the afterlife of holocaust memory in contemporary literature and culture

richard crownshaw

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THE FUTURE OF MEMORY (co-edited with Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland)
The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture

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Preface

As living memories of the Holocaust\(^1\) die out with the generation that witnessed the event, practitioners of cultural memory work have focused on the transmission of memory to the next generations. Recent Holocaust memorialisation, in the form of literature, museums, memorials and monuments, must make Holocaust memory meaningful and memorable for those born after the event. With this in mind, the arts of Holocaust memorialisation often evoke and provoke a sense of what I describe as secondary witnessing and memory: a vicarious form of witnessing, or witnessing by proxy, through the staging of an empathetic identification with Holocaust witnesses and something approximating the remembrance of their experiences from their point of view.

In the academic fields of Holocaust studies and the related fields of memory and trauma studies, the theorisation of such memorial practices is, in many ways, a development of the research on the traumas of the second-generation descendents of Holocaust survivors (see, for example, Fresco, 1984). Theorisation of the cultural creativity of that generation in its attempt to piece together and articulate memories, not its own, of atrocities witnessed but often unremembered by the preceding generation – the narration of ‘absent memory’ (Fine, 1988) or ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch, 1997) – has laid the groundwork for the consideration of a more general cultural transmission of the traumatic memory of things not witnessed. So, for example, Marianne Hirsch (2001, 2008), whose work will be debated in some detail in the proceeding study, has argued that postmemory can be both ‘familial’ (i.e. inherited and inter-generational) and ‘affiliative’ in which the no-less-mediated transmission of memory is not channelled by family, or, for that matter, group belonging (be it ethnic, religious, racial or national). Indeed, and at the risk of simplification, Holocaust memorialisation, across a variety of genres and media and cultural and geographical terrains, has, over the last 20 years or so, moved from the familial to the affiliative, the private to the public, in a centrifugal fashion, with the aim of ensuring that Holocaust memory has an afterlife beyond the second generation. This generalisation or expansion of Holocaust memory can be partly explained by its nationalisation – its politicised elevation to prominence on national stages of remembrance by which current national identities can be underpinned – but also partly by its internationalisation – its distribution by a global
media, its use as a template by which to understand other extreme events of modernity, its political uses in international relations, its continuing use and abuse in identitarian politics that transcend national boundaries, and, perhaps idealistically, the purely ethical intention of remembering the Holocaust’s victims (the political and ideological implications of that intention notwithstanding). Nevertheless no matter the scale of remembrance, no matter how abstract Holocaust memory becomes in form and content, its transmission is more often than not by means of the cultivation of its affectiveness – an affectiveness resonant of a personal and familial identification with the Holocaust’s victims.

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

Eva Hoffman shares Weissman’s concern over the universalisation of the term ‘memory’, which she deems ‘metaphorical shorthand’ for the historical complexity of the events supposedly remembered but in actuality forgotten by commemorative cultures (2004, pp. 155–7). She blames the academic fetishisation of memory for this state of ‘hypermemory’, but she also deploys a standard postmodern reading of a popular cultural scene in which events such as the Holocaust are claimed by those with no direct experience of them as a historical marker in their lives, if not a historical anchor for identificatory purposes, in these supposedly history-less times. Scepticism notwithstanding as to whether we do in fact live in cultures of waning historicity (as Fredric Jameson, perhaps over-emphatically, warned in the early 1990s), the pursuit of historical anchorage further displaces historical understanding, substituting
memory or ‘hypermemory’ for it. In other words, the ‘amnesia’ we set out to correct is compounded (Hoffman, 2004, pp. 158, 167–9, 175). The obsession with memory contributes to the paradoxical sacralisation of the Holocaust and the idealisation of Holocaust survivors who have access to more authentic modes of memory and historical experience. Yet Hoffman also seems to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic, as if the memories of survivors and their descendents are any less mediated than the virtual forms about which she is wary (2004, pp. 158, 175, 178). Nevertheless Hoffman’s call for a move from memory, particularly traumatic memory – the hypermemory of trauma, she argues, locks historical understanding into a reductive fixation on individual experience of sealed off moments of time – to history, or ‘retrospective reflection’ is a call to which the proceeding study is sympathetic (2004, pp. 196–9). Memory studies, and particularly the study of Holocaust traumatic memory, certainly need to be placed in a dialectical relation with history, which it often seems to have subsumed, by which notions of memory can be delimitied. However, cautionary responses to the expansion of memory in theory and practice, such as Weissman’s and Hoffman’s, do not quite seem to recognise the possibility of the cultural transmission of an affective Holocaust memory, be it traumatic or not, outside binarisms of authentic and inauthentic. Nor do they recognise the on-going insistence, in academic discourse and cultures of memory, on the affective transmission of memory. Robert Eaglestone’s *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* provides a related example. Eaglestone’s incisive commentary on the nature of testimonial literature discusses the ways that it aesthetically and rhetorically pre-empts, refuses and evades reading practices that engender over-identification with the experiences of the author (2004, pp. 39–47). Nevertheless such practices prevail in current cultures of memory, despite the identification of potentially resistant strategies, in which authors are the subjects of over-identification and their texts colonised. What is needed is a dialectic between memory and history that, in delimiting the horizons of memory, does not lose sight of the cultural realities of over-identification, nor of the possibilities of the affective transmission of Holocaust memories.

No matter how much memory practitioners and academic theorists insist on the multiple mediations of the transmission of memory – in short, the form of historical representation and the contexts in which representations are produced, disseminated and received or consumed – and no matter how much that insistence points to the self-reflexive nature of this kind of memory – that its mediation points to its own limitations, the unbridgeable gap between past and present, witness and
secondary witness, and to the act of recollection more than to what is recalled – cultures of secondary witnessing and memory have a tendency to lose sight of the historical specificity of acts of memory and what they aim to remember. Post-Holocaust memory work can become appropriative, displacing or colonising the memories of witnesses, replacing their trauma with a kind of equivalent experienced vicariously. Under such memorial regimes, and the theories that inform them, trauma can become universalised and homogenised. The universalisation of trauma expands notions of victimhood, which can now be claimed in the act of secondary remembrance, obscuring the identities of those who remember, not to mention of those remembered, all of which has pronounced ethical and political ramifications. Nevertheless, the affect of Holocaust memory cannot be denied, nor can its cultural transmission, whether that affect is manufactured or inherited. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it would be true to say that the Holocaust is still a matter of memory and not just history. The following will examine a range of memory texts (literary, museal and monumental) as well as critical and theoretical discourses that they have attracted in order to identify the ethical and political implications of the practice and theory of memory where it becomes appropriative and universalising, to reinstall the particularities of memory work and of the identities produced by that work where they have become obscured, and to theorise more robustly how memory may (or may not) be transmitted and how things not directly witnessed may (or may not) be remembered.

This study begins to attend to the question of transmission by laying out general theoretical grounds of its possibility and then by critically surveying versions of Holocaust and related memory and trauma studies that find in representations of the Holocaust the transmission of degrees of traumatic affect. This theoretical groundwork creates a platform for the discussion of the work of W. G. Sebald and its critical reception, the fiction of Bernhard Schlink, the countermonumental architecture of Jochen and Esther-Shalev Gerz, Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman, as well as the theoretical discourses such forms of memory attract, and finally of readings of photography in Holocaust museums in general and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in particular. The work of Sebald is discussed in light of theories of trauma that confuse the traumatic event of the Holocaust and the experience of the text. The argument is made that Sebald’s work might frustrate the expectation of a textual trauma. The idea of a textual trauma is particularly problematic in the context of German cultural memory, as it blurs historical distinctions between perpetrators and victims. Sebald’s
affective and postmemorial narrative of the air wars (the Allied bombing of German cities) is discussed in relation to Holocaust memory to consider the ethics of his entanglement of German victims and the victims of Germany. The theme of victims and perpetrators continues with an investigation of Schlink’s strategic identification with perpetrator identities – a literary intervention in the culture of memory that increasingly identifies with the victims of the Holocaust. Schlink’s fiction is situated in relation to the concept of the grey zone, which in its blurring of boundaries between perpetrator and victim makes the assumption, through acts of memory, of innocent victimhood untenable. An examination of countermonumental architecture follows in which the theorisation of the architecture is scrutinised as much as the forms themselves. What is found problematic is a theorised animation of architectural texts, as if architecture in its disruptive forms can itself remember and witness the Holocaust. Put another way, witnessing the disruptive form of architecture is found akin in such theoretical discourses to the experience of trauma – once again over-extending and confusing the category the victim and witness while also eclipsing the historical specificity of German memorialization and those who perform memory work in such spaces and places. The final chapter discusses the ways that the USHMM nationalises Holocaust memory, but more crucially how theories of memory work performed around particular types of exhibits fail to deliver victim identity from the national narratives that appropriate it. In short, theories of performance are also implicated in colonising victim identity. In conclusion, the present study argues that the theory and practice of Holocaust memory often assumes a Levinasian sense of ethics in its relation to alterity but that the ethics of otherness is belied by a collapse into sameness. For the difference between self and otherness to be reinstalled in the afterlife of Holocaust memory, historical specificity needs to be returned to theorisation of acts of recall and to those who recollect.
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1
Theory after Memory

