



Bettina Bannasch, Almuth Hammer. *Verbot der Bilder - Gebot der Erinnerung: Mediale Repräsentationen der Shoah.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004. 418 S. EUR 39.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-37485-7.



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The Shoah—Theorizing the Boundaries of Representation and Tracking Pluridisciplinary Representations

Saul Friedländer, in his introduction to his seminal collection, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, posed the fundamental epistemological conflict that has informed much subsequent writing about representing the Holocaust: “[t]here are limits to [the Holocaust’s] representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed*. What the characteristics of such a transgression are, however, is far more intractable than our definitions have so far been able to encompass.”[1] While the Friedländer volume explored primarily the representations of the Holocaust in historiography, Bannasch and Hammer have attempted to cast a wider net by including essays from the following disciplines: philosophy, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, history, art history, media studies, musicology, literary history, cultural studies and religion. The specific representational “limits” this volume examines are located in the thorny relationship between the biblical injunction against graven images on one hand and representations of the Holocaust in a multiplicity of media on the other.

The authors’ preface states that claims of the unre-

presentability of the Holocaust are often justified on a “quasi-theological” basis, namely the biblical injunction against images (p. 9). The authors argue that the invocation of this principle, especially in a critical context that intermingles esthetic and ethical aspects of the question, can result in an unwarranted appropriation of the concept, especially when the specifically Jewish nature of the injunction is emphasized (pp. 9-10). Furthermore, they qualify any claims to a global validity of such an injunction in the context of the Holocaust by stating that it does not extend to a generic “proscription of pictorial representation” but represents a “prohibition of appropriation qua representation” (p.10). “Thus,” they argue, “the question shifts its emphasis from the injunction against images itself towards argumentative strategies within the context of the injunction and the rhetorical deployment of images” (p. 10).

This authorial acknowledgment combines uneasily with the implicit diametric opposition between the terms cited in the book’s title. Indeed, discourse about the limits of Holocaust representation has not been character-

ized by an adherence to claims that would apodictically extend the injunction against images towards any representation; rather, it explores parameters for distinguishing between adequate and inadequate modes of representation, while devising a critical framework to answer this question.

The authors (and their contributors) seem to be aware of these dynamics as well: most contributions to this volume acknowledge what Manfred Krippen and Klaus R. Scherpe describe as “the knowledge that every form of shaped memory always already implies interpretation” (p. 1).[2] The following paragraphs will provide a synoptic treatment of the most important contributions’ arguments vis-à-vis this thetic statement.

Jens Mattern focuses on the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, examining the causation and emergence through Nazi persecution of a specifically Jewish, “metaphysical election” (p. 25). He argues that, according to Lévinas, Nazi antisemitism triggered an “anamnetic process of dissimulation” (p. 29) and created a “situation in which [Jews] can once more remember the metaphysical meaning of their Being which had been cast aside by the modern process of assimilation” (p. 31). In this reading, the Holocaust occasions the re-emergence of “Jewish Being as that Being in which inescapable facticity changes into utmost freedom” (p. 37).

Christina Pfestroff attempts to qualify critical notions that connect Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of the unrepresentable with injunctions against graven images. She argues instead that “Lyotard’s discourse does not contain a general proscription against images. Rather, one can and must speak of a commandment to present images in Lyotard’s work” (p. 45). She sees Lyotard’s claim about the unrepresentable as “less normative than descriptive” (p. 57) and describes Lyotard’s argument that all “instances of witnessing leave false marks because in every such act the impact of traumatic experience is neutralized” (p. 59). This dynamic, she claims, should not lead to eschewing representation, however: “according to Lyotard, no act of witnessing—be it linguistic, embodied, or artistic—frees us from the necessity of reflection on what cannot be represented in it” (p. 60).

The final article in the book’s first section, “Justifications for the Injunction against Images,” analyzes how the injunction against images plays itself out in Theodor W. Adorno’s work. Andreas Langenohl argues that it would be erroneous to “interpret the relationship between the injunction against images in [Adorno’s] critical theory and Jewish theological traditions as a genuinely theolog-

ical/metaphysical one” (p. 78). Rather, he sees a “specifically materialistic appropriation of such traditions that view cultural forms of expression as an option, to be taken seriously ... of overcoming a bad material reality” (p. 78). According to Langenohl, Adorno makes the case for a utopian world in which “the utopian cancellation of past harm would not aim at an *ex post facto* bestowal of meaning but at an acknowledgement of the historical senselessness of the sacrifices made during forms of domination that have been overcome” (p. 80).

Collectively, these three articles provide an interesting theoretical basis for the following contributions, which focus primarily on specific instances of representations in various disciplines. However, I would have hoped for a more sustained theoretical treatment of the questions surrounding the representability of the Holocaust; the focus on Lévinas, Lyotard and Adorno—while certainly addressing significant contributions to studies about the Holocaust and representation—seems somewhat arbitrary and skirts more recent theoretical work on these questions.

The main focus of the remaining essays is visual: Matthias Heyl, Ursula Stenger, Habbo Knoch, Martin Schulz, Paul Petzel and Detlef Hoffman offer contributions that examine the production and dissemination of images of the Holocaust, along with their attending epistemological and ethical dimensions.

