infamous treatise *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life* [*Die Freigabe der Vernichtung unwerten Lebens*].¹³ Here, the authors describe mentally disabled people as »human lives that are not only absolutely worthless but have a negative value.«¹⁴ The paragraph continues:

There cannot be any doubt that there are human lives whose death would be redemption for themselves; likewise, it would free society and in particular the state from a burden which is of no use at all, apart from the one to be an example of utmost selflessness.¹⁵

12 Eugen Bleuler: *Textbook of Psychiatry*, Translated by A.A., New York 1934, p. 214. Following the fourth German edition: Eugen Bleuler: *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie*, 4th ed., Berlin 1922, p. 160: »Aber wenn wir nichts tun, als die geistigen und körperlichen Krüppel fortpflanzungsfähig zu machen, und die tüchtigen Stämme ihre Kinderzahl beschränken müssen, weil man so viel für die Erhaltung der anderen zu tun hat, wenn man überhaupt die natürliche Auslese unterdrückt, muß es ohne neue Maßregeln mit unserem Geschlecht rasch rückwärts gehen«.

13 Karl Binding/Alfred Hoche: *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens. Ihr Maß und ihre Form* [1920], 2nd ed., Leipzig 1922. Contemporary English translation: *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life. Its Measure and Form*, translated by Cristina Modak, Greenwood 2012. Since there is no authorized scholarly translation, the quotes are translated by Martina King.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 27, the whole paragraph goes like this: »Denkt man sich gleichzeitig ein Schlachtfeld bedeckt mit Tausenden toter Jugend [...] und stellt man in Gedanken unsere Idioteninstitute mit ihrer Sorgfalt für ihre lebenden Insassen daneben—und man ist auf das Tiefste erschüttert von diesem grellen Missklang zwischen der Opferung des teuersten Gutes der Menschheit im grössten Massstabe auf der einen und der grössten Pflege nicht nur absolut wertloser sondern negativ zu wertender Existenzen auf der anderen Seite«.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 28: »Dass es lebende Menschen gibt, deren Tod für sie eine Erlösung und zugleich für die Gesellschaft und den Staat insbesondere eine Befreiung von einer Last ist, deren

Binding and Hoche again, in their radically utilitarian argument, include both innate disability and acquired mental disorder. Initially, they bring up two groups of people who legitimize the legalization of euthanasia. The first one: those with mortal physical conditions, end-stage cancer or deadly wounds on the battlefield who intentionally wish to die. The main target, however, is the second group which

consists of the incurable idiots—no matter if they have been borne or become like this, such as the paralytics [tertiary syphilis, MK] in the last stage of their illness. They have neither the will to live nor to die. Hence, one doesn't need, on the one side, consider consent on their side in being killed; on the other hand, the killing doesn't meet any will to live which would first have to be broken.¹⁶

Those »incurable idiots« for whom it doesn't make any difference if they are alive or dead, would just give rise to the emergence of a new profession, the carers in the asylums. This new profession has its only aim in maintaining the »unworthy lives« for years and decades.¹⁷ The rhetoric of Binding and Hoche, stating that the mentally disabled are far below the »normal« human existence, without self-consciousness and hence unable to wish to live or to die, is so cynical, so striking and simplifying that the idea of legalized killing almost automatically emerges in this text. That in turn implies the infamous epithet, the »beautiful death«, euthanasia or »mercy killing«; it equally predominates Binding's and Hoche's rhetoric:

The most suitable means in these cases – which have to be decided individually – would then be euthanasia, since redemption must come painless at any rate and only an expert would be entitled to use this means.¹⁸

»Painless redemption at any rate«: One can see that the fatal euphemism »euthanasia« carries all sorts of religious subtexts. »Erlösung« in German can mean release from the earthy burden (of »unworthy life«); but it can also mean

Tragung ausser dem einen, ein Vorbild grösster Selbstlosigkeit zu sein, nicht den kleinsten Nutzen stiftet, lässt sich in keiner Hinsicht bezweifeln.

16 Ibid., p. 31: »Die zweite Gruppe besteht aus den unheilbar Blödsinnigen—einerlei ob sie so geboren oder etwa wie die Paralytiker im letzten Stadium ihres Leidens so geworden sind. Sie haben weder den Willen zu leben noch zu sterben. So gibt es ihrerseits keine beachtliche Einwilligung in die Tötung, andererseits stösst diese auf keinen Lebenswillen der gebrochen werden müsste«.

17 Ibid., p. 31f.

18 Ibid., p. 37: »Es dürfte sich empfehlen, im Anschluss an den Befund des Einzelfalls das in diesem Fall geeignetste Mittel der Euthanasie zu bezeichnen. Denn unbedingt schmerzlos muss die Erlösung erfolgen, und nur ein Sachverständiger wäre zur Anwendung des Mittels berechtigt«.

redemption or even salvation, it is polysemic and I translate it with ›redemption‹. However, as stated above, Binding and Hoche were not well received and could not gather much ground. The Weimar republic was still openly hostile to the idea of legalizing euthanasia; the influence of social democratic forces and Christian churches was still too strong. So why bother with Binding and Hoche? Because of their striking style which marks a threshold. We see a certain rhetoric of extremes coming up, precisely of extreme contrasts – mainly of darkness and light, misery and happiness, suffering and redemption. On the one hand, there is the darkness of the asylum, the poor dark creatures living a dark life of unworthiness: ›mentally dead‹, ›human ballast‹, ›empty shells of human beings‹. On the other hand, there is euthanasia – implying brightness and happiness, a happy society, happy caregivers, happy relatives and a soft, painless release from earthy burdens. What follows almost without saying from these dichotomic extremes: mercy killing can either happen on demand or without demand, if the person is unable for rational consent.¹⁹ Hence this type of contrastive, black-and-white representation is catchy, easy to remember, will stick in people's mind.