1.1 From collective to cultural memory

That memories can be shared is fundamental to the formation of cultural memory. Cultural memory is inherently collective. What, though, does sharing really entail? What happens to memory when it is collectivised? Can the collective really claim the memories of the individual? There has been of late a constellation of work around (or at least indebted to) the theories of Maurice Halbwachs that strives to overcome the binary thinking that opposes individual to collective memory. For Halbwachs the ‘past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present’ (1992, p. 40). Memory reconstructs the past via collective frameworks, which are not the collection of individual memories – and so collective after the fact – but the instruments by which images of the past are generated in line with the ‘predominant thoughts’ of the society in each epoch (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). The individual remembers in the group, but the group also remembers in the individual (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). So, ‘no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections’ (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 43). The coherence or at least contiguity of the individuals’ memories is informed by the fact that they are part of the totality of the group’s thoughts (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 52). Despite the particularity of individual experience, the individual’s memorative thoughts on past happenings exclusive to him or her will be, by their very nature, social. Discourses are social and the individual’s participation in the discourses of the group attributes a social significance to past happenings as they are reconstructed within a social frame.
In this way, the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other. It is not necessary that the group be familiar with them. It suffices that we cannot consider them except from the outside – that is, by putting ourselves in the position of others – and that in order to retrieve these remembrances we must tread the same path that others would have followed had they been in our position

(Halbwachs, 1992, p. 53).

Halbwachs’ model of collective remembrance collapses the distinctions between the collective and the individual, or at least makes the boundaries between them permeable. Informed by Halbwachs, Jan Assmann’s and Aleida Assmann’s respective delineations of the relation between individual and collective memory struggle to demarcate the boundaries between the two. For the Assmanns, ‘cultural memory’ is that which bridges the individual and the collective. Cultural memory describes the artefacts (texts, objects and symbols) by which memory is socialised, or, rather, by which memory is further socialised and mobilised. When individual memory, social by nature, is represented artefactually, it has the potential to be unmoored from social groups, and no longer necessarily identifiable with or affiliated to those groups, their values, ideas and temporal horizons. This could be described as a transformation of ‘episodic’ or ‘communicative’ memory into ‘semantic’ memory, from an embodied to disembodied transmission of the past. (Embodied transmission would be, for example, familial and intergenerational; the disembodiment of memory and its materialisation would allow transgenerational transmission, but memory may be re-embodied through participatory rites and rituals organised around the materials of memory – although this is not the same kind of embodied experience found in communicative and episodic memory and its transmission.) The dynamism of cultural memory and its artefacts makes it potentially centrifugal, as well as centripetal, available for wider participation and negotiation as well as instrumental to ‘political’ memory that seeks homogeneity (a ‘unity of consciousness of the past’) rather than heterogeneity (A. Assmann, 2004, pp. 22–36; 2006, pp. 211–23; 2008, pp. 51–6; J. Assmann, 1995, pp. 127–32). For Ann Rigney (2000, pp. 11–28; 2004, pp. 361–96), no matter the political instrumentality of remembrance, ‘cultural memory’ foregrounds the construction of the past via the distribution and reception of memorative materials. The concept of ‘collective’ suggests a homogenisation of memory that does not reflect the pluralism of society and its relation to the past, ascribing an essence to memory
that does not exist. The circulation of cultural memory does not just
describe fixed orbits or trajectories of the materials of memory. If that
were so, then cultural memory would describe crystallisations or concre-
tions of the past: the hypostatisation of memory. As Alon Confino and
Peter Fritzsche (2002, pp. 1–24) argue, memory is a process ‘embedded
in social networks’ rather than solely and statically in institutions, sites,
of the continued and self-reflexive objectification of the past, adaptive
to cultural, social and historical change, Rigney deploys a more specifi-
cally Foucauldian model of cultural scarcity. Culture reproduces itself by
selecting and deselecting utterances from the available repertoire, by
recycling, reproducing, revising them according to the needs of the
present moment. So, the materials of memory must be subject to a con-
tinual symbolic investment for them to retain their memorative value,
and their form may not always be appropriate to the events remembered
or how they should be remembered, potentially leading to their modi-

ification, convergence with other materials and media of memory, or
de-selection in favour of alternatives from the archive of latent cultural
objects awaiting significant and symbolically invested circulation. The
same could be said of cultural memory, reproduced by an economy or
working and archival memory, to use Assmann’s terms (Rigney, 2000,

Where ‘collective memory’ might imply some kind of shared essence,
‘cultural memory’ foregrounds the cultural means of its transmission,
thereby overcoming sceptical versions of memory studies that, in their
construction of binary oppositions between the collective and individual,
are wary, and rightly so, of mapping individual psychological processes
onto cultural scenarios to explain collective participation in individual
experiences. ‘Cultural memory is’, argues Rigney, ‘always vicarious in the
sense that it involves memories of other people’s lives that have been
mediated by texts and images: inherited’ (2004, p. 367). Sceptical of col-
lective psychological models, Wulf Kansteiner concedes that ‘Collective
memories’ [by which he means cultural memory] originate from shared
communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the
life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respec-
tive collective. As such, collective memories are based in a society and its
inventory of signs and symbols’ (2002, p. 188). Kansteiner’s emphasis on
the reception of cultural memory further illuminates its vicariousness by
arguing the exceptions prove the rule (the potential that is not always
realised). As Kansteiner reminds us, the objects of memory, no matter
the intentions that motivate their cultural circulation – the intentions of
the discourses and institutions of the public sphere that authorise their meaningful dissemination, as well as the intentions of the makers of those objects – may not be received as memoratively pertinent or significant. The focus of memory studies, for Kansteiner, should be on the hermeneutical triangle of object, maker and consumer (2002, p. 197).

1.2 Cultural trauma

The above models of memory, implicitly and explicitly informed or inspired by Halbwachs, suggest the voluntary production, dissemination and reception of cultural memory. What, though, of the dissemination of traumatic memory, the transmission and transference of affect? In orthodox definitions, trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation. However, not only have recent studies of trauma (Luckhurst, 2008) found that trauma compels rather than impedes narrative, there is a logic in canonical studies that, as the following argues, suggests trauma as a pure, unmediated form of memory. If we were to entertain the notion of cultural trauma, how could it be envisaged without over-extending psychoanalytical categories that would too easily bridge ‘diverse cultural phenomena’ (Radstone, 2008, p. 35) or that, for Andreas Huyssen, articulate ‘Freudian phylogenetic fantasies’ that render all of modernity traumatic and all moderns as victims, condemning victimised groups to a repetitive cycle of victimhood (2003, pp. 8–9). The emergence of trauma studies as an academic discipline in the 1990s has been largely credited to the work of Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), but of late a critical consensus has gathered around their work charging it with the universalisation of trauma. The following will provide examples of this canonical version of trauma studies and of the critique it has attracted, in order to lay the groundwork for how the transmission of cultural trauma may be envisaged otherwise.

The following will mostly concentrate on critiques of Felman’s and Caruth’s conception of the performative nature of language as a conduit for traumatic affect. To understand how trauma might inhere in language, the temporality of trauma, according to Caruth, must be understood. For Caruth the American Psychiatric Association’s recognition and diagnosis of traumatic experience and its effects under the title of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was the culmination of a long history of the relation between psychiatry and trauma, where trauma can be generally defined as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled
repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’ (1996, p. 11). For Caruth, the pathological reaction to the event is not defined by the nature of the event itself, because its traumatisation of witnesses will vary. Nor can the pathological reaction be accounted for in terms of its distortion by the personal significances attached to it by witnesses (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). As Caruth argues:

The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it .... Thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted simply as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of an unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what was once lived. (Caruth, 1995a, pp. 4–5)

Instead, ‘the returning traumatic dream [or other intrusive responses] ... is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits’ (Caruth, 1995a, p. 5). Caruth continues, ‘It is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event’ (1995a, p. 5). So, the event cannot be known when witnessed and cannot be known upon its insistent return (see also Caruth, 1996, pp. 60–2). To emphasise, it is not the event itself that returns in the dream, flashback, hallucination, or other form of intrusive and repetitive behaviour, but rather the failure to process the event. Repetition is the attempt to master what was missed first time round. It is the literality of the event in its missed occurrence and missed return that makes it inassimilable, resistant to symbolisation, beyond representation, and it is its non-symbolic nature that maintains its literalness. As Caruth puts it elsewhere, in relation to Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, ‘In trauma ... the outside has gone inside without any mediation’ (1996, p. 59).