Heyl provocatively lays out the possibility that the injunction against images could be “aimed not only at a respectful approach to [Holocaust] history, where the injunction denotes the limitations of our capacity for representation, understanding and cognition, but also at its own, maybe perhaps especially elaborated, form of denial” (p. 118). Referring to a tendency to “not wanting to understand” (p. 121), he sees the danger of warnings against images primarily as an “erasure of memory” (p. 123). Therefore, he posits a generic proscription of representation only in cases where the presentation of images could lead to the further dehumanization of the victim (p. 129).

Ursula Stenger argues that photographic images “touch [the viewer] emotionally and elicit participation” (p. 132). Thus, images can play an important role in “sensitizing [the viewer’s] capacities of perception” towards empathy (p. 145). Knoch points to the paradox of “positing that the Holocaust is unrepresentable,” while it is “constantly documented visually for the purposes of historical enlightenment” (p. 168). Photographs are in the latter process transformed from “visual documents” into

“objects of memory” (p. 168). More precisely, Knoch sees photographs as elements of “‘counter memory,’ whenever they sustain the principles of bearing witness and demonstrability in the sense of visual proof” (p. 188).

Schulz reflects on the hybrid representational nature of photographs of the Holocaust: on one hand they invoke “hallucinatorily clear evidence of the representation ... of a past presence,” while on the other they also stand for the “impossibility of making visible and tangible the entire representation of a past, which in a photograph appears merely as an detail and is always based on the absence of what occurred” (p. 204). Photographs, by virtue of their dual nature as historical documents and flexibly deployable “iconographic *donnÃ©es*” (p. 205) can serve the important function of sharpening our critical approach with images at large. Showing photographs of the Holocaust makes visible the “crossing gazes exchanged between perpetrators, victims and recipients” (p. 206). In a similar vein, Petzel pleads for a “memorative esthetics of acknowledgment” that would combine “a critique of the image as idol with the development of a sense for the pathic within an image, i.e., the sense for the lasting otherness of those remembered, as well as the otherness that remains” (p. 376).

Hoffmann states that “images and symbols are necessary for the organization of everyday reality” and in this context analyzes the impact a potential prohibition of images would exert on remembering historical events (p. 384). He concludes that the “impossibility to represent experience” is a hallmark of trauma and that “omitted symbolization is detrimental to traumatized individuals” (p. 396). Consequently, he sees the visual and linguistic confirmation of what complicates individual acts of memory as helpful in relieving trauma.

The volume also contains two articles on psychology: Julia Chaitin and Dan Bar-On examine memory about family relationships during the Holocaust and the survivors’ incapacity to discuss what the authors term “emotional memory” (p. 89). Revital Ludewig-Kedmi discusses internally and externally conditioned rules for and prohibitions against narrating Holocaust experiences, focusing on Holocaust survivors; Jewish Kapos; perpetrators; those who saved Jews; and latter-day recipients of those narratives. A media studies approach is offered by Moshe Zimmerman, who analyzes representations in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood movies of Nazi Germany, and Rembert HÃ¼ser, who provides a close reading of Jean-Luc Godard’s “Une Femme mariÃ©e” [1964]. Eckhard Tramsen scrutinizes the ambiguous role of silence

in music that thematizes the Holocaust, while Bettina SchlÃ¼ter examines the “substitution of esthetic strategies by physiological operations” in music (p. 303).

Manuela GÃ¼nter discusses literary representations of the Holocaust and argues that our knowledge of the Holocaust exists only in representations, which are indispensable in the context of the mandate to remember. However, she also argues for establishing a mechanism for evaluating the artistic quality of those representations and considers the injunction against images a “regulative principle of [this] discourse” (p. 307). Bettina Bannasch makes the case that language cannot emulate the experience of the Holocaust and that this unrepresentability of experience may not be used as a springboard for an over-aestheticizing language (p. 342).

Michael Tilly examines the injunction against images within the historically and theological contingent context of synagogue architecture. He argues that the rejection of anthropomorphic representations of God does not extend to a larger prohibition of all figurative representation. Almuth Hammer posits that the trope of the Holocaust’s incommensurability can result in its sacralization—a status that in her view reinscribes the empty space left by modernism’s abandonment of the transcendental. Finally, Carsten Probst reviews recent artistic and architectural approaches to the Holocaust and argues that in the face of the passage of time since the Holocaust monuments have to inscribe in their design the process of memory/remembering itself.

The volume’s greatest strength is also the source of its methodological weakness: the editors allow the contributions to employ individual definitions of the injunction against graven images. The final product thus reflects a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives and approaches, which allows the emergence of many (at points contradictory) facets of the term at hand. The absence of a more sustained synthesizing effort by the editors leaves me somewhat frustrated. Rather than playing on the ostensible tension between the biblical injunction and the plethora of Holocaust representations we experience daily, it would have been more fruitful to work towards a taxonomy of the latter. In other words, in the presence of many divergent representations of the Holocaust—injunction or not—it is crucial to advance our understanding about sound epistemological and ontological principles that allow us to distinguish between responsible and irresponsible representations.

Notes

- [1]. Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 3. Original emphasis.
- [2]. Manfred Köppen and Klaus R. Scherpe, "Zur Einführung: Der Streit um die Darstellbarkeit des Holocaust," in *Bilder des Holocaust: Literatur-Film-Bildende Kunst*, ed. Manfred Köppen and Klaus R. Scherpe (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997), pp. 1-12.

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