3 Eugenic propaganda after 1933 – the NS media dictatorship

Why is this so important? Because the contrastive image of the disabled person as dark ›unworthy life‹ reappeared and remained after 1933 – and became a major propaganda tool for the crimes and atrocities against those considered inferior. We must not forget that the Nazi regime is considered both a biomedical dictatorship *and* a media dictatorship (›Mediendiktatur‹)²⁰ that worked and could only work with a huge, bureaucratically complex propaganda machinery, divided in many sub-institutions. On the state side, there was the Ministry of Propaganda, and furthermore the *Reich Chamber of Culture* (›Reichskulturkammer‹) with its many sub-divisions; on the party side, there was the *Rosenberg Office* (›Amt Rosenberg‹), a complex body of

19 See *ibid.*

20 See Erhard Schütz: ›Das Dritte Reich‹ als Mediendiktatur: Medienpolitik und Modernisierung in Deutschland 1933 bis 1945, in: Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht, deutsche Sprache und Literatur 87 (1995), pp. 129–150; Bernd Sösemann/Marius Lange: Propaganda. Medien und Öffentlichkeit in der NS-Diktatur. Vol. 2, Stuttgart 2011. For the literary market see also the seminal book of Jean-Pieter Barbian: Literaturpolitik im »Dritten Reich«. Institutionen, Kompetenzen, Betätigungsfelder. Überarb. u. aktual. Ausg., Munich 1995.

cultural surveillance. Finally, the Office of Racial Policy (›Rassepolitisches Amt der NSDAP‹) must be mentioned. It was founded by medical men with the purpose of education and dissemination; speakers were trained here, the Office ran a journal – *Neues Volk*²¹ – and commissioned films for disseminating biomedical doctrines such as inherited racial or constitutional inferiority. This multifaceted, decentralized propaganda machinery would permanently infuse ideological content in didactic or entertaining, soothing or polarizing wrappings into society, such as UFA films, weekly broadcasts, documentaries, posters, novels, picture books etc. An important example is the propaganda film *Erbkrank* from 1936, produced by the Office of Racial Policy and its leading official for press and media, Hellmuth Unger²² (see below), and directed by Walter Gross. It was mainly used for didactic purposes within the party, but also presented to the greater public in cinemas as educational film;²³ and it shows the universality of the category ›mentally disabled‹.



Fig. 3: screenshots from propaganda film *Erbkrank*²⁴

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- 21 Neues Volk. Blätter des rassepolitischen Amtes der NSDAP (Verlag der Deutschen Ärzteschaft), founded in 1933 by Hellmuth Unger, broadly received by NS physicians.
 - 22 See Thomas Werther: Fleckfieberforschung im Deutschen Reich 1914–1945. Untersuchungen zur Beziehung zwischen Wissenschaft, Industrie und Politik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der IG Farben, Marburg 2004, p. 167, FN 628.
 - 23 See Petra Zimmermann: Der ›Kampf ums Dasein‹. Eugenik, Rassismus und Antisemitismus, in: Zimmermann, Petra/Hoffmann, Kay (eds.): Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland 3. ›Drittes Reich‹ 1933–1945, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 505–529 & 554–567; Ulf Schmidt: Medical Films, Ethics and Euthanasia in Nazi Germany. The History of Medical Research and Teaching Films of the Reich Office for Educational Films/Reich Institute for Films in Science and Education 1933–1945, Husum 2002.
 - 24 Silent film, Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP, 23m 40s, 352x288, 1935/36, Erbkrank|Filmportal.De, www.filmportal.de/film/erbkrank_4bc08ccca3da41b89c4a691f80a71ae1 (02.03.2025); see also Deutsches Filmportal (Deutsches Filminstitut und Filmmuseum DFF), www.filmportal.de/film/erbkrank_4bc08ccca3da41b89c4a691f80a71ae1 (02.03.2025).

A large and intentionally unsystematic variety of people, children, adolescents, young women, old women, young men, old men, pass by in front of the camera very quickly, mostly in split seconds; but they are always depicted in a humiliating way, improperly dressed, sometimes half naked or in straitjackets, obviously vulnerable.

And they have, as far as one can see, very little in common, suffer from all sorts of heterogenous handicaps: neurological and physical illnesses, spastic paresis, ataxia, osteochondrodysplasia, Down syndrome, extrapyramidal disorders, limb amputations, behavioral disturbances, blindness, stereotypical movements, just to mention a few. However, inserted texts declare them without exception as ›madmen‹ or ›idiots‹ and offer arbitrary, astronomical statistics – their number having increased by 450% over the last 70 years, the general population only by 50%. These quick film sequences sum up to a panorama of monstrosities that should apparently shock people and frame the opinions of party physicians and party speakers about this new, universal class ›inherited insanity‹. The latter must not be passed on, as inserted texts repeat over and over again, since many of these ›idiots‹ are the offspring of criminals, vagabonds and alcoholics and stand now – at the end of the chain of degeneration – far below the animal. However, they are kept in luxurious homes by healthy staff, a complete waste of resources; inserted texts present again astronomical, five-figure costs for exemplary individuals after decades in asylums. The argument made for coercive mass sterilization is so strong that Goebbels was thrilled by the propagandist value of these pictures. In December 1936, he wrote in his diary: »[...] then a film from the asylums, for justification of the sterilization law. Horrible material. With great pictures. Makes one's blood freeze while watching. Sterilization then comes as a blessing«.²⁵