The inherent latency of the event – experienced neither in its initial occurrence nor (non)return – guarantees the unconscious as a blank space: ‘If repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness – the space of unconsciousness – is paradoxically what preserves the event in its literalness’ (Caruth, 1995a, p. 8). Evacuated as such, the unconscious is positioned as a vehicle for trauma. This also means that the witness is devoid of potential interpretive agency and has become the mere carrier of trauma – a trauma
that has now become curiously insulated from its witness. However, if trauma is, by this definition, that which defies its own witnessing, then the trauma has also been dislocated from its historical origins in the (impossible-to-witness) event itself. Trauma constitutes a departure from its own site (of non-origin) – a departure that is reiterated by trauma’s insistent (non)return. What then becomes of the witness? A crisis of witnessing engendered by trauma, which calls the origins of historical (empirical) knowledge into question, demands of history a new kind of witnessing: ‘the witnessing, precisely, of impossibility’ (Caruth, 1995a, p. 10).

For Ruth Leys, the literalness of trauma adds a linearity to the temporality of trauma that was not there in the first place. For Caruth, the traumatic event is experienced outside of time, because of its overwhelming nature and the witnesses’ unpreparedness for it, and therefore as missing experience and un-locatable in time. ‘But when she (Caruth) goes on to define repetition in terms of the belated, literal, and unmediated return of the traumatic event she seems to define trauma in more traditional causal terms, as if trauma involved a linear determinism, or direct action of the past on the present’ (Leys, 2000, p. 271). This action attributes causal origins to trauma by which Caruth contradicts the first stage of her own conception. Contrary to Caruth, Leys provides a different reading of Freud’s Nachträglichkeit, or belatedness, in which the past is ‘determined as traumatic by a retroactive conferral of meaning’ (Leys, 2000, p. 271).

Susannah Radstone’s more general critique of trauma studies argues that this linearity results from trauma studies’ emphasis on dissociation, which entails ‘the closing-down of the traumatised mind’s capacity for association’. The result is that ‘fantasy’s imbrication with psychic life and the agency of psychical mediation has been sidelined’. The psychoanalysis that informs this trauma theory is, argues Radstone, moving away from the depth model of psychic life that is structured in terms of ‘surface’ consciousness and ‘subterranean’ unconscious. At the centre of this depth model is the understanding that ‘fantasy is the motor of psychical life and subjective meaning’ (Radstone, 2001a, pp. 188–93). The dominant version of trauma studies sees fantasy as inadmissible. For both academic and popular concerns, the belief that the traumatic event can be recovered from memory (intact and unmediated) is fundamental. From the initial recognition of PTSD in Vietnam veterans to the debates over recovered memories of childhood abuse in the US in the 1990s, political movements and legal action (and what might be described as the emergence of a victim culture) have been predicated on the perceived unmediated nature of the remembered
event (Radstone, 2000, p. 88; see also Seltzer, 1997, pp. 3–26; Ball, 2000, pp. 1–44; Luckhurst, 2003, pp. 28–47). To put it another way: fantasy would make memory inadmissible in terms of legal evidence or as the basis of an identitarian politics of memory.

At stake in the opposition between association and dissociation and the two versions of trauma is the role of agency. ‘What trauma theory excises … is [the] insistence on the agency of the unconscious in the formation of memories (Radstone, 2000, p. 89). Devoid of agency, the victim of trauma is reduced to passivity, and absolute innocence in the face of active, agentic and absolutely evil perpetrators. Leys adds to this point that the unmediated impact of the event and its literal return means that the witness is bereft of interpretive agency (2000, pp. 271–2). Caruth’s choice of belatedness over repression models the unconscious as a voided space for the retention of the event. Traumatic response is not defined in terms of ‘repressed motives, disguised representations, and unconscious symbolic meanings … On this interpretation, traumatic dreams [and other responses] are not autobiographically or subjectively mediated or owned by the individual; rather, the “self” – which can hardly be characterised as self any longer – is possessed by the traumatic dream, which thus bypasses all representation by impersonally memorializing and chronicling the historical truth of the traumatic origin’ (Radstone, 2000, p. 272; see also Radstone, 2001a, p. 191). If the chronicling of trauma is impersonal – if trauma insists on departing from a self that was not substantive enough to retain it – then this facilitates trauma’s transmission from the individual to the collective and into the culture at large.

With the witness nullified, the burden of witnessing is passed to those who listen to the witness’s testimony: ‘To listen to the crisis of a trauma, that is, is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in testimony the survivor’s departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is how to listen to departure’ (Caruth, 1995a, p. 10). Just as trauma no longer resides in the event, so the identity of the survivor no longer resides in the witness. The trajectory of trauma could not take place without those who listen: ‘passing out of the isolation imposed by the event … the history of a trauma, in its belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another’ (Caruth, 1995a, p. 11). In other words, addressing beyond (or no longer isolated by) the historical specificity of the event and its witness, trauma travels culturally:

The meaning of the trauma’s address beyond itself concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures…. [for example]
more generally in the survivors of the catastrophes of one culture addressing the survivors of another. This speaking and this listening – a speaking and a listening from the site of trauma – does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves.

(Caruth, 1995a, p. 11)

If the traumatic event cannot be known in its own right, then it makes sense that it resonates in another: ‘The traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others’ (Caruth, 1996, p. 18; 1995a, pp. 8–9). Furthermore, if the traumatic event cannot be known then it engenders through its insistent return a compulsive and repetitive acting out rather than working through: the ‘endless inherent necessity of repetition’ brought about by the survival of trauma might well lead to the ‘formation of history as the endless repetition of previous violence (Caruth, 1996, p. 63). However, Caruth’s model of transcultural trauma suggests something else. Our ability to listen to the trauma of others depends on ‘what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts’. That ability, though, despite its grounding ‘within the traumas of contemporary history’, is enabled by ‘our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves’ (emphasis added). Irrespective of ‘our’ differing historical experiences, or lack of them, Caruth points to a trauma common to us all, which surely must exceed history to be so widespread. So, the implication here is not just that all of modernity is traumatic, affecting all modern subjects to some degree, but that our receptiveness to trauma is based not on historical experience, whether we are cognisant of it or not, but on an ahistorical structural trauma (a lack) at the core of our identity that resonates in the historically specific events of this ‘catastrophic age’. In other words, there is a confusion of structural and historical trauma. It is that commonality that facilitates trauma’s departure from specific, historical events and acts of witnessing and an arrival in a cultural memory of events not witnessed directly, making us all survivors, and turning history into a memory in which we can all participate (Caruth, 1996, p. 67; see also Leys, 2000, p. 285).

