The Holocaust: historical memories and contemporary identities

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James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988.
Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989.
Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Introduction

Last year, an article in the British newspaper the *Guardian* reported that the topic of the Holocaust would be incorporated into the history syllabus of the country's national curriculum.[1] This move followed a successful lobby of the Education Secretary by a group of MPs following an interim report by a history working party which had recommended that children study the subject only as an 'optional unit'. In light of the vigorous campaign for its inclusion, the working party's final report came out in favour of the study of the Holocaust as an essential component in the teaching of European history. The article went on to report that while Jewish groups and educationists had welcomed the decision, representing as it did a victory over those wary of placing too much emphasis on a

'Jewish subject', a concern had been expressed about *how* the subject of the Holocaust would be taught.

This reaction might seem at first sight excessively cautious — even a trifle ungrateful — in light of the breakthrough the subject's inclusion in the history syllabus represents. However, worries about the consequences of different historiographical approaches to the Holocaust are not unfounded. The last decade has seen the rise in Germany of a 'new revisionism' among conservative historians in which the widely accepted accounts of the Nazi epoch and the Holocaust have been substantially revised and given an altogether new interpretive dressing. The *Historikerstreit* or 'historians' debate' is a subject to which I return below. Suffice it to note for the moment that one of its key historiographical 'moves' — the relativization of the Holocaust within the context of other twentieth-century atrocities — has achieved a measure of academic and popular legitimacy outside of Germany such that its deployment in general histories of this period and Holocaust studies in particular has to be anticipated. Closer to home, one teacher cited in the report expressed his dismay that teaching about Nazi atrocities aroused in some students an 'unhealthy preoccupation' and a stimulation of fantasies of absolute power — a reaction which again is not confined to school classrooms. 'Fascination with Fascism', (to slightly modify the title of a seminal article by Susan Sontag)[2] is a recurrent representational feature of both high art and popular cultural forms.

How teachers respond to these concerns will partly be determined by their own intellectual grasp of the Holocaust as a historical subject and the appropriate pedagogic strategies they can bring to bear. This is not as straightforward as the reality of this most traumatic of events would imply. The books under review all ponder — and to some extent problematize — the manner in which the Holocaust can be remembered and commemorated in the present, even when its 'facts' remain indelibly and painfully engraved in our historical consciousness. Moreover, these books do not engage primarily with the historiography of the Holocaust, which may seem surprising — and even unacceptable — given their subject. Their main concern is with the different representational forms in popular culture — novels, poetry, testimonials, films and television — *because* these are the means by which most of the post-war generation has gained its knowledge of the Holocaust. The conviction of the authors is that understandings of the Holocaust can be gleaned as much from these texts as from historical exegesis.

The common point of departure of all these texts is one familiar to a scholarship of representation informed by critical theory and semiotics which acknowledges the constituting activity of form in meaning creation. But cognizant, too, of the potential disappearance of the object in the sometimes 'delirious' activity of interpretation — a disappearance which in this case would betray the very aim of remembering and commemorating

— they weave a more delicate interpretive path through the historical truths of the Holocaust as we have come to know and understand them through various representational forms. James E. Young's introductory remarks to *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* express the hermeneutic activity to which all these authors could be said to adhere, when he defines the task as 'a search for the truth in the interpretation intrinsic to all versions of the Holocaust . . . to know what happened in how it is represented' (Young, 1990: 2, 5).

While the *Historikerstreit* — the German historians' debate — falls outside the scope of my main concerns, it is worth mentioning briefly if only because it is one of the main animating backdrops acknowledged by all the books under discussion and in its evolution crystallizes issues which form the crux of their enquiry. There are now several excellent accounts of the genesis of this heated public polemic occasioned by new writings on the Nazi era by a number of well-known conservative historians, and the response these drew from their opponents, especially the renowned philosopher, Jürgen Habermas.[3] However, I draw on a short article about the debate by Saul Friedländer in an essay in Berel Lang's edited volume *Writing and the Holocaust* because Friedländer, author of one of the most influential studies of the aesthetics of Nazism (Friedländer, 1984) is especially attuned to the reverberations this debate has for the politics of representation of the Holocaust.

Friedländer describes the reason for the controversy (and here I condense his finely nuanced account) as a major shift in the narrative representations of the Nazi era and its policy of mass annihilation. He suggests that if we reduce historical representations of this period to a narrative organized around the issue of historical responsibility, three collective actors are clearly distinguishable: the perpetrators, the bystanders and the victims. Controversies among professional historians in Germany from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s were based on the different ways their representations plotted the specific interaction between these categories of actors. 'Intentionalists' and 'functionalists', the main parties to this dispute, disagreed, for example, about the extent of responsibility to be laid at the door of the murderous policies of the Nazi leadership as opposed to the complicity of wider social agents and institutions, and about the degree to which the acquiescence of 'bystanders' — the mass of the German people — implicated them in the regime's unimpeded course of action. However, underlying these differences, Friedländer identifies a more fundamental consensus concerning who the victims were and the unequivocal responsibility for their fate to be attached to groups of German perpetrators and bystanders, both acting from within a system rooted in German social life. The location of historical responsibility firmly within German society which this representation entails has been deeply etched in popular memory and in the self-perceptions of German society —

however problematic dealing with the implications of such an admission has proven to be.

The turning-point that occurs in the mid-1980s, which ruptures this 'consensual narrative' and breaks out acrimoniously on to the wider terrain of German political culture is marked by the ascendancy of new mappings of these more traditional narratives of the Nazi epoch. These have two essential components: in the first, what Friedländer calls the 'symmetric version of the past', the crimes of the Nazis are matched, like in a game of 'snap', with the destruction wrought by Allied forces — and especially the Soviets. Thus a chain of equivalence links Auschwitz to Katyn, to the expulsion of the German population from the East, to Dresden, to Hiroshima and so on. While not denying Nazi crimes, in this symmetric narrative the Allies join the Nazis in the category of potential 'perpetrators', especially for those acts committed against the Germans before Nazi crimes were generally known.