While the film is a good example for the universalist scope of the category ›mentally disabled‹ – being at work in both dictatorial health policy and educational propaganda – the following picture from the same institutional source, the Office of Racial Policy, shows how eugenic propaganda works with defined iconographies of contrast. It was published in 1934 in the Journal *Neues Volk* and we see the contrastive constructions in both text and image (left side):

25 Diary entry 04.12.1936, quoted after Felix Moeller: *Der Filmminister. Goebbels und der Film im Dritten Reich*, Berlin 1998, p. 359: »Dann einen Film aus Irrenanstalten zur Begründung des Sterilisationsgesetzes. Grauenhaftes Material. Mit tollen Aufnahmen. Das Blut gefriert einem bloß beim Anschauen. Da ist die Unfruchtbarmachung nur ein Segen«.

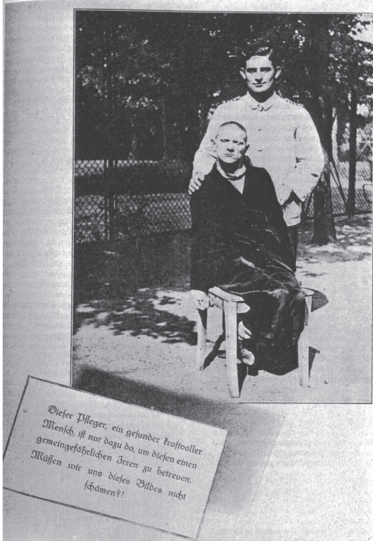


Fig. 4: Foto, Journal *Neues Volk*, 1934²⁶



Fig. 5: Poster, Publishing House *Neues Volk*, 1938

There is the disabled person, spatially inferior; sitting, in dark clothes, with a dark facial expression and unpleasant body language. Then we have the opposite, the caregiver: superior, standing, in white clothing, friendly, open expression, very good looking. And the caption suggests that all this superiority is wasted to maintain ›unworthy live‹. In 1938, the scope of this new, dichotomic iconography was widened: the image was reprinted as a poster, with a much more aggressive caption, and widely disseminated. However, it is a somehow negative message – firstly it might leave an uneasy feeling, even be perceived as a threat. Secondly, no reward is given, for example with a nice story; no distraction, no entertainment, no pleasure, no happy end. And this is the point where the medical novel comes to the fore, becomes almost necessary in the totalitarian media machinery: on the one hand, this genre again draws on the dichotomic image of the disabled and his/her healthy

26 Journal *Neues Volk*. Blätter des Aufklärungsamtes für Bevölkerungspolitik und Rassenpflege, Vol. 2:1 (1934), p. 16. The caption is »Dieser Pfleger, ein gesunder kraftvoller Mensch, ist nur dazu da, um diesen einen, gemeingefährlichen Irren zu betreuen. Müssen wir uns dieses Bildes nicht schämen?«.

counterpart. On the other hand, the medical novel combines the underlying threat with the pleasure of simplistic, teleological storytelling.

4 The medical novel as propaganda tool for eugenic crimes

The rather new genre²⁷ saw a real boom between 1933 and 1945, where at least 30 medical novels flooded the controlled Nazi book market – many of them bestsellers that sold up to half a million copies and had many post war editions.²⁸ They were all trivial, entertaining and easy-to-read-stories of various traditional kinds – adventure novels, social novels, travel novels, love novels, pastoral novels; but they had one thing in common: a male or female physician as protagonist.²⁹ These texts distracted readers from the reality of violence, barbarism and finally war; by showing devoted, modest, heroic doctors who embodied German scientific progress. These fictional protagonists continuously fight for humanity and a better happy world without misery – in other words a eugenically purified world without miserable disabled people.

27 As to the history of the medical novel – at least in the German world: it seems to emerge in the 1920s as part of a growing entertaining media market. There are some precursors in ›high literature‹ such as Jean Paul's *Dr. Katzenbergers Badereise*, Storm's *Ein Bekenntnis*, Zola's *Docteur Pascal*, Kafka's *Ein Landarzt*, Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle*, Benn's *Rönne-Zyklus*, and Ernst Weiß' later novels, which all tackle questions of physicianship such as identity, ethics, and epistemology. However, in the course of the 20th century, the topic is no longer of interest for avant-garde or experimental prose and somehow moves into the entertaining sector; see King: *Helden, Heilige, Menschenzüchter*, 2026 and Walter Müller-Seidel: *Arztbilder im Wandel. Zum literarischen Werk Arthur Schnitzlers*. Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Heft 6, Munich 1997, p. 11.

28 As to numbers of editions and sold copies, see Rolf Düsterberg: Einleitung, in: Düsterberg, Rolf (ed.): *Dichter für das »Dritte Reich«*. Biografische Studien zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Ideologie, Bd. 3. 9 Autorenporträts und eine Skizze über das Deutsche Kulturwerk Europäischen Geistes, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 7–19, here p. 8.