Trauma, then, is contagious, because it is culturally endogenous and un-locatable in or uncontainable by witness and event, and forever departing. Contagious, it spreads via language. If trauma demands of
history a new kind of witnessing ‘of impossibility’, if trauma has been
disarticulated from event and its witness, and if trauma resonates tran-
sculturally and transhistorically within the very structures of our being,
then that new kind of witnessing does not describe the witness, but the
witness to the witness, and entails ‘the possibility for transmission’
or ‘the traumatisation of the ones who listen’ (Caruth, 1995a, p. 10).
The force of trauma is felt in testimony and testimonial language and
literature, so that witnessing is constituted by listening to another or
reading a text. For example, Caruth finds in the aporias that she dis-
cerns in and between Freud’s explanatory and prefatory notes to Moses
and Monotheism not only the traumatic ramifications or repetitions of
Jewish historical experience, the inception of which is Mosaic, but also
a repetition, beyond representation, of Freud’s departure from Vienna
in 1938 under threat of Nazi persecution. So, it is the threat of Nazism
and an unfolding Holocaust, and its resonance in a longer Jewish history
of trauma, that is (un)registered in the aporias of literary language. In
which case, as Leys puts it, any representational space or gap is capa-
bale of registering trauma (2000, p. 290). Amy Hungerford develops the
logic of Caruth’s argument further: language and traumatic experience
become the same thing. Language’s inherent failure of reference – its
falling impact – turns it into a site of trauma (Hungerford, 2001, pp. 81–3).
(As Kansteiner puts it somewhat more simply, ‘Just because trauma is
inevitably a problem of representation in memory and communication
does not imply the reverse, i.e. that problems of representation are always
partaking in the traumatic’ (2004, p. 205).) Historical trauma is reduced
to a textual trace, and textual trauma supersedes history. So, Moses and
Monotheism is marked by Freud’s departure from Austria for England in
1938, but the site of trauma is the text itself. Literary language as such is
able to transmit trauma from one person to another because it has been
severed from any prior relationship between (direct) witness to historical
trauma and his or her testimony. Leys concurs: ‘By cutting experience
free form the subject of experience, Caruth allows trauma not only to
be abstract in the extreme but also, by virtue of that abstraction, to be
transmissible (2000, p. 297). If the text is traumatic and the contagion
of trauma extends to the act of reading, then trauma has the potential
to victimise all who are affected by the language of trauma, universalis-
ing the category of victim and thereby confusing distinctions between
victim and perpetrator (Leys, 2000, p. 297).
Dominick LaCapra would describe that kind of universalised trauma
as ‘structural’ or ‘transhistorical’, a structural absence as opposed to
historical loss that is nonetheless attributed to an historical event
and sacralised as a foundational experience or basis for identity. For LaCapra, this is not simply a case of over-identification with the witness to historical trauma, but also an attempt to narrativise an absence at the core of our being, to make it palpable, historical. So, transhistorical or structural trauma when confused with historical loss leads to an undifferentiated sense of trauma and of traumatised victims – trauma is a universal condition – which in turn distorts the transmission of trauma because the so-called traumatisation can now be achieved by experiencing the right kind of representation (or structure of trauma). Indeed, LaCapra finds in the work of Caruth the near confusion of absence and loss. Caruth’s insistence on the preservation of the event’s incomprehensibility is sustained not just out of fidelity to the witness’s difficulty in understanding and testifying to his or her experiences, but also out of a fidelity to the conditions of knowledge itself. Working through would be an “affront to understanding” itself. There is no distinction between knowledge of a particular historical event and knowledge in general – both are incomplete’ (LaCapra, 2004, pp. 115–27).

Felman and Laub’s conception of testimony – in Felman’s words, the ‘literary – or discursive – mode par excellence of our times’ (1992) – develops the idea that trauma can be conveyed by language. Felman and Laub deal with more concrete historical contexts of trauma than Caruth and invest in the therapeutic sense of working through trauma rather than in its endless repetitions (Hungerford, 2001, p. 82; Leys, 2000, p. 269). However, continuity can be found in particular in Felman’s tendency of over-extending the category of testimony. Felman (1992, p. 5) defines testimony thus: ‘As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.’ The event does not just exceed but undoes the very form and concept of representation: testimony cannot possess or master itself enough to deliver a ‘conclusion’ or ‘verdict’ on the event, failing to render itself transparent to knowledge; testimony cannot reify concepts by which to understand and frame the past (Felman, 1992, p.5).

Examples of Felman’s over-extension of testimony that have gained a certain notoriety in criticism, but are still worth mentioning here by way of critical illustration, include Felman’s commentary on the so-called testimonial response of her graduate class at Yale after a viewing of videoed testimonies of Holocaust survivors from the Fortunoff Archive. In her account of the class, Felman quotes her address to the distressed
class whose members had difficulty in articulating their response to the videotape. As Felman said at the time, ‘the event of your viewing ... was not unlike Celan's own Holocaust experience, something akin to a loss of language’ in which 'language was ... incommensurate' with the experience of viewing – an experience of the suspension of knowledge. It is 'this loss Celan precisely talks about'. Nevertheless all that remains of the event is language, which, as in Celan’s ‘Bremen Speech’, must ‘pass through its own answerlessness’ (Felman, 1992, p. 51). More precisely, all that remains is testimony: in this case, the class’s verbal and written response to Felman’s course. In relation to the videotaped testimonies of the Fortunoff archive, Felman argues that historical ‘knowledge does not exist, it can only happen through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it. It can only unfold in the process of testifying, but it can never become a substance that can be possessed by either speaker or listener, outside of this dialogic process’ (1992, p. 51). If the force of trauma is felt in language, then all linguistic responses to trauma, no matter how distanced from the historical origins of that trauma, are testimonial. So, the class’s written and verbal response to watching testimony is testimonial and so bodies forth or rather enacts a traumatic knowledge and its elusiveness, and Felman’s response to the class is testimonial and traumatised (1992, pp. 51–5).

Where Felman focuses on a chain of testimonies and witnesses in the pedagogical scenario outlined above, in her reading of Lanzmann’s Shoah, the documentary itself ‘embodies the capacity of art not simply to witness, but to take the witness stand’ (Felman, 1992b, p. 208). The problem, though, with Felman’s conception of trauma, and particularly trauma’s transmission, is that it collapses this distinction through the way that trauma texts ‘take on particular characteristics we ordinarily assign exclusively to persons’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 78). Felman’s reading of Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah is a case in point. When Lanzmann takes survivor Simon Srebnik back to the site of Chelmno, Felman claims that ‘Srebnik in effect is returning from the dead (from his own deadness)’ and that ‘Srebnik’s return from the dead personifies ... a historically performative and retroactive return of witnessing to the witnessless historical primal scene’ (1992b, p. 258). The ‘collapse of persons and representations’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 78) in this reading is ironic, given Felman’s identification of the performative nature of Srebnik’s return (as in its staging by Lanzmann and that staging’s provocation of traumatic memory). Nevertheless Srebnik’s ‘retroactive’ witnessing of events that were beyond his witnessing the first time round suggests that Lanzmann’s film is not the representation of witnessing but witnessing itself: ‘the
embodiment (rather than representation) of the kind of experience – of “life” that only persons can be said to have’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 78).

As Hungerford argues, that language or representation can embody rather than represent the force of trauma reveals a certain irony about the deconstructionist origins of much trauma theory. The very rejection of language as representational by deconstructionism gives way to a kind of sacralisation of language as not a representation of trauma but the trauma itself in terms of language’s embodiment or performance of trauma’s disruptions (Hungerford, 2001, p. 80; see also Ball, 2000, pp. 1–44; Douglass and Vogler, 2003, p. 5). As in Caruth’s version of trauma, this positioning of trauma shifts the focus of Holocaust studies away from the survivors’ acts of survival in the camps to their acts of witnessing, in which anyone, potentially, can participate. The implications of that deconstructive shift from language as representation to language as performance – apparent in the idea that survivors can be produced on the basis of trauma that is experienced by being read – suggests that Felman’s evident concern with the actual violence experienced in the Holocaust may be unnecessary to trauma theory at its most abstract level’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 80). The logic of Felman’s argument about the participatory nature of trauma is that the direct experience of the camps is exemplary (in the extreme but exemplary nonetheless) rather than unique in that it illuminates a crisis of language and identity at the ‘very core of our common life’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 80). So rather like Caruth’s version of trauma, as the contagion of trauma spreads throughout the language community, it is language that constitutes a series of traumatised identities – and the experience of traumatic events in history merely exemplifies a trauma that has already been felt at the core of identity.

1.3 ‘Bare life’

It is perhaps in the work of Giorgio Agamben that the universalisation of Holocaust trauma reaches its apogee. Continuities with the logic of Caruth’s and Felman’s work are apparent, but Agamben extends the category of witnessing and survival to the experience of subjectivity itself. The traumatised victim is an everyman under the power of modern sovereignty. Sovereign power is not experienced through a simple division of ‘bare’ and political life, as if the source of that power automatically inheres in bare life (as if bare life can simply be found). Rather bare life has to be produced or included to be excluded. Sovereign power is exercised through an inclusive exclusion: ‘The inclusion of bare life
in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. It can be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power’ (Agamben, 1998, pp. 6–7). Bare life is the residue of all subjectivity, from which subjectivity separates itself, in another inclusive exclusion. While the inclusive exclusion of bare life is ancient and the means by which a political life or community is possible, modernity is characterised by a politics that is focused on those on its margins and by the emphatic production of biopolitical life there (Agamben, 1998, p. 9). Biopolitics is fundamental to the birth of the democratic nation state and its citizenry, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. The very notion of the inalienable rights of man institutes a biopolitical core to identity, which is fundamental to the state – the state becomes steward of biological life – and through which sovereign power is exercised, binding citizen and nation. (The citizen is subject and object of the state.) The inalienability of the citizen materialises in the residue of natural or bare life – ‘because democracy demands that objects be subjects in the face of sovereign power, because the democratisation of the subject necessitates an isolation of bare life in that subject – and democracy compels law to assume care of this body’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 124). Given this institution of bare life, the difference between totalitarianism and democracy is matter of degree – it depends what is done with that bare life – and democracies can slip easily into their counterpart (Agamben, 1998, p. 122). The political mobilisation of bare life is found everywhere: in the realisation of the French Revolution, in the Nazi regime’s racial politics and consequent denaturalisation of Jewish citizenry that concludes with Auschwitz; in the medical experiments on American prisoners before 1939; in definitions of brain death at the end of the twentieth century; the refugee crisis at the end of this century; and ethnic cleansing and rape camps in the former Yugoslavia (Agamben, 1998, pp. 128, 131, 142–50, 155–9, 160–5, 176).