In an elaboration of this symmetric pendulum, Friedländer identifies a 'double symmetry' set in motion around the issue of historical responsibility. Here, the evil and criminal character of the Waffen-SS is contrasted with positive images of the brave and non-ideological engagement of the fighting troops of the Wehrmacht, especially in their eastern front defence of their own population against the onslaught of Soviet troops during the last year of the war. This idealized image of the *Frontkämpfer* had been in popular circulation since the aftermath of the First World War and was revived following the Second World War — despite evidence of the Wehrmacht's implication in the Nazi death-machine and in the deaths of tens of thousands following Germany's invasion of neighbouring territories. But Friedländer considers its rehabilitation in the revisionist narratives of the 1980s especially significant since its focus on the defensive, patriotic efforts of the Wehrmacht against the 'revenge orgy' of the Red Army allows a distinction to be sharply drawn between the Nazis and the Wehrmacht, while simultaneously creating out of this partially sanitized imagery new categories of victims — soldiers and bystanders — pitted against the newly designated category of perpetrators.

The second narrative remapping Friedländer charts (which first launched the debate into the public arena) was historian Ernst Nolte's proposal that we can, with the benefit of historical hindsight, identify the Bolsheviks as the main originators and perpetrators of crimes against whole populations in this century, and therefore Nazi crimes can be seen to derive in a causal and mimetic way from this prior model of evil ('Was not the Gulag Archipelago more original than Auschwitz?' asks Nolte).[4] Nolte also suggests that the National Socialists executed their murderous actions of the Final Solution out of nascent, pre-emptive motives, fearing themselves potential victims of an annihilation to which they had been alerted by pre-

war Bolshevik policies and practices. (Of course, the unspoken 'logic' of this explanation is that 'Bolshevik' equals 'Jew' — a recurrent anti-Semitic theme this century.) In this version, then, not only has the Bolshevik given spiritual birth to the Nazi perpetrator and conceptual birth to Nazi crimes; in addition, notes Friedländer, 'the Nazis themselves become the potential victims of the archcriminals, the Soviets' (Lang, 1988: 73).

It should now be clear why Friedländer believes these new narratives mark a profound breach with previous historical representations. The historical consensus which had clearly demarcated actual perpetrators, bystanders and victims and sketched a broadly agreed-upon compendium of their interaction has been challenged by a new typology and disposition of these elements, which multiplies groups of actual and potential perpetrators and — by necessity — actual and potential groups of victims, and transforms erstwhile perpetrators and bystanders into their opposite number 'not unlike, in their sufferings, the other victims, such as the Jews' (Lang, 1988: 74).

Why is this debate — which, after all, seems confined to the German public and to rely on competing interpretations of historical actors, events and institutions outside the competence of non-historians — considered relevant for a study of representations of the Holocaust circulating in popular cultural forms? Friedländer suggests that these new narratives and the controversy they subsequently generated attest to the continuing dominance of the Nazi epoch in German historical memory. But like memory's 'emplotment of the past', they engage in a selective *mise-en-scène* of representative elements which dynamically respond to the needs of the present. In today's Germany, these needs range across a spectrum of social desires — from a genuine desire to come to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), to a wish to 'normalize' the past in order to concentrate on the present, to a determination to rewrite the past in ways that offer an affirmative German identity. It is this latter, nationalist agenda that these new narratives primarily and explicitly serve, though their danger also lies in the more subtle ways in which they respond to a post-war generation's desire to construct a contemporary identity absolved of the task of 'working through' the past.

Jürgen Habermas insisted, in one of his many interventions in the *Historikerstreit*, on the obligation of Germans to

> keep alive the memory of the suffering of those murdered at the hands of the Germans. . . . These dead have above all a claim to the weak anamnestic power of a solidarity which those born later can now only practice through the medium of the memory which is always being renewed, which may often be desperate, but which is at any rate active and circulating. (Habermas, 1988: 44)

Memory, then, is the only vehicle of commemoration for the post-war

generation of 'that which cannot be made good', but it is also for Habermas this generation's only route to forging an identity that takes account of the constitutive legacy of the past:

> . . . the simple fact remains that even those born later have grown up in a form of existence in which *those* things were possible. Our own life is linked inwardly, and not just by accidental circumstances, with that context of life in which Auschwitz was possible. Our form of existence is connected with the form of existence of our parents and grandparents by a mesh of family, local, political and intellectual traditions which is difficult to untangle — by an historical milieu, therefore, which in the first instance has made us what we are and who we are today. No one among us can escape unnoticed from this milieu, because our identity both as individuals and as Germans is inextricably interwoven with it. (Habermas, 1988: 43–4)

The seductive power of the new narratives for a larger German constituency is that the terms of understanding of agency and victimization they offer make it possible to insert the Nazi epoch into the larger continuum of historical narratives, to diffuse the singularity of the Holocaust into the general pathos of war's atrocities and injustices — in short, to historicize the Holocaust in such a manner that it is evacuated 'from the field of ever-recurring memory to that of distant history' as Friedländer puts it (Lang, 1988: 75). That primal historical memory that Habermas invokes — 'the memory of the suffering of those murdered at the hands of the Germans' — is thereby put out of reach of active 're-memoration', and hence of the assumption of historical responsibility — despite the focus on the period of National Socialism. This treacherous dynamic of memory and history in other representations of the Holocaust is the central concern of the books I now move on to discuss.

