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THE FUTURE OF MEMORY *(co-edited with Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland)*

The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture

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Preface

As living memories of the Holocaust¹ die out with the generation that witnessed the event, practitioners of cultural memory work have focused on the transmission of memory to the next generations. Recent Holocaust memorialisation, in the form of literature, museums, memorials and monuments, must make Holocaust memory meaningful and memorable for those born after the event. With this in mind, the arts of Holocaust memorialisation often evoke and provoke a sense of what I describe as secondary witnessing and memory: a vicarious form of witnessing, or witnessing by proxy, through the staging of an empathetic identification with Holocaust witnesses and something approximating the remembrance of their experiences from their point of view.

In the academic fields of Holocaust studies and the related fields of memory and trauma studies, the theorisation of such memorial practices is, in many ways, a development of the research on the traumas of the second-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors (see, for example, Fresco, 1984). Theorisation of the cultural creativity of that generation in its attempt to piece together and articulate memories, not its own, of atrocities witnessed but often unremembered by the preceding generation – the narration of ‘absent memory’ (Fine, 1988) or ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch, 1997) – has laid the groundwork for the consideration of a more general cultural transmission of the traumatic memory of things not witnessed. So, for example, Marianne Hirsch (2001, 2008), whose work will be debated in some detail in the proceeding study, has argued that postmemory can be both ‘familial’ (i.e. inherited and inter-generational) and ‘affiliative’ in which the no-less-mediated transmission of memory is not channelled by family, or, for that matter, group belonging (be it ethnic, religious, racial or national). Indeed, and at the risk of simplification, Holocaust memorialisation, across a variety of genres and media and cultural and geographical terrains, has, over the last 20 years or so, moved from the familial to the affiliative, the private to the public, in a centrifugal fashion, with the aim of ensuring that Holocaust memory has an afterlife beyond the second generation. This generalisation or expansion of Holocaust memory can be partly explained by its nationalisation – its politicised elevation to prominence on national stages of remembrance by which current national identities can be underpinned – but also partly by its internationalisation – its distribution by a global

media, its use as a template by which to understand other extreme events of modernity, its political uses in international relations, its continuing use and abuse in identitarian politics that transcend national boundaries, and, perhaps idealistically, the purely ethical intention of remembering the Holocaust's victims (the political and ideological implications of that intention notwithstanding). Nevertheless no matter the scale of remembrance, no matter how abstract Holocaust memory becomes in form and content, its transmission is more often than not by means of the cultivation of its affectiveness – an affectiveness resonant of a personal and familial identification with the Holocaust's victims.

Correspondent with and sometimes informing these memorial trends, Holocaust, memory and trauma studies have theorised the transmission of traumatic memory, as in, for example, the concept of 'postmemory', or 'postmemories' (Liss, 1998), 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg, 2004), 'media witnessing' (Kaplan, 2005), and 'posttraumatic cinema' and the 'discourse of trauma' (J. Hirsch, 2006). However, the theoretical trend has in turn attracted criticism. For example, Efraim Sicher (2000, p. 67) notes an insufficient differentiation in recent theories between transgenerational (interfamilial) transference of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder from witnesses to their descendents and an imaginary identification, outside of familial experience, with Holocaust victims and their traumas. (For that matter, Ellen Fine's definition of 'absent' memory revolves around a slightly blurred definition of the 'second generation' and where its horizons may lie, even if her literary examples are precise.) In his critique of what he determines as 'fantasies of witnessing' generated in Holocaust studies, Gary Weissman finds, understandably, the very definition and boundaries of 'memory' to be rather unclear and uses the term 'nonwitness' rather than contribute to that confusion.

Eva Hoffman shares Weissman's concern over the universalisation of the term 'memory', which she deems 'metaphorical shorthand' for the historical complexity of the events supposedly remembered but in actuality forgotten by commemorative cultures (2004, pp. 155–7). She blames the academic fetishisation of memory for this state of 'hypermemory', but she also deploys a standard postmodern reading of a popular cultural scene in which events such as the Holocaust are claimed by those with no direct experience of them as a historical marker in their lives, if not a historical anchor for identificatory purposes, in these supposedly history-less times. Scepticism notwithstanding as to whether we do in fact live in cultures of waning historicity (as Fredric Jameson, perhaps over-emphatically, warned in the early 1990s), the pursuit of historical anchorage further displaces historical understanding, substituting