The production of bare life from a universal, biopolitical potential is brought about by the state of exception, itself another inclusive exclusion or ‘zone of indistinction’. The sovereign power’s suspension of law, which allows the emergence of bare from political life hitherto protected, is a legal act. In other words, the sovereign power places itself outside the law legally (Agamben, 1998, p. 15). The law is situational rather than transcendent in that the sovereign’s power creates the situation in which it is valid or invalid, or rather the sovereign power creates the situation in which the law’s validity is determined and whether or not law can be suspended; the law cannot be used to judge a situation. As the law is situational, its exception proves the rule: it has within it
its own suspension (depending on the situation); it includes its own exclusion (Agamben, 1998, pp. 17–19, 21). Unable to stand outside the situation in which it is suspended, the law generates rather than judges the situation and therefore inherently repeats its own transgression: ‘Law is made of nothing but what it manages to capture inside itself through the inclusive exclusion of the exceptio: it nourishes itself on this exception and is a dead letter without it’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 27). To be abandoned by law is not then to be placed outside of it but to be placed in a zone of indistinction – subject to a sovereign ban (Agamben, 1998, pp. 28, 83). The indistinction of the law does not preclude the localisation of its effects, materialised, for example, in the concentration and death camp.

While it is hard to deny the political urgency of Agamben’s concerns, given the political potential of modernity, especially when he identifies flaws in the supposed antidote to the politicisation of bare life. The foundations of democracy – the inalienable rights of man – are the bases of sovereign power and its states of exception that prove the rule, against which democracy was supposed to protect the citizen. Where democracies break down, humanitarian politics mobilised in zones of exception re-isolate bare life by reclaiming natural or inalienable rights, thereby reinscribing sovereign power and its potential of excesses (or exception) (Agamben, 1998, p. 134). However, there is a universalising tendency in Agamben’s version of modern political life. Admittedly, biopolitical life and the regimes that govern it have to be constantly reproduced:

Once it crosses over the walls of the oikos and penetrates more and more deeply into the city, the foundation of sovereignty – non political life – is immediately transformed into a line that must be constantly redrawn. Once the zoe is politicised by declarations of rights, the distinctions and thresholds that make it possible to isolate a sacred life must be newly defined. And when natural life is wholly included in the polis – and this much has by now already happened – these thresholds pass, as we will see, beyond the dark boundaries separating life from death in order to identify a new living dead man, a new sacred man.

(Agamben, 1998, p. 131)

That reproduction, though, is potentially infinite, in the way that the law generates or repeats its own transgressions/suspensions. The state of exception unfolds across different histories and cultures reproducing
a kind of serialised bare life. As LaCapra (2004, pp. 166, 177–8) argues, the complex continuities and discontinuities between bare life, states of exception and sovereign power are elided in this transhistorical formula, and their internal differences are smothered. Or, rather, sovereign power transcends and totally organises from above these components (states of exception and subjects) in a way that seems at odds with the Foucauldian conception of disseminated power that informs Agamben’s theory: ‘In modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or nonvalue of life as such. Life – which, with the declarations of rights, had as such been invested with the principle of sovereignty – now itself becomes the place of a sovereign decision’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 142). The actual act of genocide – the mass murder of those abandoned by law and stripped to their bare life – is dependent on myriad cultural, social, historical enabling conditions in and across the locations of killing that have receded behind the transcendence of the Fuhrer (in Agamben’s argument): ‘The Fuhrer represents precisely life itself insofar as it is he who decides on life’s very biopolitical consistency’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 142).

Agamben concludes that bare life is fundamental to democracy and the nation state, to the very concept of citizenship – it has ‘moved inside every human life and every citizen. Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being’ (1998, p. 139) – and therefore totalitarianism is everywhere or rather the location of bare life is everywhere, and we must ‘regard the camp not as historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past (even if still verifiable) but in some way as the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living’ (1998, p. 166). In other words, the camp is everywhere where the modern nation state is, signalling ‘the political state of modernity itself’, its nexus of ‘land’, ‘state’ and the ‘inscription of life (birth or the nation)’ by which the State stewards the ‘nation’s biological health’ born into the nation: ‘The camp as dislocating localisation is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognise in all its metamorphoses into the zones d’attentes or our airports and certain outskirts of cities’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 175).

Agamben’s universalisation of the camp entails a universalisation of the Holocaust’s witness as the exemplar of the modern subject. Following Primo Levi, Agamben argues that the ‘true’ witnesses of the camps in general and Auschwitz in particular are the ‘muselmänner’, the drowned, those who could not bear witness. The muselmänner, produced by the state of exception, is bare or naked life revealed, in whom another indistinction can be located, that of human and inhuman
(Agamben, 1999, p. 47). Reduced as such, the muselmänner experience the experience of dying (an infinite exhaustion of life) on their way to death: an ‘infinite potentiality to suffer that is the mark of the inhuman’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 77). Dying in life and living in death, the muselmänner become the ‘cipher’ of Auschwitz, a location of the biopolitical regime operated by the modern sovereign power whose decisions of life and death (which subjects live, which die) coincide as living death in the camps (Agamben, 1999, pp. 78–9, 82–3). Those who survive in place of the muselmänner bear witness and give testimony to the impossibility of witnessing embodied by the latter (Agamben, 1999, p. 34). This is a ‘disjunction of two impossibilities of bearing witness’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 39): the impossibility of bearing witness for those who could not witness the experiences that consumed them (Agamben, 1999, p. 55).

However, as LaCapra would argue, this is a ‘homogeneous’ view of Auschwitz, in which the emergence of the muselmänner (as opposed to their immanence to the regime of Auschwitz and elsewhere) is not thoroughly considered. The perpetrators’ role (particularly members of the SS) in the shaping of muselmänner is not thought through; the location of the muselmänner in the camps’ ethical grey zone, in which they are implicated in the system of their own and others’ objectification, is not mapped out. Paradoxically Agamben’s study ends with muselmänner testimonies, which begs the questions of how, if we are to honour their status as impossible witnesses, we should regard those testimonies except as sacred and beyond interpretation, and how they gained the subjectivity and agency to testify – a transformational process not accommodated by Agamben’s argument. Unmoored from historical specificity, in a theory that subsumes history, the muselmann becomes a transhistorical figure – even a ‘spectre of the sublime’ (LaCapra, 2004, pp. 162, 164, 175–6, 159).

The despecification of the muselmänner continues in the testimonies that arise in their place. In order to register this impossibility of witnessing, testimonial language must give way to a ‘non language’ in which testimonial language can be found (Agamben, 1999, p. 39). The ability to testify is informed by a universal condition: the ability to experience shame. In a modification of Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of shame, Agamben characterises shame as the inability to flee ourselves at the moment of our defacement. We are ordered to be present at our own ruin, but that command is intimate, it comes from within ourselves – we are expropriated by ourselves. In shame, the subject has no content but its own disorder, oblivion and desubjectification. Shame is not then an
‘emotive tonality, but the condition of Being (Agamben, 1999, p. 106). Like the operations of sovereign power in which the subject is both subject and object, shame produces one’s self-sovereignty at the expense of self-objectification. The residue or remnant of this double movement is the self, or, rather, ‘desubjectification bears witness to a self’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 107). Similarly the muselmänn’s desubjectification bore witness to a self, to subjectivity and to activity as opposed to passivity and therefore to a potential of witnessing foreclosed by murder (Agamben, 1999, pp. 111–12). Although Agamben grants potential agency to the muselmänner, the problem here is that the double movement of subjectification and desubjectification is universal, meaning that not only can the saved, the survivors, stand in the place of the muselmänner (on the basis of a structural similarity rather than experiential and historical proximity), anyone can – on that structural basis.