The construction of historical memory

James E. Young, in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, turns his attention to how historical memory is constructed in a wide variety of Holocaust narratives — diaries and memoires, documentary fiction, theatre, poetry, video and cinema and even the architecture of Holocaust memorials — and also to the 'consequences' which follow from the various narrative strategies deployed. I highlight this word because Young is concerned at the outset to distance himself from a deconstructive exercise that would dissolve the actuality of the Holocaust into a myriad of competing interpretations. At the same time, he rejects the assumption that actuality need only be prised away from the artifice which it is constrained to adopt. To circumvent both these interpretive pitfalls, Young asserts that the interpretation of Holocaust narratives also involves a consequential dimension — i.e. particular understandings have the force

of agency — both for those who lived through this event and for a post-Holocaust generation. This is Young's most complex and compelling theoretical move, allowing him to see the constitutive interplay of events and interpretation without sacrificing the integrity of the Holocaust's reality. This, for example, is the way Young formulates the nature of this 'reciprocal exchange' faced with an assertion that the facts of the Holocaust have an independent existence immune to the incursions of interpretation:

> . . . it was not 'the facts' in and of themselves that determined actions taken by the victims of the Holocaust — or by the killers themselves; but it was the structural, mythological and figurative apprehension of these facts that led to action taken on their behalf. (Young, 1990: 4)

In the specific case of narrative as an interpretive paradigm, the same exchange principle holds:

> . . . the events of the Holocaust are not only shaped *post factum* in their narration, but . . . they were initially determined as they unfolded by the schematic ways in which they were apprehended, expressed, and then acted upon. (Young, 1990: 5)

If this is how we must begin to understand the reality of the Holocaust in its time, Young also argues that the different figurative modes through which knowledge about the Holocaust has been offered subsequently have consequences for how we live and act in a post-Holocaust world. As he states simply: 'What is remembered of the Holocaust depends on how it is remembered . . .'. (The narratives of the new revisionism in Germany are again salient here, reminding us that the form these historical memories take are directly consequential for the present.) Young then proceeds to draw on his extensive knowledge of Holocaust literature and his considerable powers of narratological analysis to subject many of these modes of recall to a critical — though never disrespectful — scrutiny.

Concentration camp survivor and author, the late Primo Levi, spoke of the obligation to remember the Holocaust even while acknowledging the inevitable deformation of 'memory of the offense' (Levi, 1988a). The predominance of narrative testimonial among genres of Holocaust literature indicates that this obligation among survivors to 'bear witness' has indeed outweighed considerations of memory's infidelities. But Young's examination of this genre asks why it is, given memory's drift, that claims for the testimonial's privileged status within Holocaust narrative are based on *realist* premises.

Here Young embarks on a very 'Barthesian' critique of the 'referential illusion' that underwrites the conventions of narrative realism, and Holocaust testimony in particular, which equates adherence to realist codes with the unconstructed — hence evidentiary — nature of the discourse. While Young acknowledges the appeal that the 'mimetic

impulse' must awaken in those compelled to assume the role of witness, he argues that any realist conceit must also be abandoned by this genre since 'the narrative documentarist attempting to bring forth a wordly object through its sign succeeds only in transmitting the sign itself' (Young, 1990: 18). While it might be tempting to dismiss this as the callous response of a knee-jerk semiologist, especially faced with the real psychic pain which testimonies exact from their authors, in fact this semiological gesture acts as a defence against the impossible representational burden which Holocaust testimonials have traditionally been required to bear:

> . . . in asking literature to establish the facts of the Holocaust — of evidence of events — [diarists and memoirists] are demanding not just that words signify experiences, but that they become — like the writers themselves — *traces* of their experiences. Their impossible task is then to show somehow that their words are material fragments of experiences, that the current existence of their narrative is causal proof that its objects also existed in historical time. (Young, 1990: 23)

Young argues that this equation between realist modes of representation and authoritative factuality confuses the basis upon which Holocaust testimonals can lay claim to a privileged status in Holocaust literature. These texts are what he calls 'ontologically authentic', i.e., they testify to the empirical connection between the event, writer and text, but even this intimate and painful link with the experience of the Holocaust cannot escape mediation once it passes through the filters of memory and the conventions of language and narration. If we remain fixed on the facticity of the details of survivor testimonials, and so compare accounts for their historical veracity and points of conflict, we lose sight of why the Holocaust has assumed different meaning and significance for those survivors who have all operated under the common compulsion to bear witness. As Young argues:

> The critical aim here is not to discern the truest of five different versions of, say, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, thereby dismissing four of them for their deviation from the 'most' authoritative. More important are the ways that different witnesses understood their roles in the revolt and how these understandings may have determined their actions. Whatever 'fictions' emerge in the survivor's accounts are not deviations from the 'truth' but are part of the truth in any particular version. (Young, 1990: 32)

Narrative testimonials, Young insists, cannot inscribe evidence of the events but they can and do testify to the writer's apprehension of events — 'how writers saw themselves, how they grasped their condition in particular figures, and how this grasp led to particular actions' (Young, 1990: 34). He offers the example of Chaim Kaplan's ghetto diary where the account of the terrors of daily life inflicted by Hitler's army is reflexively balanced by optimistic news from the front. Young suggests that the selection of events

which were included in Kaplan's daily entries, and the significance he accorded them were as much governed by a traditional destruction–redemption dialectic through which the writer grasped his situation and sought to document it as they were by the repertoire of daily occurrences in the ghetto itself. Hence the 'eyewitness record' itself took the form of a narrative structured by a religious-interpretive paradigm, and this schema in turn framed the diarist's understanding of events and influenced subsequent actions based on this understanding.

Young's trenchant critique of the realist assumptions of Holocaust testimonials is one which manages to respect the integrity of every act of bearing witness because it asks us to derive knowledge rather than evidence from their discourse. It also seems to me a particularly appropriate way to approach those testimonials which seem to speak directly to the contemporary reader and to contain insights relevant to the post-Holocaust life-world. I am thinking, for example, of the contemporary appeal of Primo Levi's writing — an appreciation which at first sight might seem to rest on realist credentials: his understated first-person narration of camp life (as if he were giving a 'factory report' as he once described his style), the finely chiselled profiles of fellow inmates and 'Kapos' and his skill in relating the poignant anecdote. But embedded within the trajectory of Levi's realist narration can be found tropes and figures which break the bonds of realism and yield insight into Levi's own apprehension of the truth of his Auschwitz experience. Consider in this context Levi's story, in *Moments of Reprieve* (1986), of Bandi, a disarmingly honest Hungarian, whose rite of passage through Auschwitz from a new arrival to the ranks of the camp 'initiated' is signified by his shy pride in presenting Levi with a stolen radish. The shedding of moral scruples which became an essential survivor principle of the *univers concentrationnaire* is apprehended by Levi and conveyed to the reader in a parabolic moment at once endearing and harrowing in its implications. As a contemporary 'morality tale', Levi's parable reminds the reader precisely that we cannot apply conventional ethical criteria to situations where, as Levi comments elsewhere, 'the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero' (Levi, 1988a: 50).

