Capturing the Ungraspable in Words: An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Postmodern Elements from Markus Zusak’s The Book Thief as Translated in the Dutch Prose Translation, the Novel’s Screen Adaptation, and the Dutch Subtitles Thereof

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Abstract: Set in Nazi Germany and told from the perspective of Death, The Book Thief by Markus Zusak tells the story of a young German girl named Liesel who stubbornly tries to read books despite the forces in her life trying to keep her from doing so. The Book Thief has been classified as postmodern – and, more specifically, magic realist – holocaust fiction (Adams 2011). This thesis analyses the translation of the novel's postmodern elements both in the Dutch translation of The Book Thief by Annemarie Lodewijk, released in 2009, and the film adaptation, released by Sunswept Entertainment in 2013. Rather than weighing in on whether The Book Thief is “better” as a book than as a film, this thesis instead attempts to analyse whether the film adaptation is effective in conveying postmodern elements, and whether the Dutch subtitles are effective in capturing the source material’s postmodern character.

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Because Markus Zusak’s novel The Book Thief (NY: Random House, 2007) is set in Nazi Germany and is narrated by the figure of Death itself, one might expect the author’s depictions of cellars to match perfectly with the “dark entity” described by Bachelard. However, in this compelling story of a foster child's coming of age during World War II, Zusak alters and subverts the archetypal image of the basement, picturing it instead as a shelter, a home, and a setting in which words can provide salvation. Here, in the basement, Liesel's love affair with reading begins—a passion that leads her to steal books from a Nazi book-burning as well as the library of the mayor's wife. As the narrator observes, “She was a girl. In Nazi Germany. In the first chapter, Liesel steals her first book, The Grave-Digger’s Handbook. She doesn’t know how to read it at first, but eventually opens up to Hans and they read it together. Together they read, play accordion, and roll cigarettes for Hans to smoke. And even when Liesel goes to school, she still reads at night with Hans. Repeating her words as he works, Max takes pages from Mein Kampf and paints them over with white paint before creating his own story to give to Liesel. He writes The Standover Man, talking about how his father was the first one who watched him as he slept and now it was a girl. On the last few pages, he writes about how Liesel said his hair looked like feathers, and this preview is partially blurred. Sign up to view the complete essay. Show me the full essay.