The universalisation of the muselmänn is more apparent in testimony and language. As linguistic signs have no inherent meaning, they need to be appropriated so that they can be related to a meaningful set of ideas (discourse). Their appropriation, which allows the phrasing of a discourse, is by an enunciative subject, who, already immersed in language, is able to shift language from sign to phrase to discourse. That immersion, though, strips the subject of extra-linguistic reference – signs have no inherent meaning – as the subject identifies with a purely linguistic entity, or ‘shifter’ such as ‘I’. Immersion in language, though, reveals not the possibility of speaking but its impossibility. The subject has been ‘anticipated by a glossolalic potentiality over which he has neither control nor mastery’. (The subject cannot control the meaning of his or her utterances, which will always be interpreted differently; and the subject cannot stand both inside and outside of language to control his or her relation to it.) The subject is defined by an empty and pure relation to the event of discourse, through which he cannot speak, because of the ultimately indeterminate nature of language and because of the subject’s inability to transcend language. Put another way, the ‘impossibility of speaking comes to speech through the subject’. Entry into language is a process of subjectification (the articulation of self) that reveals a process of desubjectification (the disarticulation of self) in the contradictory nature of the statement ‘I speak’ (Agamben, 1999, pp. 116–17). To enter into language is to bear witness to one’s own desubjectification and (im)possibility of testifying to that movement.

The ‘I’ is the means by which discourse can enter the world; it becomes the centre of a mediated worldly experience and the experience
of the world in time. That experience though is one of fluctuation, as present experiences become past. So, the experiencing self is incessantly unmade and made in relation to the temporality of experience in which the self is (de)constituted in the world. However, the experience of temporality, and of loss, gives way to a transhistorical trauma: ‘subjectification, the production of consciousness in the event of discourse, is often a trauma of which human beings are not easily cured; this is why the fragile text of consciousness incessantly crumbles and erases itself, bringing to light the disjunction on which it is erected: the constitutive desubjectification in every subjectification’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 123).

So, shame is the ‘hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 128) – a desubjectification from which subjectification arises. Entry into language means desubjectification, but it is the means to (im)possibly speak of one’s (im)possible subjectivity – to (im)possibly speak of oneself. Just as the survivor is structurally similar to the muselmann, so his language enacts a desubjectification that both have experienced. Language, though, is universally desubjectifying, rendering all language testimonial, especially if the experience of world in language is a traumatic experience of loss of world. (There is no sense here of how the Holocaust witness can maintain interpretive agency in testimonial language with which he or she will never coincide.) Language never coincides with the one who enunciates (Agamben, 1999, pp. 145–6, 129–31). Language, then, is testimony to one’s survival of one’s self: in ‘human beings, life bears with it a caesura that can transform all life into survival and all survival into life’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 133; see also Leys, 2007, p. 169). In this conflationary and dehistoricising scheme, the muselmann, universalised, exemplifies the human condition (LaCapra, 2004, p. 180), and the aporia of language precedes and predetermines the aporia of Auschwitz, which, again, exemplifies a universal structural trauma (Leys, 2007, p. 168).

1.4 Recent theoretical orthodoxies

The logic of these canonical versions of trauma can be felt in more recent attempts to theorise cultural trauma. Joshua Hirsch explores the possibility of a cultural trauma in terms of ‘posttraumatic cinema’ that attempts to ‘repeat formally the traumatic structure of experience of witnessing the events themselves’, inducing a ‘posttraumatic historical consciousness’. The problem is that Hirsch’s prefix ‘post’ does not prevent the logic of his argument from conflating the trauma of the witness and that
of the spectator, despite the emphasis on empirical criteria for and
evidence of trauma. As the following argues, Hirsch reinscribes some-
thing like the universalisation of trauma he finds in post-structuralist
theory. The problem is that the criteria for and evidence of trauma often
relates to how affective Hirsch himself finds particular films, the reactions
to which are framed by very general clinical research on non-Holocaust
‘stress’ films and non-Holocaust clinical psychoanalytical scenarios. On
the one hand, Hirsch argues that trauma is never unmediated – the
ideological and political conditions of the production of cultural (in
this case, filmic) narratives determines the extent to which it is denied,
repeated and processed – and that what is deemed traumatic can only
ever be of cultural determination. On the other hand, Hirsch suggests
that trauma institutes a pure event from within that cultural mediation
(very much akin to Caruth’s theory): ‘the impression remains in the mind
intact and unassimilated’, resisting ‘coherent mental representation’. This
sounds like what Hirsch would describe as the ‘exogenous’ trauma of post-
structuralism against which his enquiry is positioned (J. Hirsch, 2006,
pp. xi, 3, 10, 15, 15–17). Turning, though, to empiricism to overcome
this universalisation, the theoretical premise for Hirsch’s specification of
trauma provides a rather thin basis for his extrapolation.

Hirsch provides a springboard for a discussion of trauma in relation
to the (formally and content-wise) very different Holocaust films that
he discusses (see J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 168 n41 for Hirsch’s list of sources,
in which Mardi Jon Horowitz is prominent). Hirsch also draws on
research on transference between analysand and analyst to launch his
argument:

According to one report, a therapist treating a Vietnam veteran expe-
rienced a posttraumatic flashback of one of her client’s memories as
if it were her own. The question is whether, if vicarious trauma can
result from prolonged contact with a traumatised person [in an
analytical situation], it can also result from a single exposure to a
filmed representation, which, as an indexical sign, affords an experi-
ence closer to eyewitnessing.

(J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 17)3

The difficulty in answering this question is that Hirsch ponders the
impact of ‘atrocity’ films in constructing this theoretical framework, yet
many of the films he analyses cannot be strictly described as such in
terms of their content. In fact, as we shall see, the very concept of filmic,
vicarious trauma that Hirsch develops is dependent on the formal aspects
of film, their disrupted and disruptive narrative structure as much as on their denotative (and not always atrocious) content. However it seems as if Hirsch wants it both ways. While he argues that watching a stressful film is different from ‘direct trauma’, because watching a film is existentially different from directly participating in a traumatic event, the effects of watching ‘may include a number of the symptoms of PTSD’ (J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 17). The empirical evidence for these effects (or affect) is rather hypothetical, or anecdotal, subjective, un referenced and syllogistic to say the least: ‘Much of my anecdotal evidence for vicarious trauma induced by viewing atrocity films relates to Night and Fog. It includes my own childhood memory of seeing the film at my synagogue; numerous similar stories told to me by acquaintances; numerous brief references in a variety of published sources; and even a representation in another film: Margarite von Trotta’s Marianne and Juliane (1981). In the 1999 film 8mm, the protagonist could be interpreted as suffering from vicarious trauma induced by the viewing of a snuff film’ (J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 168 n44). In this problematic (footnoted) passage, the theorisation of vicariousness is weakest when empirical evidence for vicarious traumatisation caused by watching atrocity or stress films is drawn from the contents of a fiction film in which a character is traumatised by watching a snuff film.

The affectiveness of film is produced in what Hirsch describes as the ‘discourse of trauma’. Rather like Marianne Hirsch’s ‘postmemory’, discursive trauma is not claimed as an identity position (a vicarious traumatic experience) in relation to the particular experiences of a witness, nor does it seek to represent those experiences literally. Rather, it seeks, in the staking out, in the languages of various media, ... a discursive space pertinent to all these experiences. One may be traumatised by an encounter with the Holocaust, one may be unable to assimilate a memory or an image of atrocity, but the discourse of trauma – as one encounters it in conversation, in reading, in film – gives one a language with which to begin to represent the failure of representation that one has experienced.

(J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 18)

The temporal distance invoked by the prefix of ‘post’, and the spatial distance evoked by Hirsch’s cultural staging of trauma in a different ontology to witness’s experiences, collapses in his definition in which there is no differentiation between a ‘memory or an image of atrocity’ and where the ‘one’ who experiences trauma is supposed to refer to
the subject of the post-traumatic encounter but could easily refer to the Holocaust’s witness.