The above suggests the general modality of Young's critical enterprise, though every chapter produces a new analytic twist, depending on the specific genre of Holocaust narrative in question. I shall just mention several in passing.

Young's discussion of documentary fictions of the Holocaust (like the 1979 American television series *Holocaust* or — equally controversial — D.M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel*) homes in on the ambiguity they deliberately cultivate by virtue of their reliance on the historical authority of real events on the one hand, and their fictive recreation on the other. The question to be addressed to this genre of 'rhetoric of fact', Young

believes, concerns the purpose for which they make their bid for authenticity. If it is to increase the emotional stakes for the reader/spectator, then the spectre of exploiting the pain of real victims is raised. If on the other hand, they engage in this ambiguity from a legitimate impulse to document events, while recognizing the fictional element involved in all narrativization, then a justified defence of their form can perhaps be mounted. Young's schema works here up to a point, but exactly *whose* intentions can be thus interrogated — the novelist's, scriptwriter's or director's? — and is it really a question of intention here, or, as he also acknowledges elsewhere in the discussion, the nature of reader/spectator response to a discourse seemingly authorized by historical actuality? As critics of the television drama-documentary form have pointed out, the weaving together of fact and fiction necessarily produces a 'hierarchy of discourses' and the work of interpretation is to determine how this structuration yields particular audience responses in particular historical conjunctures.[5] The intense controversy in Germany over the television series *Holocaust* is one instance of how difficult it is to assess the impact of this hybrid form. In that case the critical debate centred on 'the politics of identification' which the series mobilized, and the type of collective mourning which it thereby unleashed.[6] Did the fictional format of the family melodrama facilitate for German audiences an empathetic identification with the Jewish victims of the Final Solution or did it elicit an emotional catharsis safely contained by the filmic experience (a 'useless . . . timeless form of shock' as Alexander Kluge described it)?[7] Young is right to call attention to the wide circulation of Holocaust narratives in this 'factional' genre (the term now in vogue) as is evident by Hollywood's latest offerings of *Music Box* and *Triumph of the Spirit*, but a sharper critical framework is needed if we are to properly appreciate their 'consequential' dimension.

Young's intricate and exciting book should not be left without mentioning his diagnostic of the role of metaphor, and figurative language generally, in Holocaust texts since it is perhaps here that the ramifications of his analytic approach touch the most sensitive critical nerve. By now it is clear that for Young, narrative cannot be treated merely as a convenient representational prop supporting the revelation of the real facts of the Holocaust. Rather, it must be understood as the interpretive scaffolding by which the Holocaust's horrific meanings were apprehended in its own time and subsequently. Young wishes to extend this constitutive and interpretive function to other elements of language — notably the figures and tropes that have inserted the Holocaust into metaphoric language. However, in so doing, he is faced with a seemingly insoluble quandry. If the Holocaust's uniqueness is acknowledged, its articulation through metaphor threatens to create a chain of substitution which annihilates its very fact of singularity.

Young is well aware of the current in Jewish thought that resists any metaphorization of the Jewish experience, and also of Adorno's dictum that after Auschwitz writing poetry — that most metaphoric of languages — is 'barbaric'. In the case of the radical evil represented by the Holocaust — an event which outstripped the human imagination in its horrific reality — the invocation of metaphorical language seems destined to travesty the commemoration of that reality. One could also add that the new revisionists of Nazi history cited earlier might see this concession to metaphor as providing linguistic support for their historiographical case against the Holocaust's uniqueness. All this would seem to doom Young's efforts to retrieve — let alone redeem — the metaphoric impulse that has operated in relation to the Holocaust. But Young is adamant that just as Jews have functioned as metaphors 'for poets, novelists, theologians, too often for murderers and anti-Semites, and more often for themselves as Jews' (Young, 1990: 84), so too have metaphors of the Holocaust been enacted, generating meanings and understandings which need critical examination.

The choice, Young believes, is not between the singularity of the Holocaust or its metaphoric dissimulations; rather, it is a case of seeing how metaphor's tropological landscape actively negotiates our understanding of uniqueness. Here Young is worth quoting at length:

> Inasmuch as these qualities of uniqueness are measured in the language and figures we bring to events, we might shift the emphasis here away from the intrinsic uniqueness of the Holocaust to the ways it is inevitably figured by other calamities — and inevitably used to figure post-Holocaust suffering. For even though these events were indeed like no others, as soon as we speak of them, or respond to them, or represent them in any fashion, we necessarily grasp them in relation to other events; even in their unlikeness, they are thus contextualised and understood in opposition to prevailing figures, but thus figured nonetheless. (Young, 1990: 88)

The issue, then, is not the use of metaphor itself, but whether any particular deployment of metaphor enhances or hinders our understanding of what it is that makes the Holocaust historically unique among other instances of genocide.

To my mind, Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* (1988b) abounds with such illuminating deployment of metaphor. His elucidation of the unique qualities and combinatory possibilities of different chemical elements, a knowledge gained as an industrial chemist in Turin, metaphorically engages with the transformative experience he himself undergoes from a reverent young chemistry student to a prisoner-cum-chemist in Auschwitz. Tales of the vicissitudes of different chemical components intersect with the biographical path which led the young Levi, enchanted with chemistry's key to 'higher truths', 'future potentialities' and principles of 'wordly

order', to a world devoid of transcendent meanings. The subtle metaphoric structure of Levi's text is a powerful rendering of 'the ruptured connection between human will and human fate'[8] which Auschwitz powerfully inscribed into twentieth-century consciousness.

On the other side, Young argues that the more sinister work of metaphor which likened the Jews to 'vermin' played an instrumental role in provoking the policy that gave the Holocaust its singular and intentional character — namely, the singling out of he Jews for extermination on racial grounds. Again Young effectively demonstrates the *consequential* nature of language in determining the course of the Holocaust reality.