29 Here is a selection of the most successful novels: Hans Dittmer: *Der Arzt, der aus Gott ging*, Göttingen 1937; Betina Ewerbeck: *Angela Koldewey*, Berlin 1939; Hans Hartmann: *Vitamine*, Stuttgart 1939; Max René Hesse: *Morath verwirklicht einen Traum*, Berlin 1934; Hans Hoster: *Genesung in Graubünden*, Berlin 1938; id.: *Viele sind berufen*, Leipzig 1933; Friedrich Klingler: *Darfst du töten? Ein Gegenwartsroman*, Stuttgart 1935; Hans Künkel: *Ein Arzt sucht seinen Weg*, Berlin 1939; Luz Lorentzen: *Elke oder die Bewährung*, Berlin 1939; Reinhold Conrad Muschler: *Beata Diana*, Berlin 1938; Florian Seidl: *Das harte Ja*, Berlin 1941; Hellmuth Unger: *Robert Koch: Roman eines großen Lebens*, Berlin 1936; id.: *Sendung und Gewissen*, Berlin 1936; id.: *Unvergängliches Erbe. Das Leben Emil von Behrings*, Oldenburg 1940; id.: *Germanin. Geschichte einer deutschen Großtat*, Berlin 1940; Karl Unsel: *Der Arzt aus Leidenschaft*, Berlin 1935; id.: *Ein Arzt muss schweigen*, Berlin 1941.

In the novel *Consent to the greatest hardship* [*Das harte Ja*, 1941], a propaganda text for the sterilization law, a physician tells the protagonist: »Just because the Volk matters most to us, just because we want children, many healthy children, we have to act like this«. ³⁰ What he means: the protagonist must give up his great love, must not marry and reproduce, since his mother suffered from schizophrenia and died in an asylum. Her illness is described by the sister of the protagonist in a vivid way:

She tossed and turned in the bed, screamed, reared, ran out onto the road in her nightgown and screamed that the wall would crack. [...] She often screamed in a horrible way, I took her head in my hands and kept her mouth shut with a cushion; since no one should hear that. ³¹

With this frightening report of the mother's condition, the narrative logic becomes clear: the reader follows the protagonist's inner development towards heroic renunciation. It emerges almost automatically from the contrastive stereotypical image of the disabled person: screaming, suffering, insane, the horrible dark side of human existence; well established, initially by Binding and Hoche and then echoed and disseminated by the film *Erbkrank*. The contrastive, bright side is also there:

He thinks about the singing and dancing girls he had seen then, he looks at Guta and thinks: »You healthy, strong mothers of my Volk!« [...] And he thinks: Renunciation! I must renunciate! ³²

Therefore, no marriage, no reproduction: the heroic individual steps willingly back from personal happiness for the sake of collective happiness. And for those poor creatures who are shown by the film *Erbkrank* as having no reason and no decision-making faculty, coercive sterilization emerges as the only, unavoidable solution; the novel fosters public acceptance of this mass crime firstly by arising emotions with extreme black-and-white-contrasts, and secondly by creating an atmosphere of progress with scientific language. A doctor in the asylum tells the protagonist about the successes of the insulin

30 Seidl: *Das harte Ja*, p. 348: »Gerade weil uns das Volk über alles geht, gerade weil wir Kinder wollen, viele gesunde Kinder, müssen wir so handeln«.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 220f.: » Sie wälzte sich auf dem Bett, bäumte sich vor Entsetzen auf, schrie, wollte zum Fenster, fliehen [...]. Sie lief im Hemd auf die Strasse, sie rief: Die Mauer stürzt ein [...] Sie schrie oft schauerlich, ich nahm ihre Stirn in meine Hände. Ich hielt ihr auch den Mund mit einem Kissen zu, denn es durfte niemand hören«.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 355f.: »Er denkt an die tanzenden und singenden Mädchen, die er damals sah, blickt auf Guta und denkt: Ihr gesunden und kräftigen Mütter meines Volkes! [...] und er denkt: Verzichten! Ich muss verzichten!«.

treatment and he adds »of course, all those who are – by the sake of the insulin treatment – reintegrated into a normal working life, must undergo sterilization before discharge; they carry the seed of the illness«. ³³

We see how the novel *Consent to the greatest hardship* adds elements of pleasure and hope to the threatening iconographies of film and pictures. The reader is led through internal states of fictional characters who doubt, fear, tremble and finally experience utter satisfaction, even happiness when they have found out the truth: eugenic purification will lead to a better world without any misery.

This kind of maturation of fictional characters, in other words heroic renunciation of ›impure‹ marriage, is a pattern we find in other medical novels. An important example is *Angela Koldewey. Story of a young female physician* [*Angela Koldewey. Roman einer jungen Ärztin*], an immensely successful best-seller. Written by ambitious Nazi physician and author Betina Ewerbeck, it had two editions (1939, 1943) in the publishing house *Neues Volk* of the Office of Racial Policy and sold 240,000 copies until 1945. After the war, it had six further editions between 1949 and 1963 and sold all in all 500,000 copies. ³⁴ In this novel, the protagonist finds out in a conversation with her fiancé that she can't marry him, he is genetically ›impure‹:

›Something that I never told you: my older brother has been suffering from bouts of severe insanity for years, has repeatedly tried to kill himself. We had to bring him to an asylum—and also my father had died in an asylum. Angela was terrified, she realized the severe hereditary disease. As if he had read her thoughts, Martin added quietly: ›I must renounce having children, Angela, so our future is in your hands.‹ ³⁵

We have the same pattern: poor disabled creatures in the asylum—and voluntary heroic characters with genetic burdens that renounce love and reproduction. In this case, the reader is offered pleasure by the teleological plot itself, since the female medical protagonist finds a better suited partner; he is the embodiment of Aryan superiority: »She wanted to have a child – and

33 Ibid., pp. 157f.: »Selbstverständlich müssen auch alle, die durch die Insulinkur wieder dem Erwerbsleben zugeführt werden, vor ihrer Entlassung unfruchtbar gemacht werden, denn sie tragen den Keim der Krankheit ja in sich«.