To take one of Hirsch’s textual examples, Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog*, the film generates the ‘shock of the original encounter with atrocity’ by narrativising documentary and archival stills and footage (J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 19). In particular, the montage sequences of archival footage and contemporary images characterise the intrusiveness of the past: ‘the past repeats with shocking literality’ (J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 53). This is not the memory of the past returning to disrupt the narrative’s attempt to master it, but rather the return of its unassimilability. That the shock of the past is repeated on a ‘formal’ level does not seem to differentiate between witnessing and cinematic spectatorship. The witness is taken out of the equation – his or her trauma is not experienced vicariously in post-traumatic spectatorship – only to be reinserted: this is not witnessing by an over-identification with the witness, as that identity position is not needed, because the affectiveness of form provides an experience equivalent to the witness’s. That equivalence is based on an understanding of traumatic memory remaining intact in the witness and, as in Caruth’s theory, thereby eminently transmissible: ‘Whereas normal memories change over time as the rememberer and the conditions of remembering change, traumatic memories remain as literal recordings of past traumatic perceptions.’ Put another way, ‘In post-traumatic memory … the present “I” is invaded by the memory of the past “I”. The point of view remains that of the witness. The case of the therapist mentioned earlier, who experienced a flashback of her client’s traumatic memory, demonstrates that this witness’s point of view can even be transferred to a nonwitness through vicarious traumatisation’ (J. Hirsch, 2006, p. 22). Although not ‘predetermined’ by the witness’s experience, Hirsch argues that the film conflates the position of the witness and that of the outsider – Resnais’s but by implication the viewer – who is in ‘danger of vicarious traumatization’ (2006, p. 57). Paradoxically Hirsch’s ‘discourse of trauma’ reproduces the very things it sets out to critique – a universalisation of trauma and victim, which is produced by the literal inscription of trauma in its representation – ‘the boundariless contagion of trauma that erases the distinction between specific and historical experiences’ (2006, p. 26). The conflation – a ‘chain of traumatic witnessing begun during the genocide and relayed onscreen’ – despite being the original object of his critique affords, claims Hirsch, opportunities for critical distance (‘a consciousness possible only to the outsider’) that the collapse of the position of the cinema spectator actually precludes (2006, pp. 81, 84).
Although not focused on the Holocaust, E. Ann Kaplan produces a version of cultural trauma similar to Joshua Hirsch’s, albeit politicised. Kaplan widens the ‘concept of trauma to include suffering terror’, which enables the consideration of postcolonial legacies of colonial atrocity on the one hand and the ‘family’ or ‘quiet trauma’ of relatives of those affected by public events (such as 9/11) on the other. Such an extension means that mediatised trauma (traumatisation caused by media representation of events) is possible. Although wary of homogenising groups and attendant cultures by attributing to them a traumatic essence, for Kaplan the Holocaust and slavery produce what she might describe as collective traumas. For Kaplan, cultural trauma is registered in a cultural splitting off (or dissociation). Cultural texts, such as films, provide a series of symptoms of what the culture cannot know but which it retains in a cultural unconscious. The mechanics of cultural dissociation remain unclear in this transposition of individual psychoanalytical states onto cultural scenarios – a transposition of which, as we have seen, Huyssen, Kansteiner and Radstone would be wary). Put another way, Kaplan does not account for the relation between the individual experience and expression of trauma, that is always culturally inflected, and collective feeling that might share (to some extent) that experience. Like Joshua Hirsch, Kaplan’s theoretical foundations are lacking in substance and are found in research on the transmission of trauma in clinical scenarios – the affect of analysands’ narratives on their therapists – and then writ large with little attention to the difference in scale and variants such an extrapolation should consider (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 1, 2, 66, 73, 40–1).

The problems of mapping the individual onto the collective notwithstanding, Kaplan’s other theoretical basis is a neuroscientific model of PTSD. A neuroscientific understanding of PTSD, argues Kaplan, not only admits dissociation but combinations of the dissociation (intact but inassimilable preservation) and conscious memory of trauma, as well as its association with unpalatable fantasies (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 37–8). It is unclear how any of these routes that trauma might take in the neuroscientific model manifest themselves culturally and collectively, how science may be grafted onto the cultural in this instance. Cultural trauma seems self-evident, its problematic basis circumnavigated by Kaplan’s development of an ethics of trauma’s cultural transmission.

While symptoms of trauma may manifest themselves culturally, cultural texts (film and fiction) that actively engage with trauma can produce ethical, political effects. These are texts that use techniques ‘to produce in the reader the impact of a traumatic situation, that is,
to “translate” the trauma as personal and political happening for the reader’. However, the translation of trauma aims to ‘move the viewer emotionally but without sensationalizing or overwhelming her with feelings that make understanding impossible. “Witnessing” involves not just empathy and motivation to help, but understanding the structure of injustice – that an injustice has taken place – rather than focusing on a specific case .... “Witnessing” thus involves a stance that has public meaning or importance and transcends individual empathic or vicarious suffering to produce community’. As Kaplan notes, overly empathic relations with the other solves nothing politically, but is a form of condescension not the basis of political action. In fact ‘witnessing’ via ‘translation’ is the very thing that prevents over-identification through vicarious trauma – witnessing involves a necessary distance, political stance, ethical consciousness. So, cultural witnessing is the evolution of the ‘prosocial’ clinical scenario based on vicarious trauma and empathy – an evolution of the motivation to help an individual to a motivation do so for a larger collective (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 21–3, 120–3).

So, this cultural witnessing of the witnesses of trauma, given its ethical impetus and political basis, does restore subjectivity to the original witness. In fact, the political agency of the secondary witness is dependent on the recognition of the original’s subjectivity. Cultural texts such as films therefore make the original witness less available for an apolitical over-identification: ‘When a film constructs this sort of position for the spectator, it enables attention to the situation, as against attention merely to the subject’s individual suffering, and this positioning thus opens the larger text out to social and political meaning’ (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 123–5). So, in contrast with theoretical models that universalise trauma and the category of victim – victimisation before an aesthetic trauma – Kaplan, although unclear about her theoretical bases, at least generates the historical coordinates for particularising the act of recollection, in terms of an ethico-political stance to be taken, restoring at the same time the particularities of those remembered. The problem, though, with Kaplan’s ethical restoration of the original witness’s agency is that it retroactively justifies her obscuring of the relation of culture to the event. It is difficult to tell just how mediated trauma is in her argument, even though traumatic affect is supposed to be an effect of media. Perhaps what is more problematic is the assumption of traumatisation via media witnessing. The potential for the particularisation of the remembered and those who remember is overwhelmed by what is tantamount to another universalisation.
A related universalisation of affect or assumption of trauma, with similar ramifications, can be found in Alison Landsberg’s ‘prosthetic memories’. Prosthetic memories are enabled by the modern technologies of mass cultural communication and by the way that mass culture is commodified; remembrance takes place in ‘experiential sites’ produced by commodification and technologisation, such as the museum and cinema (2004, p. 2). The interface with historical narratives made possible at these sites generates memory in consumers of events not directly experienced: experiences with which they would not necessarily identify, or experiences that are culturally, socially and historically associated with particularities of identity not their own. The particularities of identity (gendered, ethnic, class, racial, sexual, national or otherwise) do not restrict the acquisition of memory and a resulting empathy across identities and experiences (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 2–3):

The idea of prosthetic memory, then, rejects the notion that all memories – and, by extension, the identities that those memories sustain – are necessarily and substantively shaped by lived social context. Prosthetic memories are not ‘socially constructed’ in that they do not emerge as the result of living and being raised in particular social frameworks.

(Landsberg, 2004, p. 19)

Given their mass distribution and circulation in a commodified culture, prosthetic memories thereby resist ownership and their naturalisation as belonging to (or as part of the heritage of) one particular individual or group. Prosthetic remembrance, then, resists what are in effect biological or essentialist claims over memory made by individuals or groups in the course of their self-identification. Prosthetic memory builds on Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of ‘imagined communities’ that were enabled by mass cultural technologies of the nineteenth century, and, as discussed above, on Halbwachs’s (1992) theorisation that social frameworks are the instruments by which collective memory is formed and expressed. Where the models of Anderson and Halbwachs are centripetal, describing the way in which group or national identity is shored up by the collective memory of events not directly experienced, Landsberg’s, in a realisation of the potential of cultural memory akin to that identified by the Assmanns, is centrifugal in its dispersal of memory beyond group ownership (2004, pp. 9, 18, 7–8).

Landsberg’s theory of memory admits transference, but problematically so. These problems are illuminated in a more detailed fashion in
the critique of Landsberg’s reading of the exhibits of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) that follows in Chapter 7. For now, though, those problems will be raised more generally. Landsberg positions prosthetic memory between the individual and the collective:

[M]emories ... ‘speak’ to the individual in a personal way as if they were actually memories of lived events .... Prosthetic memories are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience. They are privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person’s own archive of experience.