This sketch cannot do full justice to the elaborations and nuances that inform Young's analysis nor the range of objects that come within its reach: the poems of Sylvia Plath, anti-war poetry in Israel, video testimonials and Holocaust memorial monuments. But what should be clear is the important theoretical shift which Young effects both in interpreting Holocaust texts and understanding the purchase any such critical enterprise has on the present. A similar shift is also reflected in two recent books dealing with memory, history and post-war German film.

The representational fallacy

The huge ratings success of television series like *Holocaust* or *The Winds of War* testify to film's status as a privileged vehicle of popular memories about this period. However, as Anton Kaes observes in his book *From Hitler to Heimat*, our reliance on film for representations of the past, whether documentary or reconstructed, is ambivalent. On the one hand, because film appears to offer the most faithful rendering of past events, it acts as an accessible archive of images — a 'technological memory bank' — of what transpired, preserving these images for posterity and stimulating historical awareness in the present. The danger that Kaes identifies is that insofar as film or television images have increasingly mediated our experience and memory of events, they threaten to 'occupy the audience's historical imagination instead of stimulating and liberating it' (Kaes, 1989: 196). The past, he argues, 'is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space, available in an eternal present by pushing a button on the remote control' (Kaes, 1989: 198). It is Baudrillard's 'simulated reality' realized: 'images of images circulate in an eternal cycle, an endless loop' (Kaes, 1989: 196). If this Baudrillardian landscape is indeed the inevitable consequence of the image-saturated environment we inhabit, then the nature of the historical images in circulation assumes all the more critical importance. Herein, for Kaes, lies an additional danger, in fact signalled by the subtitle of his book — *The Return of History as Film* — namely, that we are increasingly

judging the interpretive cogency of images of the Third Reich not in relation to a historical referent but in relation to the preceding images from which they have drawn.

This representational fallacy — that conventionalized images, by dint of their repetition, are thereby to be regarded as more 'correct' representations of German history — is one that Kaes exposes via a discussion of a range of films produced in Germany in the post-war period. The importance of the New German Cinema to Kaes's study is that its adherents have largely refused to recycle clichéd images of the Third Reich and have instead sought out new forms of filmic remembering in an effort to generate new historical memories.

The opening chapter of the book documents the importance of film in articulating concerns about German history and identity. While this claim can certainly be made for most national cinemas, Kaes underlines the particularly interventionist role that films have assumed historically in German cultural and political life. The Nazi proganda film was not so much a reflection of national socialist reality as it was a constituting moment of that reality. The spectacular *mise-en-scène* of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1933) was only one of many moments in the staging of national identity — itself understood as the fulfilment of a mystical and archaic destiny — in the form of a public spectacle. Kaes then outlines how the *Heimatfilme* (homeland films) of the Adenauer era similarly played out the drama of German identity — this time the desire, especially on the part of those made homeless by the war, to bury the recent, traumatic past in images of an idyllic rural landscape and romantic narratives of rebirth and redemption. The links these films sustained both thematically and aesthetically with the mountain films of the 1930s and the 'blood and soil' productions of the Nazis indicated the persistence of longings for an idealized, collective identity that had not been satisfied by their mere suppression. This particular legacy of image and identity, according to Kaes, was so deeply lodged in public memory that it bequeathed to the younger generation of German filmmakers an 'instinctive distrust of images and sounds' dealing with the German past. And it was in response to what Wim Wenders described as the 'loss of confidence in images of their own, their own stories and myths' (Kaes, 1989: 8) that directors of the New German Cinema in their turn intervened in the production of historical memories.

This history of the New German Cinema has been told before in numerous accounts.[9] What is gratifying about Kaes's treatment is his keen appreciation of the dynamic interplay between filmic renditions of memory and debates about identity in the larger sphere of German political culture. His discussion of the films of the 'counter-cinema' which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge conventional images of the past (among them, films by Straub/Huillet, Fassbinder, Kluge and Schlöndorff) shows how

they were part and parcel of a more general struggle in the domain of public memory. These films, Kaes maintains, were

> engaged in a critical project of providing images that polemically challenged the existing amnesia as well as the represssion of the past; the filmmakers insisted on questions of responsibility, guilt and the legacy of history for the present. (Kaes, 1989: 197–8)

Whether these memory-images more effectively assisted in the collective process of 'working through' the National Socialist past than their conventional counterparts is of course the moot critical point. While, for example, Kaes holds up the collective film *Germany in Autumn* as a model, critical text relating the National Socialist past to the terrorist events of 1977, he acknowledges that the public response to the film was limited because its focus on questions of memory and mourning and its experimental form controverted the expectation of viewers: 'There were no characters to identify with, no elaborate historical sets, and no engrossing story to follow' (Kaes, 1989: 28). By contrast, the widespread reaction to the television series *Holocaust* in West Germany, and the public display of mourning it evoked — however ambivalently this is regarded — is partly accounted for by its fulfilment of these very expectations. Kaes cites one sympathetic critic of *Holocaust* who curtly sets out the terms in which victory on the battlefield of public memory should be measured: '. . . intellectual and critical reaction is one thing, whereas the spontaneous effect on the naive emotions is something altogether different' (Kaes, 1989: 32).

The bulk of Kaes's book is devoted to a compelling analysis of films (Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Kluge's *The Patriot*, Sanders-Brahms's *Germany, Pale Mother* and Reitz's *Heimat*) which, the above critic's remarks notwithstanding, still insist on negotiating *differently* the critical and emotive paths to historical self-reflection. Kaes's appreciation of the distinctive contribution these films make to the *mise-en-scène* of German memory is evident from the painstaking textual and contextual attention which each receives. However, he is also acutely aware of their own ambivalent representations: an empathy with Germans as victims which undercuts the Holocaust and Jewish suffering (*The Patriot, Germany, Pale Mother*), the allegorizing of female figures to represent Germany's tribulations (in *all* five films), the mythic reconstruction of Germany's history (*Hitler*) and complicity with the search for a new German identity (*Hitler* and *Heimat*). Already it is clear how close we are again to the discourse of the new revisionists; indeed Kaes identifies in these films a certain prefiguring of themes which would kindle the historians' debate several years later. Not only does this reinforce his earlier observations about the multiple lines of penetration

between a popular cultural form like film and intellectual and wider public debate; it also highlights the fact that however critically the past may be appraised, a yearning for a present identity just won't go away.

