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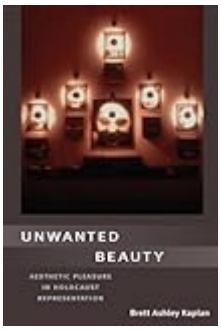

Brett Ashley Kaplan. *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xii + 215 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03093-2.

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Making It Possible to Look

This book is a gracefully written addition to the growing discourse on aesthetic anxiety in relation to the representation of atrocity and traumatic events such as war, genocide, famine, hurricanes, and other forms of natural disaster or man-made violence. The challenge to the aestheticization of suffering, the "unwanted beauty" of Brett Ashley Kaplan's title, runs through much of twentieth-century criticism, positing such aestheticization as both artistically and politically reactionary and trivializing of both history and its victims. It has been the subject of works such as Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004) and, most recently, a photographic exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (2007). In the accompanying catalog, curator Mark Reinhardt, like Kaplan, rejects the ban on beauty and argues that the ability of a picture to arouse disturbing reflections through aesthetic strategies leads to a deeper engagement with the problems of suffering and is reason enough to relax the aesthetic anxiety of critique.[1]

Kaplan takes up the question of the demonization of beauty in Holocaust representation specifically and analyzes the power of aesthetic pleasure to deepen understanding in Holocaust literature, poetry, visual art, monuments, and memorials. Her book is organized chronologically from the war years to the postwar era and is accompanied by three corresponding arguments: how aesthetic pleasure provided survival mechanisms in the concentration camps, how it enabled the exploration of postwar memory and identity, and how it allows postwar artists to keep the Holocaust culturally visible. Among poets and writers, Kaplan's subjects include Paul Celan, Charlotte Delbo, Jorge Semprun, and Edmond JabÃ¨s. Artists include Anselm Kiefer and Christian Boltanski, while memorial spaces include Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, the Holocaust monument in Harburg by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., designed by James Ingo Freed.

Like most scholars who now address the anxiety of critique, Kaplan explicitly rejects the single most haunting and influential critique of beauty in Holocaust representation, which underlies all such critiques: the interdict against aestheticization and exploitation made by

Theodor Adorno in his famous 1949 assertion, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." The power of this assertion has been little diminished either by Adorno's later retraction or by the wealth of Holocaust representation, which began even before World War II was over, in the camps themselves.

Kaplan's strongest chapters are those on the poets and writers who began writing during and immediately after the war, particularly her first chapter on Jewish poet Paul Celan, whose parents were killed in Transnistria while he was interned in Romania. His famous poem *Todesfuge*, likely composed in 1944 but first published in 1948, arguably provoked Adorno's interdiction and helped set off decades of debate on the possibility or impossibility of Holocaust representation. Kaplan reproduces the poem in full, alternating the original German lines with lines in English translation, and provides commentary on the work and its reception.

Kaplan also thoughtfully analyzes the role of aesthetic pleasure in keeping alive the non-Jewish French resistance fighter Delbo, who "purchased" MoliÃ¨re's play *Le misanthrope* (1666) while in Auschwitz and bit by bit committed it to memory until she could recite it to herself in its entirety during the long and grueling morning roll calls. She eventually published three volumes on her experiences. Kaplan adds to the literature on the writing of Buchenwald survivor Semprun, a Spaniard from a Catholic family, who joined the French Resistance and worked with a clandestine communist group in Buchenwald, later producing both his own books and screenplays with filmmakers such as Constantin Costa-Gavras and Alain Resnais. Kaplan concludes her examination of literature with the work of French/Egyptian Jewish poet JabÃ¨s, who was arrested in Egypt during the war, but evacuated by the British to Palestine for the remainder of World War II. Unlike Celan, Delbo, and Semprun, JabÃ¨s is an indirect witness, whose elliptical and evocative poetry invites his readers to consider the contradictions of identity, place, and memory. Kaplan effectively contextualizes the works with the lives of the writers and defends the beauty of their texts in relation to the difficulty of the subject.