34 See King: *Helden, Heilige, Menschenzüchter*.

35 Ewerbeck: *Angela Koldewey*, p. 212: »›Etwas, was ich dir bisher verschwiegen habe: mein älterer Bruder leidet seit Jahren an Zuständen von schwerer Geistesverwirrtheit. [...] [Auch] mein Vater ist in einer Anstalt gestorben.« Angela war zutiefst erschrocken. Eine schwere Erbkrankheit, dachte sie voll Entsetzen. Als ob er ihre Gedankengänge gespürt hätte, fügte dann Martin still hinzu: ›Ich werde auf Kinder verzichten müssen, Angela. Die Entscheidung über unsere Zukunft liegt bei dir.«.

Hans von Dühren, so young, so healthy, so happy and fresh, with the most honorable character – he was the best she could wish«. ³⁶

So healthy, happy and fresh: breeding with the perfect Aryan partner brings the protagonist to her final destiny, happy motherhood – and it brings a happy ending to the reader; namely to thousands of readers who had to be distracted in the years of merciless violence and extermination.

Now we see the twofold function of the eugenic novels: concealment of the violent reality on the one hand, subtle propaganda for the new eugenic world. Both come hand in hand, brought about firstly by systematic euphemisms, embellishment, glorification; secondly by showing inner states of characters and commenting on them as moral maturation. As opposed to the threatening iconography of the documentary film and the propagandist pictures, these novels transmit a positive message. They promise a healthy and happy world of perfect Aryans, e.g. in *Angela Koldewey* – without any suffering, violence and coercion. And this, in return, must have worked as positive propaganda: it apparently increased the public's preparedness for the reality of eugenic purification.

5 Hellmuth Unger and his novel *Mission and Conscience* [*Sendung und Gewissen*], 1936 ³⁷

The next step was, as already mentioned, the mass killing of the mentally disabled. It was already debated in 1936 in the inner circle of Reichsärztführer Wagner and in the Office of Racial Policy; ³⁸ the concrete, secret planning started in 1939 when a committee of 40 eminent physicians met in the *Chancellery of the Führer* in Tiergartenstrasse 4. However, it could not remain an absolute secret and it was clear that disabled people had an uncertain future from now on. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that this step was equally accompanied by literary fiction. In 1936, the physician and creative writer Hellmuth Unger published his infamous medical novel *Mission and conscience*, which is all about ›mercy killing‹. Unger, high rank medical officer, prolific bestseller writer and leading figure within the NS

36 Ibid., p. 221: »Sie wollte ein Kind haben—und Hans von Dühren, so jung, so gesund, so froh und frisch, in Gesinnung und Charakter anständig und ehrenhaft bis zum letzten, war der Beste, den sie sich nur wünschen konnte«.

37 Unger: *Sendung und Gewissen*, Berlin 1936. Second edition: Oldenburg 1941.

38 See Eckart: *Medizin in der NS-Diktatur*, p. 98.

medical press,³⁹ presents in his triple role the link between the dictatorial media market and the dictatorial medical system. Having published successful medical novels already in the Weimar Republic, he starts working at the Office of Racial Policy in 1933, founds the Journal *Neues Volk*,⁴⁰ becomes press officer for the *Reichsärztführer* Gerhard Wagner and in 1935, press officer for the *Reich physicians' chamber* (»Reichsärztekammer«). From 1938 onwards, Unger is publishing director of the central publishing company that unites all local medical journals in NS Germany and after 1936, he is involved – even if historical details are unclear – in the planning of children's euthanasia.⁴¹ As one of the most powerful actors between media and medicine, Unger had already co-produced the film *Erbkrank* in the same year,⁴² and now complemented his efforts with this novel.

The book is – as opposed to the film that only implies euthanasia without mentioning it – pure, frank euthanasia propaganda; but it comes in a manipulative and suggestive form that uses literary techniques for soothing and pleasing the reader. A homodiegetic narrator, a doctor himself, tells us (in a series of fictitious letters to his wife) the story of his medical teacher who is a great surgeon. Again, the reader follows the inner development of a saintly protagonist, but this time not towards heroic renunciation but towards heroic mercy killing. This inner »maturation« is strictly presented from the point of

39 Unger had published several medical novels already in the Weimar republic which sold 150,000 to 200,000 copies, see Walter Müller-Seidel: Euthanasie im nationalsozialistischen Staat. Hellmuth Ungers Roman *Sendung und Gewissen* und der Film *Ich klage an*, in: Anz, Thomas (ed.): *Literatur und Medizin in Deutschland. Zur Geschichte des humanen Denkens im wissenschaftlichen Zeitalter (1795–1945)*, Marburg 2022, pp. 636–660, here pp. 643f. From 1929 onwards, Unger was the director of the press office of the association of German physicians [Verband der Aerzte Deutschlands], see Claudia Sybille Kiessling: *Dr. med. Hellmuth Unger (1891–1953). Dichterarzt und ärztlicher Pressepolitiker in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus*, Husum 1999; see also Roger Uhle: *Neues Volk und reine Rasse. Walter Gross und das Rassenpolitische Amt der NSDAP (RPA)*, Aachen 1999; Eckart: *Medizin in der NS-Diktatur*, pp. 94–100.

40 Unger publishes in 1936 – again in *Neues Volk* – also his most successful propaganda novel *Robert Koch: Roman eines großen Lebens* which sells 300,000 copies and has many further editions: Berlin/Wien 1940, Leipzig 1942, Hamburg 1947, Hamburg 1948, Berlin 1961, see King: *Helden, Heilige, Menschenzüchter*.

