

Contemporary Modes of Remembering the Holocaust — How and Why?

Archana Ravi

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Archana.Ravi@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Trauma and Memory: The Holocaust in Contemporary Culture edited by Christine Berberich explores the different ways in which the Holocaust is represented and commemorated in contemporary cultures, including fiction, films, museums and social media. The edited volume compels us to reflect on *how* the Holocaust can be remembered without forgetting *why* we need to do so. Contributions problematize newer ways of remembering and discuss if and how ideas regarding ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ forms of commemoration and representation are gradually changing in the present.

Zeitgenössische Formen des Erinnerns an den Holocaust — Wie und Warum?

German Abstract:

Trauma and Memory: The Holocaust in Contemporary Culture, herausgegeben von Christine Berberich, behandelt die verschiedenen Arten der Darstellung und des Erinnerns an den Holocaust in zeitgenössischer Kultur, darunter Literatur, Filme, Museen und soziale Medien. Der Sammelband bringt uns dazu, über Formen und Beweggründe des Gedenkens an den Holocaust zu reflektieren. Die Beiträge problematisieren neuere Arten des Erinnerns und überlegen zudem, ob und wie Ideen bezüglich ‚richtiger‘ und ‚falscher‘ Formen des Erinnerns und Darstellens sich gegenwärtig langsam wandeln.

How to cite:

Ravi, Archana: “Contemporary Modes of Remembering the Holocaust — How and Why? [Review of: Berberich, Christine (ed.): *Trauma and Memory: The Holocaust in Contemporary Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2021.]”. In: KULT_online 67 (2023).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2023.1384>



Contemporary Modes of Remembering the Holocaust — How and Why?

Archana Ravi

International Graduate School for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Berberich, Christine (ed.). *Trauma and Memory. The Holocaust in Contemporary Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 223 pages, 22,39 EUR. ISBN: 978-0-367-70316-5.

At the heart of *Trauma and Memory: The Holocaust in Contemporary Culture* lies the contemplation of *how* and *why* the Holocaust is commemorated. Each of the chapters within this book raise, and try to answer, the question of what newer modes of representation and commemoration exist and can be negotiated with, in order to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust and also go beyond existing modes of remembering. Such a discussion becomes more pertinent in an age where the survivors of the Holocaust, the first-hand witnesses, are gradually passing away and where the temporal distance to the event itself risks that the experiences and testimonies of both the Holocaust victims and survivors are undermined, disregarded or forgotten.

Edited by Christine Berberich, the volume consists of three parts (the introduction and eleven chapters) and a conclusion. In the introduction, Berberich traces the history of Holocaust commemoration from its earliest form to present day practices and gives an insight into debates on what constitutes ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ commemoration. In a comprehensive but concise manner, Berberich discusses the specific stages in which the post-war commemorations took shape and made visible the events of the Holocaust: for example, through school curriculums, television and cinema, memorials and museums, etc. While Berberich acknowledges the importance of learning about the past, she argues that existing modes of narratives that include recurring cliches (like “striped uniforms; the Star of David; train tracks; the *Arbeit macht frei* entrance gate to Auschwitz” (p. 5) etc.) and sanctioned narratives that are solely victim focused are not enough to stimulate the readers into *really* and meaningfully engaging with the Holocaust. Thus, she asks for “new modes of representation” (p. 7) — which will be explored by the following contributions — in order “to stop Holocaust memory from solidifying and becoming static” (p. 7). Instead of an “over-simplified distinction into ‘good’ versus ‘bad’” (p. 5),

the following chapters try to deviate from existing modes of narration and look at newer perspectives to study the specific details of the Holocaust and to see what led to it.

Part two, “New Trends in Holocaust Fiction” examines various emerging genres within Holocaust fiction. In chapter two, for example, Christoph Madden looks at how the use of humor and irony in literary fiction and films create narratives that position the reader in an unsettled state due to a simultaneous stimulation of “the pleasure principle” (p. 33) and “ethically charged guilt” (p. 33). This simultaneous affective response from the reader compels them to further reckon with and remember the Holocaust through a more critical manner. Audrey Bardizbanian, in her examination of *Everything is Illuminated* (Jonathan Safran Foer, New York 2002) as a third generation “post-trauma narrative” (p. 49), argues that the novel tries to make the reader access the event of the Holocaust through a form of “traumatic realism” (p. 49) and in doing so performs trauma throughout the novel. In chapter five Christine Berberich discusses the debates for and against Holocaust fiction and then extends this discussion through a close reading of the historical novel *HHhH* (Laurent Binet, London 2012). Berberich emphasizes the extensive research Binet conducted to write his novel as well as his postmodernist techniques to self-reflexively engage with the process of “fiction writing and history making” (p. 79). In chapter six, Sue Vice discusses the reasons for the lack of cultural representations of the *Einsatzgruppen* murders. She does so by analyzing existing representations which are eyewitness and survivor accounts in the mode of memoirs, poetry and fiction. She also examines a diary kept by a bystander to the mass shootings.