The further the artist is from direct Holocaust experience, however, the more credence Kaplan lends to those who criticize their work, introducing a note of ambivalence in her discussion of JabÃ¨s that grows much louder in the last two chapters on visual art and memorials. In these chapters, the question of aesthetics becomes entangled in other issues that trouble Kaplan, such as issues of conceptual art, which Kaplan admits she does not find engaging, but which are integral to an understanding of much that she undertakes to examine. In her chapter on Kiefer and Boltanski, she faults Kiefer for evoking both perpetrator and victim in his paintings and faults Boltanski for either a lack of historical specificity or else for being insufficiently aestheticized in works that are more historically specific. Such works, however, are not meant to be pedagogical in the sense of providing access to the historical event of the Holocaust. On the contrary, Kiefer and Boltanski, like many postwar artists, are concerned with the present. Acutely aware of the impossibility of access to Holocaust experience, they focus on the way this experience is constructed for later generations exclusively through representation. Their work is necessarily diffused and allusive because diffusion and allusion are the conditions of contemporary Holocaust consciousness, pervaded by the pressures of contemporary concerns. Kiefer and Boltanski, it can be argued, deliberately reproduce such forms of difficult apprehension, from their very different subject positions, in part as a commentary on the contemporary understanding of the Holocaust by those born later.[2]

Kaplan's equivocations continue in her discussion of monuments and memorials, a chapter premised on the notion of "aesthetic pollution," by which Kaplan means "the fear of fascist aesthetics," which is "also a fear of beauty, a fear of reprising the terrible uses to which aesthetics were put during the Third Reich" (p. 151). This definition seems an oversimplification and at times reads like a de facto argument for the monumental in memorials on the premise that it is now time to uncouple this style from a fascist aesthetic. Perhaps she is correct, but even so, this does not mean that style is not and should not be associated with ideology. To argue, as Kaplan does, that the modernized neoclassicism of Friedrich St. Florians's widely criticized National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. refers equally to monumental works constructed before the war as well as after and therefore does not employ allusions to the kind of imperial, triumphalist aesthetic now associated with fascism is weak at best, while ignoring other arguments about its placement on the Mall (p. 153).

Kaplan makes the equally dubious argument that Eisenman's own concept of fear-inducing structures, previously produced in the form of fractured architectural buildings, was "recycled" for the Berlin Holocaust memorial, "thus indicating that aesthetic forms cannot be attached to single political histories" (p. 160). Kaplan suggests that Eisenman "should have come up with an aes-

thetic uniquely appropriate to the unique event of the Holocaust" though she concedes, "his appropriation of other aesthetic forms has nonetheless produced an interesting and effective commemorative site" (p. 160). It seems that Kaplan would like to have it both ways. Likewise, the Gerzes's "clever and wonderful" monument in Harburg (p. 162), which was sunk into the ground over the course of seven years and is a stunningly inventive work that returns the burden of memory to the viewer, is nonetheless found by Kaplan to be "a form whose anti-monumentality eradicates the memory site…. Thus the fear of aesthetic pollution compromises the excellent aims of their monument" (p. 161). Kaplan reduces the work to an avoidance strategy, effectively critiquing it for "avoiding monumental form" (p. 162). While Eisenman and also Freed, who designed the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, were subject to outside pressures regarding their designs, this was not true for the Gerzes, yet by combining the three in a shared critique, Kaplan seems to suggest that the monumental is de facto the best and most necessary form of memorialization.

In her final remarks Kaplan responds to Sontag's examination of the Abu Ghraib photographs, specifically the observation that violence has become entertainment in American culture, providing an "easy delight." Kaplan takes this claim to mean an unchanging effect of the photographs themselves, rather than the violence they represent. But shifting the arena of circulation from the closed community of soldiers and their friends to mass distribution by the global media has provoked no "easy delight" in the crudely composed Abu Ghraib images. The single photograph that has become the most iconic and emblematic image of the Abu Ghraib atrocities is the most aestheticized of those released: the Hooded Man. In confirmation of Kaplan's own argument, the aesthetic appeal of the graceful figure in this image gives it the power to evoke an abiding horror. This is not an "exploitative use of aesthetics" (p. 170), but exactly the kind of "unwanted beauty" and painful contradiction that make the suffering it represents haunting and unforgettable.

Despite sometimes treading on shaky ground in the realm of visual art, Kaplan's text tackles a large and ambitious subject that has broad and important implications today.

Notes

[1]. Another recent text is Arthur C. Canto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2003).

[2]. For a sensitive examination of Kiefer's position as a non-Jewish German male born after the war, see Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); on Boltanski, see Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (San Francisco: Stanford University Press, 1998).