In recent times, this yearning was most forcefully expressed in the events leading to, and immediately following, German reunification. Yet as the overwhelming majority of the German public rejoiced in the prospect of becoming 'ein Volk', the image of the Nazi past came to the fore once again as a few voices inside Germany and many outside asked whether democratic traditions and structures were sufficiently rooted to prevent a recurrence of German expansionist ambitions or to contain nascent authoritarian/totalitarian forces. The international community's subsequent acceptance of reunification reflected a general confidence in the maturity of Germany's post-war democracy. In this context, it is worth asking whether the collective process of 'coming to terms with the past' which these films grappled with, and which was seen hitherto as a precondition of democratic citizenship, has not been eclipsed by history itself.

In the early post-war period, Adorno made the observation that an insistence on exploring the past in order to instil public enlightenment may in fact have awakened a 'stubborn resistance' and brought about 'the exact opposite of what is intended' (Adorno, 1986: 126). Describing West Germany's policy of reparation to Jewish victims of the Holocaust which began in the Adenauer era, Anson Rabinbach has noted that the official legislation of political morality and prohibition of anti-Semitism in fact perpetuated 'a deep disjuncture between public professions of responsibility and popular attitudes' (Rabinbach, 1988: 167). In this view, the Holocaust and the guilt of the German nation were not repressed in post-war Germany but massively present insofar as the 'Jewish Question' became a primary instrument of domestic and foreign policy in the gradual effort to consolidate German sovereignty. The symbolic value which the Jewish Question subsequently acquired in the public mind conferred on Jews a negative form of power, a 'power of absolution',[10] which became a source of popular resentment. This resentment received extreme expression in neo-Nazi revivals but it was also documented in the widespread support shown by the German population for US President Ronald Reagan's 1985 visit to the military cemetery in Bitburg Cemetery, despite — or rather *because of* — the visit's condemnation by the international Jewish community.

The point of this example is not to question the stability of German democracy but rather to note that official exhortations to recall the 'memory of the offence' (Levi, 1988a) and official proclamations of historical responsibility are not sufficient conditions of a collective process of 'working through'. We need to probe beneath the surface of public discourses to discern why this undoubtedly democratic state continues to live out a troublesome 'history of confronting a salient other'.[11]

The German political unconscious

Eric Santner's book *Stranded Objects* offers perhaps the most far-reaching
explanation of why this is so by turning the spotlight on those features of
the German political *unconscious* — individual and collective — which
have actively engaged the post-war desire for a restored national identity,
and on several films which have spoken to that desire.

It is not surprising that a work focused on the subjective constituents of
German cultural identity should take as its point of departure the seminal
study of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*
(1975), first published in 1967. A very brief excursion into the psycho-
analytic territory they chart is necessary here to appreciate the rather
breathtaking itinerary that Santner subsequently follows. In a nutshell, the
Mitscherlichs sought to explain why by and large the population of post-
war Germany had not displayed any profound emotional reaction to the
immediate Nazi past. Not only were contrition, shame and a desire to
remember not forthcoming, but the self-devaluation and depression which
would be anticipated following the humiliating loss of an 'ideal leader'
were also not affectively registered. All psychic energies were seemingly
channelled into popular identification with the successes of the 'economic
miracle' and a preoccupation with the Germans' own status as victims of
persecution and war. The Mitscherlichs argued that this 'psychic im-
mobilism' was the consequence of a 'collectively practised defence' which
involved the withdrawal of cathecting energies from everything that had
previously been libidinally invested: the Führer, the doctrine of National
Socialism, and the spectacular mass events it staged. This unconscious,
self-defence mechanism, which nonetheless entailed a considerable
expenditure of psychic energy, had prevented a sustained 'work of
mourning' usually attendant upon all experiences of psychic loss and
instead severed all affective ties to the immediate past. Going a step
further, they draw upon Freud's distinction between mourning and
melancholia — the latter being the response to the loss of narcissistic
object choices — and venture that 'had Germans "taken note" of the
reality as it actually was, they would have succumbed to mass melancholia'
(Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1975: 44). In the Mitscherlichs' view,
psychic energy mobilized to ward off melancholia, the loss of self-esteem
and the intrusion of unacceptable memories could not be deployed for
mastering the present.

The Mitscherlichs' psychoanalytic treatise functions both as an expla-
nation for the 'autistic attitude' affecting the German citizenry at large as
well as a manifesto calling for the 'work of mourning' finally to take place
in post-war German society. Memory — 'the painful work of recollection'
— is seen as the only means to achieve 'an animating relationship to guilt,
transforming it into an anxiety of responsibility, and thus into a survivor

mission of illumination' (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1975: xii). Memory's task was to facilitate the painful working through, and slow detachment from those narcissistic object relations — both human beings and ideals — that had formed the sociopsychological bedrock of National Socialism. As Santner notes, the Mitscherlichs' psychic agenda was for a self 'reconstituted on the ruins of narcissism . . . the mastery of the capacity to say "we" nonnarcissistically' (Santner, 1990: 4, 32–3).

For Santner, who deftly sets out the main terms of the Mitscherlichs' thesis, this prognosis is necessary for understanding the psychic and social roots of the inability of post-Holocaust Germany to mourn the victims of Nazism, but it is also in need of further development. He believes that the reasons that *Trauerarbeit* — the work of mourning — has not yet been systematically undertaken by post-war German society also relate to the vicissitudes of identity formation in 'postmodern' society.

If it is by now a familiar gesture to invoke the 'postmodern' to explain the crisis of identity in contemporary society, this usage runs the additional risk of theoretical impropriety when it is applied to an event like the Holocaust. What may be experienced as a 'crisis of meaning' in the wake of modernity's failures can surely not claim explanatory force with respect to an event where very specific and deadly meanings prevailed. However, I think that Santner deploys the concept of the postmodern in a way that profoundly illuminates issues concerning memory, representation and identity that have traversed this essay.