memory or 'hypermemory' for it. In other words, the 'amnesia' we set out to correct is compounded (Hoffman, 2004, pp. 158, 167–9, 175). The obsession with memory contributes to the paradoxical sacralisation of the Holocaust and the idealisation of Holocaust survivors who have access to more authentic modes of memory and historical experience. Yet Hoffman also seems to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic, as if the memories of survivors and their descendents are any less mediated than the virtual forms about which she is wary (2004, pp. 158, 175, 178). Nevertheless Hoffman's call for a move from memory, particularly traumatic memory – the hypermemory of trauma, she argues, locks historical understanding into a reductive fixation on individual experience of sealed off moments of time – to history, or 'retrospective reflection' is a call to which the proceeding study is sympathetic (2004, pp. 196–9). Memory studies, and particularly the study of Holocaust traumatic memory, certainly need to be placed in a dialectical relation with history, which it often seems to have subsumed, by which notions of memory can be delimited. However, cautionary responses to the expansion of memory in theory and practice, such as Weissman's and Hoffman's, do not quite seem to recognise the possibility of the cultural transmission of an affective Holocaust memory, be it traumatic or not, outside binarisms of authentic and inauthentic. Nor do they recognise the on-going insistence, in academic discourse and cultures of memory, on the affective transmission of memory. Robert Eaglestone's *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* provides a related example. Eaglestone's incisive commentary on the nature of testimonial literature discusses the ways that it aesthetically and rhetorically pre-empts, refuses and evades reading practices that engender over-identification with the experiences of the author (2004, pp. 39–47). Nevertheless such practices prevail in current cultures of memory, despite the identification of potentially resistant strategies, in which authors are the subjects of over-identification and their texts colonised. What is needed is a dialectic between memory and history that, in delimiting the horizons of memory, does not lose sight of the cultural realities of over-identification, nor of the possibilities of the affective transmission of Holocaust memories.

No matter how much memory practitioners and academic theorists insist on the multiple mediations of the transmission of memory – in short, the form of historical representation and the contexts in which representations are produced, disseminated and received or consumed – and no matter how much that insistence points to the self-reflexive nature of this kind of memory – that its mediation points to its own limitations, the unbridgeable gap between past and present, witness and

secondary witness, and to the act of recollection more than to what is recalled – cultures of secondary witnessing and memory have a tendency to lose sight of the historical specificity of acts of memory and what they aim to remember. Post-Holocaust memory work can become appropriative, displacing or colonising the memories of witnesses, replacing their trauma with a kind of equivalent experienced vicariously. Under such memorial regimes, and the theories that inform them, trauma can become universalised and homogenised. The universalisation of trauma expands notions of victimhood, which can now be claimed in the act of secondary remembrance, obscuring the identities of those who remember, not to mention of those remembered, all of which has pronounced ethical and political ramifications. Nevertheless, the affect of Holocaust memory cannot be denied, nor can its cultural transmission, whether that affect is manufactured or inherited. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it would be true to say that the Holocaust is still a matter of memory and not just history. The following will examine a range of memory texts (literary, museal and monumental) as well as critical and theoretical discourses that they have attracted in order to identify the ethical and political implications of the practice and theory of memory where it becomes appropriative and universalising, to reinstall the particularities of memory work and of the identities produced by that work where they have become obscured, and to theorise more robustly how memory may (or may not) be transmitted and how things not directly witnessed may (or may not) be remembered.

This study begins to attend to the question of transmission by laying out general theoretical grounds of its possibility and then by critically surveying versions of Holocaust and related memory and trauma studies that find in representations of the Holocaust the transmission of degrees of traumatic affect. This theoretical groundwork creates a platform for the discussion of the work of W. G. Sebald and its critical reception, the fiction of Bernhard Schlink, the countermonumental architecture of Jochen and Esther-Shalev Gerz, Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman, as well as the theoretical discourses such forms of memory attract, and finally of readings of photography in Holocaust museums in general and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in particular. The work of Sebald is discussed in light of theories of trauma that confuse the traumatic event of the Holocaust and the experience of the text. The argument is made that Sebald's work might frustrate the expectation of a textual trauma. The idea of a textual trauma is particularly problematic in the context of German cultural memory, as it blurs historical distinctions between perpetrators and victims. Sebald's

affective and postmemorial narrative of the air wars (the Allied bombing of German cities) is discussed in relation to Holocaust memory to consider the ethics of his entanglement of German victims and the victims of Germany. The theme of victims and perpetrators continues with an investigation of Schlink's strategic identification with perpetrator identities – a literary intervention in the culture of memory that increasingly identifies with the victims of the Holocaust. Schlink's fiction is situated in relation to the concept of the grey zone, which in its blurring of boundaries between perpetrator and victim makes the assumption, through acts of memory, of innocent victimhood untenable. An examination of countermonumental architecture follows in which the theorisation of the architecture is scrutinised as much as the forms themselves. What is found problematic is a theorised animation of architectural texts, as if architecture in its disruptive forms can itself remember and witness the Holocaust. Put another way, witnessing the disruptive form of architecture is found akin in such theoretical discourses to the experience of trauma – once again over-extending and confusing the category the victim and witness while also eclipsing the historical specificity of German memorialization and those who perform memory work in such spaces and places. The final chapter discusses the ways that the USHMM nationalises Holocaust memory, but more crucially how theories of memory work performed around particular types of exhibits fail to deliver victim identity from the national narratives that appropriate it. In short, theories of performance are also implicated in colonising victim identity. In conclusion, the present study argues that the theory and practice of Holocaust memory often assumes a Levinasian sense of ethics in its relation to alterity but that the ethics of otherness is belied by a collapse into sameness. For the difference between self and otherness to be reinstalled in the afterlife of Holocaust memory, historical specificity needs to be returned to theorisation of acts of recall and to those who recollect.

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