While one may be a bit apprehensive about approaching some of these themes, especially because they may raise ethical concerns regarding the representation of the Holocaust which also necessitates a critical and sensitized engagement, the authors of these chapters, however, bring together a significant repository of texts within contemporary Holocaust fiction and critically examine if and how they contribute to the cultural remembering of the Holocaust. They also take cognizance of how these new modes of representation are deeply self-aware and self-reflexive of the narratives they produce. An illustrative example of such self-awareness is chapter four, where Zuzana Buráková analyzes Marcus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (New York 2005) through the lens of trauma theory and raises uncomfortable but important questions relating to perpetrator trauma. Without absolving Nazi Germany and the German citizens of their crimes or excusing their often-criticized silence, Buráková closely reads the narrative strategies used

to portray different kinds of perpetrators and their individual and collective trauma. Published a year before *The Kindly Ones* (Jonathan Little, New York 2006) which is considered to be one of the seminal works in perpetrator narratives, *The Book Thief*, as Buráková suggests, differs in its employment of 'Death' as the third-person unbiased narrator as opposed to first-person perpetrator fictional accounts which may prevent a detached point of view. Buráková's examination of *The Book Thief*, then, allows for a more serious consideration of a Young Adult (perpetrator) fiction through an analysis of various trauma concepts such as PTSD, postmemory, and intergenerational trauma, to name only a few.

The third part, "The Holocaust in Contemporary Culture," goes beyond Holocaust Fiction and looks at other modes that remember and commemorate the Holocaust. In chapter eight, Caroline Pearce considers the recent initiatives to commemorate the victims of the National Socialist euthanasia program. In light of the exclusion of these victims in the immediate post-war commemorative culture, Pearce critically examines these contemporary initiatives and pushes for more inclusive methods of commemoration that would have a deeper impact to "foster tolerance and inclusion in society" (p. 140).

Chapter eleven by Claire Griffiths expands on the criticism of Holocaust tourism with a discussion on the guided group tours in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Griffiths adopts a "personal-theoretical" (p. 191) approach which is informed by the impressions she has gained as a visitor during her first tour and subsequent ones taken between 2009–2015. She critically analyses the different aspects of this tour and the different sites within the museum. Griffiths problematizes several recurring practices in the museum, including issues of consent that arise when photographs are displayed that show survivors in a state of undress or when their personal items are displayed. Griffiths's analysis positions her both as a scholarly critic and a critical tourist. In doing so, she considers how a carefully constructed, hierarchized narrative can affect how we remember historical events. Instead of a standardized and repetitive tour narrative which focuses on the "best known artefacts" (p. 197) or the most narratable stories, Griffiths pushes for a need to examine and redevelop such tours. She also notes the importance of Holocaust tourism scholarship in identifying such ethical concerns and their potential to enable less problematic representations.

If Griffiths problematizes the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum by repeatedly visiting it as a tourist, Gemma Commane and Rebekah Potton, in chapter ten, offer a detailed description and evaluation of Instagram and its impact on Holocaust representation and commemoration. While Commane and Potton explicitly criticize any form of antisemitism displayed through images and memes on Instagram, the reprinting of such images in their article even when the purpose is to criticize them may not cater to a sensitized and academic discussion on this topic. On the other hand, by considering the potentially positive aspects of remembering the Holocaust through photos posted on Instagram and the use of #Auschwitz in Instagram posts, they insightfully discuss the use of social media for collectively engaging with and creating knowledge about the past. Yet, similar to Griffiths who while acknowledging the importance of the guided tours also describes the problematic aspects of the tour, these photos also need to be looked at critically to further understand their negative implications (if any) even if they seem to have a positive engagement with the Holocaust in an overt manner.

Readers' responses to these chapters will be conflicting and contentious. There may be, for example, an argument against the value of perpetrator narratives or in favour of Instagram as a medium for Holocaust remembrance. And while these new modes of commemorating and representing the Holocaust may create an immediate effect of unease, an engagement and confrontation with them also pushes for an understanding of how we, in contemporary society, choose to remember the past and why we do so. As Shonaleigh, a Drut'syla (a traditional Jewish Storyteller) and the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, discusses in the conclusion to this book, pushing boundaries through new modes of Holocaust commemoration and new modes of representation can create good and important conversations if we also consider the *why*. Why do we need such a new modes of representation? "What does it achieve? Does it achieve an intelligent discussion where we can move forward? Is it reinventing the wheel?" (p. 211) *Trauma and Memory* engages with these questions even if the individual contributions are unable to answer them at present. While the volume is especially useful for students and scholars working on contemporary Holocaust fiction, it allows for an interdisciplinary engagement by extending itself to academics interested in Holocaust representation and remembrance through the lens of film studies, museum studies, sociology, history, and anthropology.