41 Unger belonged to the committee of experts for the »Reichsausschuss zur wissenschaftlichen Erfassung von erb- und anlagebedingten schweren Leiden« (with Karl Brandt, the pediatricians Ernst Wentzler and Werner Catel, and the psychiatrist Hans Heinze); see Udo Benzenhöfer: *NS-»Kindereuthanasie«: »Ohne jede moralische Skrupel«*, in: *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* 97:42 (2000), pp. 2766–2772; id.: *Der Fall Leipzig (alias Fall »Kind Knauer«) und die Planung der NS-»Kindereuthanasie«*, Münster 2008, p. 72.

42 See Werther: *Fleckfieberforschung*, p. 167.

view of the protagonist, and filled with self-reflections, self-doubts, deeply moralistic considerations and emotions such as pity or sorrows; and it leads to euthanasia as the unavoidable, difficult path that requires a morally pure, superior character. However, as compared to *Angela Koldewey* and *Consent to the greatest hardship*, this process of psychic development is rather shown than told, almost without auctorial intrusion. At the beginning, the first-person narrator, in the frame narrative of letters to his wife, sometimes comments on the superiority of the medical protagonist whose story he is about to tell. However, later on, he merely quotes the self-critical monologues of this saintly character or long dialogues between himself and the latter:

Now I asked about Sollwich [...]
 ›Incurable?‹
 ›Yes, incurable.‹
 ›And what will happen?‹
 ›You know pretty well! [...] He is a weak, wretched creature. Must one not have mercy here? He asks nothing and wishes nothing, he is already half beyond the threshold. No one will miss him. As long as he is without pain, we will certainly care for him. [...] Even in half-consciousness, every day is a little present. But if deterioration starts, then...‹
 ›You grant him mercy killing?‹
 ›Yes‹
 ›If there is someone who deserves painless dying, then him, I think.‹⁴³

»He asks nothing and wishes nothing«: obviously a case of unworthy life that requires mercy; but euthanasia is just presented as something that will happen in the future or that happened in the past of the fictional world. Hence, there is on the one hand very little narrative distance; the mimetic, showing mode predominates and promotes the immersion of the reader. On the other hand, there is hardly any action, let alone murderous action. The plot merely consists of quoted thoughts and quoted speech – reflection, conversation, monologue, dialogue. Euthanasia is never performed in the actual textual world of this novel which obviously refers to the German genre *Bildungsroman* and its long tradition. Between enlightenment and modernism,

43 Unger: *Sendung und Gewissen*, 2nd ed., p. 198: »Nun fragte ich noch nach Sollwich [...] ›Unheilbar?‹ ›Ja, unheilbar.‹ ›Und was wird sein?‹ Sie wissen es doch [...] Er ist [...] eine schwache Kreatur. Ein Wrack [...]. Muss man da nicht gnädig sein? Er fragt nichts und wünscht nichts mehr, er ist schon halb jenseits der Schwelle. Keiner wird ihn vermissen. So lange er, wie augenblicklich, ohne Schmerzen ist, pflegen wir ihn. [...] Auch im Nur-Dahindämmern ist ja jeder Tag ein kleines Geschenk. Wenn erst die Verschlimmerung einsetzt, dann...‹ ›Vergönnen Sie ihm den Gnadentod?‹ ›Ja.‹ Wenn einer schmerzloses Sterben verdient hat, dann er, überlege ich.«

the *Bildungsroman* presents complex life journeys from youth to adulthood, full of personal experiences, moral and intellectual maturation, failures and the overcoming of failures. Initially, its plots follow the pattern of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, they are highly teleological and end harmoniously; from the late 19. century onwards, they tend to become negative, involving failure, inability and disillusionment.⁴⁴ Against this background, *Mission and Conscience* is clearly conceived as the positive version of the *Bildungsroman* with its harmonious end: a meaningful, satisfactory task in society that the protagonist takes over, for the sake of the common good; it works as an ethical reward for the reader. This *telos* is now obviously mercy killing, as the title *Mission* already suggests; the former appears as the main moral value of the fictional world and as the main social task the protagonist has to take over for the sake of collective happiness. »When the value and the importance of euthanasia will be accepted generally«, he states in a long monologue, »then everywhere new combatants will come up and fight for it—since it is for the sake of mankind, for every living being in the whole world without exception«.⁴⁵

It is part of Unger's refined narrative strategy – the mimetic mode with direct speech, small distance and immediacy is combined with a hypothetical, detached way of tackling euthanasia – that mercy killing does not function as real event in the fictional world; just as thought event, a change of inner states of characters. In other words, it is talked through, remembered, put in prospect and reflected on by the protagonist and other doctors in many examples: killing of the terminally wounded friend on the battlefield, killing of the terminally ill mother, killing of the poor insane in the asylum, killing on demand or without; usually by ›soft‹ poisoning with morphine. This pulls the reader into this belief system without confronting him/her directly with actual occurrences and possibly unpleasant consequences. Conclusively, euthanasia appears as embodiment of humanitarianism, altruism, spiritual modesty and Unger refers widely to the dark-and-bright-rhetoric introduced by Binding and Hoche:

44 See Jürgen C. Jacobs: *Bildungsroman*, in: Lamping, Dieter (ed.): *Handbuch der literarischen Gattungen*, Stuttgart 2009, pp. 56–65.

45 Unger: *Sendung und Gewissen*, p. 265: »Wenn Wert und Wichtigkeit der Euthanasie erst allgemein anerkannt war, erstanden bestimmt überall und täglich neue Kämpfer genug, da sie doch zum Segen der Menschheit diene, für jedes Lebewesen ohne Ausnahme auf der ganzen Welt«.