Santner acknowledges that Nazism was 'more than simply a machinery for producing individual and group identities'. However, as the Mitscherlichs' study showed (and indeed the psychoanalytically informed work of the Frankfurt school also demonstrated), Nazism mobilized the German population and secured its loyalties through convoking fantasmatic images of a self in narcissistic unity with its leader, the collectivity and the German nation as a whole. This was a whole, as Santner notes, conceived as a 'pure system, seamlessly continuous with itself'. Within this system, the cultural production of difference conferred on the Jews the status of 'other', that element intervening from the outside which had to be eliminated to ensure the integrity and purity of the whole: 'To eliminate the Jews would allow for a fantasy of return to the purity of a self-identity unmediated by any passage through alterity' (Santner, 1990: 5).

This explanation of the 'mass psychology of fascism' is familiar enough. What Santner does is to recast this individual and collective identity, fuelled by fantasies of wholeness, plenitude, unity and mastery, as one that is 'founded on a fundamental denial of mourning *in its (self-)constituting capacities*' (Santner, 1990: 6; emphasis added). Mourning, as Freud established, is a lament for the loss of an object recognized as distinct from oneself, an object 'loved for its own sake' as the Mitscherlichs put it. As such, it is a psychic labour which recapitulates the earliest experiences of

loss the child undergoes as it negotiates its treacherous path from symbiotic union with significant others to the development of a separate ego. Only when these boundaries of self and other are psychically inscribed, can an *empathetic* relation to the object, upon which mourning is based, take hold. A narcissistic position, by contrast, dissolves the boundaries between self and other, is unable to experience difference in an empathetic fashion and usually succumbs to melancholia in the face of loss.

The point of this psychoanalytic digression for Santner can now be more explicitly spelled out. The post-war population of Germany could not mourn the real victims of Nazism because the individual and collective identities which had been so libidinally invested precluded an empathetic work of mourning:

> The capacity to feel grief for others and guilt for the suffering one has directly or indirectly caused, depends on the capacity to experience empathy for the other *as other* . . . The paradoxical task faced by the postwar population was to mourn *as Germans* for those whom they had excluded and exterminated in their mad efforts to produce their 'Germanness'. (Santner, 1990: 6)

Insofar as the reconstitution of a German national identity based upon these psychic predispositions dominated the political and cultural agenda, that remembering *through lamentation* which mourning performs could not take place.

This inability to tolerate alterity is not confined to post-war Germany. Santner cites Lyotard's postmodern critique of narcissistic aspirations that have 'tantalized the Western imagination' and enriched the European social order at the expense of 'the other' in the modern period. However, if this modern project is more generally defined by its 'inability to tolerate difference, heterogeneity, nonmastery', then Auschwitz — 'a modern industrial complex for the elimination of difference' — must be seen as its nadir. This is why the entire post-Holocaust generation lives and labours 'under the sign of Auschwitz'.

It is worth noting Santner's diagnosis of the specific psychic disposition which structures the response of the second and third generation in Germany to the task of mourning, especially in light of Habermas's special appeal to this generation, cited earlier, to keep the memory of Holocaust victims alive. Raised in the amnesiac silence of their parents and grandparents, this generation, according to Santner, 'inherited not guilt so much as the denial of guilt, not losses so much as lost opportunities to mourn losses' (Santner, 1990: 34). This generation, he suggests, once or twice removed from the actuality of the Holocaust, was afflicted by the melancholia which their parents had successfully fended off. This may be one explanation as to why the issue of national identity has, over the last two decades, once again claimed centre stage in the German public sphere. The melancholia of the post-war generation articulates a feeling that

'something is missing — a sense of disappointment over something which was never received'[12] — that 'something' being the experience of mourning that, in negotiating loss, redraws the boundaries between self and other. Hence the attraction of filling that gap with the certainties of a new German identity built upon rediscovered origins and rehabilitated traditions.

This is where Santner returns us to the *Historikerstreit* and Habermas's critique of the 'identificatory grab at national history' (Habermas, 1988: 46) contained in the new revisionism which revives elements of a 'conventional identity' based on the family, *Volk* and nation. Habermas insists that, given the catastrophic legacy of these identificatory relations, its terms are no longer feasible or desirable in Germany, and in post-war Europe as a whole. Instead, cultural identity has to be constructed on the basis of a conscious awareness of the transformed conditions of identity formation in post-Holocaust societies. This process will bring about the only viable cultural identity of a post-Auschwitz world — namely, a 'postconventional identity' — whose arrival Habermas anticipates in the following observation:

> If among the younger generations national symbols have lost their formative powers; if naive identifications with one's origins and lineage have given way to a more tentative relationship with history; if discontinuities are felt more strongly and continuities no longer celebrated at all costs . . . to the extent that all this is the case, we are witnessing increasing indications of the advent of a postconventional identity.[13]

'To the extent that all this is the case . . .' may be precisely the political stakes of the battles over historical memory which have been taking place in Germany in the 1980s, of which the *Historikerstreit* is only the most well-known abroad. Habermas's words were also spoken before the outbreak of national euphoria which accompanied reunification, in which the participation of younger generations was particularly striking. It is too early to say whether we can read into these reactions a reassertion, rather than relinquishment of conventional identities, though the creeping intolerance shown toward the 'Ossies' (East Germans), the fear of a Polish invasion once visa requirements are scrapped, and the continuing exclusion of Germany's Turkish population from German public life should caution us against a premature celebration of the advent of a German post-conventional identity.