[...] There is so much that a doctor has to see in war! So much gruesome suffering, such horrible maddening pain, such misery of the cripples who became disabled through no fault of their own! And one is expected to help! There were days when we had more than a thousand wounded soldiers!¹⁴⁶

We have here the dark side of gruesome physical suffering and death; and the contrastive bright side is implied with the euphemism »one should help«. In the whole novel, the verb »killing« is systematically replaced by either »helping« or even »redeeming«; murder is thereby transformed into its semantic opposite, redemption and salvation. This utopian bright side of euthanasia is fully enfolded in the following passage when the protagonist reflects on its powers; note the superlative rhetoric of happiness, beauty and virtue:

It is puzzling how the face of a dead person relaxes in incomprehensible beauty – even if he has gone through the most unbearable suffering before death.[...] At that time, I had said to myself: If you, as physician, had the will, the power and the energy to bring such a magic smile on the face of a dead person, what a good doctor you would be, how much happier and more satisfying it would be for you!¹⁴⁷

The function of this extremely contrastive language – misery versus beauty, suffering versus salvation – is clear: in tandem with the focalized representation of inner states, it pulls the reader, as already pointed out, into the thought system of euthanasia; just by transforming murder into redemption and the killing doctor into a supernatural hero. Part of this narrative strategy is that the real target group, the mentally disabled, is *not* at the center of the story; *rather at its very margins*. The mentally disabled are of course mentioned, stereotypically dark, poor, miserable, suffering. However, they are brought up not by the protagonist but by a side character during a long conversation, and they appear only as a side effect that emerges almost naturally from the beauties of mercy killing:

Is there not enough unworthy life that just burdens the ›Volksgemeinschaft‹ [racial community] economically and that vegetates only for the sake of its own deep misery? You yourself said that we – as people who are knowing and who heard the calling – are much more responsible to our conscience than everybody else. Why

46 Ibid., p. 125: »[...] was ein Arzt im Krieg erleben muss! So viel Grausigkeit des Leidens, solchen Wahnwitz an Schmerzen, solches Elend unverschuldeten Krüppeltums! Und man soll helfen! An manchen Tagen gab es mehr als tausend Verwundete«.

47 Ibid., p. 86: »Es ist merkwürdig [...], wie unbegreiflich schön sich das Gesicht eines Toten entspannt, mag er vorher noch so viel Unerträgliches erlitten haben. [...] Wenn du als Arzt, so habe ich mir damals gesagt, den Willen, die Macht und die Kraft besäße, über das Gesicht eines Toten solch ein Lächeln zu zaubern, welch ein guter Arzt müsstest du sein, wieviel beglückender und schöner wäre es für dich«.

shouldn't we then also help those miserable creatures who have nothing humane any more? Shouldn't we spare them endless suffering? Are they not hopeless sufferers, too?⁴⁸

»Nothing humane anymore« and »hopeless sufferers«: this identification of any mental disorder with a non-human state, firstly, and a terminally ill state, secondly, comes in the guise of humanitarian pity; but it is a false claim and it shows how rhetoric concealment, euphemisms, glorification and narrative techniques work together in order to influence the mentality of the public.

Unger went actually quite far; too far for even the ministry of propaganda. Goebbels was deeply shocked by Unger's frankness and worried about public irritation and debate, especially in catholic circles; and he demanded immediately after the publication that *Mission and conscience* must neither be reviewed nor discussed in the press.⁴⁹ But too late, the novel was out, and Goebbels worried for no reason. *Mission and conscience* was broadly received and even adapted in 1941 for the cinema: the UFA film with the title *I accuse (Ich klage an)* became one of the most successful Nazi propaganda movies, had 15 million viewers, and gained many fascist prizes.⁵⁰ However,

48 Ibid., p. 157: »Gibt es nun nicht überhaupt lebensunwertes Leben genug das eine Volksgemeinschaft wirtschaftlich nur belastet und das sich selbst zur Qual dahinvegetiert? Sie sagten selbst, dass wir als Wissende und Berufene viel mehr unserem Gewissen verantwortlich sind als jeder andere. Warum wollen wir dann nicht auch jenen armseligen Kreaturen helfen, die nichts Menschenähnliches mehr haben? Ihnen jahrelange Qualen ersparen? Sind sie nicht auch hoffnungslos Leidende?«.

49 See Press conference 24.11.36, quoted after Hans Bohrmann: Press Conference 24.11.36, in: NS-Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit. Edition und Dokumentation, Vol. 4/I-IV Anhang 1936, Munich 1993, p. 1424: »Die ›Nachtausgabe‹ habe trotzdem einen Aufsatz gebracht. Man weise darauf hin, dass die Euthanasie ein sehr heikles Problem sei. Man muesse naemlich bedenken, dass in katholischen Kreisen die Ueberlegung angestellt werde, zuerst habe man die Sterilisation eingefuehrt und jetzt wolle man offenbar auch noch die Euthanasie beguenstigen. Es wuerden durch Artikel ueber dieses Thema unnoetigerweise Widerstaende geweckt und oeffentliche Interessen geschaedigt. Auch nicht im Zusammenhang mit einem Roman von Unger ›Sendung und Gewissen‹ soll die Euthanasie behandelt werden.« The ministry of propaganda held daily press conferences to which the leading media sent their representatives; the latter were given oral, confidential directives which new products on the book market should be reviewed; and which not. Journalists were forbidden to write these directives down but some of them did and the documents have survived, see Hans Bohrmann/Gabriele Toepser-Ziegert (eds.): NS-Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit. Edition und Dokumentation. Vol. 1–7, bearb. von Bartels, Claudia/Fortmann-Petersen, Heike/Kohlmann-Viand, Doris/Peter, Karen/Toepser-Ziegert, Gabriele, Munich 1984–2001.

50 See Eckart: Medizin in der NS-Diktatur, p. 224–226; Michael Schwartz: »Euthanasie«-Debatten in Deutschland (1895–1945), in: Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte 46 (1998), pp. 617–665, here pp. 640f.; Ulrike Reim: Der *Robert-Koch*-Film (1939) von Hans Steinhoff,

the sentimental love story of a terminally ill woman and her husband who delivers euthanasia on demand is an embellished, profoundly changed version of the novel and it softens the radical content of the latter substantially. But the book gained a lot of attention, too; it had two further editions in 1941 and 1943 and a total edition of 45,000 copies.

I come to my conclusion. One must assume that the quoted novels, along with various others, influenced the public attitude towards eugenics substantially. Given their success on the controlled NS book market, they obviously contributed to the gradual brutalizing of German society. *Mission and conscience* in particular was a milestone on the path to industrial mass killing of disabled people. With claims such as »the face of a dead person relaxes in incomprehensible beauty – having gone through the most unbearable suffering before death«, the novel turned the murderous reality in its utopian contrary, helped paving the way in German public opinion and must be considered as murderous in itself.

How murderous in fact, becomes clear if one contrasts it with a totally different piece of euthanasia fiction that appeared only ten years later. In 1946, Alfred Döblin published his short prose text *The Journey into the Blue* [*Die Fahrt ins Blaue*],⁵¹ a fictitious dialogue between a homodiegetic first-person-narrator and a former colleague who used to work in a psychiatric asylum during the war.⁵² He tells the narrator what happened in asylums and ›care homes‹ and gives a contrastive, rather shocking version of the ›beautiful and happy death‹:

The sick are alone. [...] It starts rushing. Apparently, the showers are rushing. One, on the bench, lowers her head and thuds lifelessly on the flagstone floor. The one who was walking in circles looks up, bends her knees and collapses. On the bench,

Kunst oder Propaganda?, in: Benzenhöfer, Udo/Eckart, Wolfgang U.: *Medizin im Spielfilm des Nationalsozialismus*, Tecklenburg 1990, pp. 22–33, here p. 22. The film was directed by Hans Steinhoff who was both famous and absolutely conformist, the actors were Emil Jannings and Werner Krauss; 4 million people watched it in only four weeks: »Der Film hatte in vier Wochen vier Millionen Zuschauer und wurde mit der Coppa Mussolini, dem großen Preis der Biennale von Venedig 1939, als bester ausländischer Film geehrt.« *Ibid.*, p. 23.

51 Alfred Döblin: *Die Fahrt ins Blaue*, in: Althen, Christina (ed.): *Leben und Werk in Erzählungen und Selbstzeugnissen*, Düsseldorf 2006, pp. 193–198, [03.05.1946, *Badische Zeitung*].

52 There is very little secondary literature on this extraordinary text which deserves to be scholarly investigated, both with regards to its elaborate narrative structure and its relevance for the cultural history of eugenics. An exception is Susanne Knittel's careful analysis, in: S.K.: *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory*, New York 2015, pp. 107–111.

they lean on one another, they slip down, two together and separately, they fall over each other. The ›showers‹ rush.⁵³

›The sick thudding on the floor and falling over each other‹ versus ›a dying person relaxing in incomprehensible beauty‹: these fundamentally opposed textual images of the same criminal reality indicate that literature plays a substantial role in the cultural history of eugenics. Hence, it is also a precarious role. Fictional prose can obviously lead to memory-building in the best sense, as we see with Döblin; but it can also foster a barbarized society where killing is hailed as happiness. It should be mentioned that Hellmuth Unger was never put on trial or sentenced after the war. He could pursue both his medical and his literary career and published further successful medical novels – now on leading social democrats such as Rudolf Virchow.⁵⁴ Neither became his murderous role in promoting children's euthanasia part of the collective memory, nor was there a scholarly or public debate on the possible murderous effects of his book.⁵⁵ On the contrary: the novel *Sendung und Gewissen* is still available in the internet antiquarian bookshop *booklooker*,⁵⁶ without explanation of meaning and context; it has never been put on any index. Literary disability studies have a responsible task here: they can throw light on such underexplored, hidden spaces of cultural representations and orchestrate adequate memory building.

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53 »Die Kranken sind allein [...] Da rauscht es. Es scheint, die Duschen gehen. Eine auf der Bank läßt den Kopf sinken und plumpst, ihrem Kopf nach, dumpf auf die Steinplatten. Die im Kreis gegangen war, blickt auf und sackt in den Knien zusammen. Auf der Bank lehnen sie eine neben der andern, rutschen, zwei zusammen und einzeln, herunter, fallen übereinander. Die ›Duschen‹ rauschen.« *ibid.*, p. 221.

54 Unger: Virchow, Hamburg 1953; see Paul Weindling: *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism 1870–1945*, Cambridge 1989, p. 547.

55 The book is usually considered as the literary basis for the film and not discussed independently; one exception is a short chapter in Grübler, Gerd: *Euthanasie und Krankenmord in der Deutschen Literatur 1885–1936*, Marburg 2011, pp. 182–191.

56 See *Booklooker.de*: Hellmuth Unger: *Sendung und Gewissen* – Bücher gebraucht, antiquarisch & neu kaufen, www.booklooker.de/B%C3%BCcher/Angebote/autor=Hellmuth+Unger&titel=Sendung+und+gewissen (02.03.2025).

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