In any event, Santner believes that Habermas's critique of conventional identities dovetails with the postmodern rejection of the certitudes of identity and faith in utopias. (Despite Habermas's well-known critique of postmodernism, Santner wishes to insist on this important point of accord.) Postmodernists, too, are alert to the dangers embedded within quests for essential identities and utopian communities in our times:

postmodern critics invite readers to mourn the shattered fantasy of the (always ready) lost organic society that has haunted the Western imagination, and to learn to tolerate the complexities and instabilities of new social arrangements as well as more hybrid, more 'creole' forms of personal, sexual, cultural, and political identity. (Santner, 1990: 8)

This is perhaps the place to leave Santner's extremely suggestive exploration of the postmodern conditions of post-Holocaust identity, even though there is much more to cull from his account, including an important discussion of why thus far the postmodern discourses of bereavement, in evacuating the particular *social* context of mourning, have evaded the task of historical mourning in Habermas's sense.

It remains to say a few words about the role that film plays in Santner's analysis. The avoidance of reference to films thus far has been deliberate, for although Santner acknowledges from the outset cinema's complicity in identity-formation under National Socialism, he confines his analysis to Reitz's *Heimat* and the films of Hans Jürgen Syberberg because in his view they represent the most ambitious attempts at 'national elegiac art' — i.e. works that incorporate procedures of mourning into their textual fabric. The films of these directors interest Santner not only because they engage with mourning at the thematic level — *Heimat*'s requiem for the lost organic community, Syberberg's lament for the demise of the utopian impulse; they also harness film's essentially elegiac character, its testimony to the passing of time, in order to generate in the spectator an *affective* response to the experience of loss which is a precondition of the capacity to mourn and work through the past. They thus inscribe aspects of mourning into the relationship between spectator and film itself.

Like Kaes, Santner's considerable estimation of the films of these directors is accompanied by an awareness of their own selective way of remembering and mourning the past. In the work of both directors, Santner observes, troubling discourses of exclusion are enacted. To mention only the most notable: the Holocaust still does not speak its name, and modernity is inscribed as the prime site of an alterity threatening the authentic ability to mourn. Notwithstanding these profound criticisms, what Santner wishes to establish by his treatment of these films as 'mourning plays' is that the cinematic medium potentially offers a vital *cultural* space in which post-war generations can engage in a labour of mourning, in its own way preparing the ground for these generations to say 'we' under the sign of a postconventional identity.

Postscript

A timely postscript to this review essay was provided by the reported scandal created by remarks Hans Jürgen Syberberg had made at a public

forum and in print on the possibilities for artistic renewal which now present themselves to a newly unified Germany. According to Syberberg, the re-education policies imposed by the 'victors' in the post-war period had submerged German cultural identity and reduced art to mediocrity. His manifesto calls for an 'aesthetic of reunification' which reclaims the 'romantic heritage, from Hölderin to Richard Wagner' but does so without passing through guilt ('the Auschwitz of the Sunday preachers'). Syberberg particularly singles out the 'descendants' of Bloch, Adorno and Marcuse for making 'guilt into a trade which was fatal to the imagination'.[14]

All this is clearly heady, nationalist stuff and, retrospectively, it casts an even greater suspicion on the motives behind the identity explorations identified by Kaes and Santner in their respective studies of Syberberg's *Hitler* film. More important to note is the unanimous condemnation which greeted Syberberg's comments in the West German press, signalling a grim determination, even on the part of its conservative wing, not to let this particular post-unification genie out of the bottle. Such condemnation reassures, but perhaps in their own outrageous way Syberberg's rantings underline a point that should not go unheeded. The task of 'working through' the Nazi past, especially by post-war generations, cannot be reduced to extracted professions of guilt but must involve an *enabling* labour of mourning whereby assuming responsibility for the past can be aligned with practising democratic tolerance in the present. This is easily enough said in these tumultuous times when so many forms of mutual intolerance threaten to destabilize the foundations of the 'common European home'. In practice it requires, to be sure, the creation and consolidation of democratic structures in the public sphere; but it also demands — and this is why the need for a labour of mourning has *not* been historically superseded — what Santner describes as the constitution of a 'different kind of self', capable of empathetic relations and solidaristic ties with those who cohabit the increasingly complex and hybrid social spaces of German — and European — society.

Notes

1. Melanie Phillips, 'When Birth was a Sentence of Death', the *Guardian*, 4 September 1990.

2. Susan Sontag (1981) 'Fascinating Fascism', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

3. See Charles S. Maier (1988) *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Richard Evans (1989) *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past*. New York: Pantheon Books; Shierry Weber Nicholsen (ed.), (1989) *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; special issue of *New German Critique* on the '*Historikerstreit*', 44, spring/summer 1988.

4. Cited in Anson Rabinbach (1988), 'The Jewish Question in the German Question', *New German Critique*, 44, spring/summer: 184.

5. See John Caughie (1981), 'Progressive Television and Documentary Drama', *Screen*, 2.

6. See Andreas Huyssen (1986) 'The Politics of Identification: "Holocaust" and West German Drama', in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; special issue of *New German Critique* 19, winter 1980; Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes (eds.) (1986) *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust: the Changing Situation in West Germany*. New York/London: Holmes & Meier.

7. Cited in Kaes, (1989: 223).

8. Lawrence L. Langer (1982) *Versions of Survival*. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 216.

9. See Timothy Corrigan (1983) *New German Film: The Displaced Image*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Thomas Elsaesser (1989) *New German Cinema*. London: British Film Institute; Eric Rentschler (1984) *West German Film in the Course of Time*. Bedford Hill, NY: Redgrave; John Sandford (1980) *The New German Cinema*. New York: Da Capo Press.

10. Saul Friedländer, cited by Rabinbach, op. cit., p. 167.

11. Ruth Mandel (1989) 'Turkish Headscarves and the "Foreigner Problem": Constructing Difference through Emblems of Identity', *New German Critique* 40, winter: 37.

12. Michael Schneider (1984) 'Fathers and Sons, Retrospectively: The Damaged Relationship between Two Generations', *New German Critique* 31, winter: 43, cited in Santner (1990: 38).

13. Jürgen Habermas (1987) 'Eine Art Schadensabwicklung', *Historiker-Streit: Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialist-ischen Judenvernichtung*, Ernst Reinhard Piper (ed.) Munich: Piper, p. 73, Cited in Santner (1990: 50).

14. Alain Auffray, 'Doing the Reich Thing', the *Guardian*, 14 December 1990.

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