(2004, p. 19)

The in-between-ness of prosthetic memory is supposed to free it from both the claims of the individual and collective – it belongs to neither. Under this theoretical regime, there is no point in adopting memory only to subject it to essentialising claims of ownership. This means that the individual’s ‘empathy’ for the ‘other’ whose experiences are remembered maintains the alterity of that ‘other’ and marks, in fact, the attenuation of identification: a ‘way of both feeling for and feeling different from the subject of enquiry’. On these grounds, the individual is then able to participate in collective (cultural) remembrance. What is troubling here is the relationship between the individual and the collective – the individual’s reception of historical experience via its mass mediatisation and what the collective actually comprises (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 147, 135). The in-between-ness of prosthetic memory suggests that although it is formed at the interface of the individual and the collective, at a specified ‘transferential site’ at a particular historical moment, prosthetic memory is simultaneously freed from the mediations of the individual, the collective and the site. In other words, the work of memory becomes historically unanchored. Landsberg’s concerns are futural:

Any distinction between ‘real’ memories and prosthetic memories – memories that might be technologically disseminated as commodities by the mass media and worn by their consumers – might ultimately be unimportant .... In the modern era, the urgency of memory projects and remembering is an attempt less to authenticate the past than to generate possible courses of action in the present.

(2004, p. 45)
The argued unimportance of this lack of distinction, on the grounds that remembrance continues in the future (as the basis for political action), means that memory grounded in the historical experience of events witnessed is the equivalent of prosthetic memory. The memories of witnesses are of course no less mediated, but Landsberg’s argumentation paves the way for the replacement of historical experience by the memory of things not witnessed – severing the attachment between memory and history. This severance is made easier by the fact that “History” has never had privileged access to the real; like all knowledge, historical knowledge is and has always been mediated through narratives and interpretation’ (Landsberg, 2004, p. 47). In other words, on the common ground of their mutual construction and mediation of the past, history is replaceable by memory. In the case of the Holocaust, history in terms of the ‘cognitive’ apprehension of the past is ‘inadequate’, leaving ‘experiential’ memory in its place (Landsberg, 2004, p. 131). Andrew Gross and Michael Hoffman see Landsberg’s reasoning as a part of a wider tendency in memory and trauma studies that measures the inadequacy of history in terms of the failure of testimony. As testimony registers the limits (although not impossibility) of witnessing and narrative in the face of the events of Holocaust, the interpretive agency of the witness is dispensed with. Not only that, it is as if all narrative, but particularly historical narrative (historiography) that attempts to make sense of the past is deemed inadequate (Gross and Hoffman, 2004, pp. 38–41). The only form of memory left is prosthetic memory, which can only be experiential rather than cognitive. Put another way, the logic is thus: since most Holocaust victims did not understand what was happening to them, subsequent generations need not understand. So, history as cause and effect is replaced by prosthetic memory as cause and affect (Gross and Hoffman, 2004, pp. 40, 38). Freed from its referent, the prosthetic act of recall is also curiously free from its enabling conditions. Sites of prosthesis (the cinema, the Holocaust museum and so on) become spaces of transference, instilling in consumers of memory symptoms of traumas they had not been previously experienced. (This is the converse of the clinical scenario in which transference is a process of externalisation (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 135–6).)

Put another way, this is an embodiment of memory by which consumers do not experience the event itself but which ‘positions their bodies to be better able to understand an otherwise unthinkable event’ (Landsberg, 2004, p. 131). Transference here is presumed, whatever mediating ‘personal archive’ of memories is brought by the consumer to the site that would presumably inform the reception of the historical
narratives orchestrated at these sites and whatever the mise-en-scène and political or ideological orchestration of historical representation at these sites. Transference is transcendent.

1.5 Returning history to memory

In the universalisation of trauma and confusion of text and event, witness and secondary witness, the identities of those remembered and those remembering and the contexts in which acts of recollection take place are eclipsed if not altogether dehistoricised. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’ suggests some critical distance on the affectiveness of the past, as well as on memory’s mediation. Postmemory is also conceived as a more self-reflexive mode of remembering trauma that foregrounds the relationship of those who remember to their act of recall. Postmemory typically describes ‘the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right’ (2001, p. 9). Having defined the concept of postmemory in terms of ‘familial inheritance’, Hirsch has broadened its application to a more general, cultural inheritance (culturally affiliative rather than familial) that can transcend ethnic or national boundaries and need not necessarily be confined to the Holocaust (2001, pp. 9–10; see also 2008). Postmemory therefore is ‘defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by an unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after ... Postmemory would thus be retrospective witnessing by adoption. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story’ (Hirsch, 2001, p. 10). It is the belated nature of traumatic memory that fuels its transmission and adoption. If the traumatic nature of the event defies its own witnessing, cognition and remembrance, then, for Hirsch, it makes sense that the next generation is in a position to work through traumatic experience and its symptoms, narratives and images bequeathed but not fully remembered or known by the previous one (2001, p. 12). A highly or hyper-mediated form of memory, it is reconstructed from the textual traces of the past, because the witness generation often bequeaths silence, in which mute but affective photographic images often play prominent roles. The act of reconstruction affords the opportunity for critical distance on the past – its working
through – rather than just an acting out of a perceived trauma. For Hirsch postmemory stages a spatial encounter rather than identification with the witness and the traumatic event, via the cultural staging of that encounter. The hyper-mediation of the past, foregrounded in that act of reconstruction, promises a move away from literality of trauma found in Caruth’s and Felman’s work. Hirsch’s work is discussed in some detail in several chapters that follow (on the USHMM, and on W. G. Sebald). As a general concept it is found particularly productive when applied to the work of Sebald, although Hirsch’s own, postmemorial reading of the USHMM is found to be problematic in that it reverts to identificatory rather than spatial modes of remembrance. Nevertheless Hirsch draws attention to the way in which ‘seeing through another’s eyes, of remembering through another’s memories’ (2001, p. 10) might collapse into seeing through one’s own eyes and remembering one’s own memories instead. ‘These lines of relation and identification need to be theorised more closely [ …. ] how … identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the difference between self and other, the otherness of the other’ (2001, p. 11). For example, Hirsch (1999a; 2003; 2008) pays particular attention to the fantasies of rescue that can be provoked by post-Holocaust art that deploys images of feminised and infantilised victims. Implicit, then, in Hirsch’s argument is the need to historicise the act of recall, as much as the need to maintain the historical specificity of who or what is remembered.

However, Gary Weissman has remarked relatively recently that the notion of ‘monumental’ memories is ‘murky’. ‘No degree of monumentality can transform one person’s lived memories into another’s’, and in fact what seems to be separating the two types of memory is temporal distance more than the substance of memory, argues Weissman. The inclusiveness of the concept of postmemory – its broader, cultural and extra-familial transmission in spaces such as the USHMM – creates a cultural scene in which we no longer identify with the Holocaust’s victims but, in effect, with those who have over-identified with them. In other words, under this theoretical regime of memory, the profusion of memory is such that the original witnesses (the Holocaust’s victims) have been wholly subsumed by our act of witness, which is the only act of witness available in cultural scenarios of postmemory (Weissman, 2004, pp. 16–18).

Weissman’s suspicion of terms such as ‘vicarious’, ‘secondary’, or ‘post’ memory and witnessing – terms which he argues rest on an over-extension of the concepts of memory, trauma, witnessing and testimony – leads him to deploy the term ‘nonwitness’ in their stead. Weissman’s critique
of trends in the theory and practice of Holocaust memory, particularly but not only in North American culture, identifies what he terms ‘fantasies’ of witnessing. Such fantasies are partly driven by the desire for academic integrity in the confrontation with the Holocaust, in which the capacity to be traumatised by things and events not directly witnessed demonstrates a moral stamina and a desire to make those events more real than in their mass mediation by Holocaust memory industries (Weissman, 2004, pp. 20, 21–2, 24). The work of Lawrence Langer is the focus of an extended critique. Weissman tracks the changing methodologies of memory studies from Langer’s *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1975) to *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (1991). In the earlier work, literary realism was the effect of a combination of the literary imagination and memory of the survivor-writer. In the later work – a study of the testimonies recorded by the Fortunoff Archive at Yale – videoed testimony is rendered a less mediated recollection of the past, less inhibited by the rhetorical and narrative strategies found in literature. Video testimonies stage the eruption of the ‘deep memory’ of incomprehensible trauma that disrupts the rational and reflective voice of ‘common memory’ in which testimony is conveyed but which nonetheless provokes that eruption. Deep memory registers in the breakdown of testimonial language and signals a supposedly purer and unmediated form of memory event if silently messaged (Langer, 1991, pp. 6, 20).

As Weissman notes, the common critiques launched at Langer revolve around the fact that testimony is not free from rhetoric, that it is performative, contingent on the interviewer and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and is mediated by the various discourses and contexts that shape the interviewee’s recollection and the archive to which he or she contributes (2004, pp. 111–15). However, for Langer, the witness becomes a kind of portal by which those who listen to testimony can attempt to experience the Holocaust directly (Weissman, 2004, pp. 107–9). The testimony becomes yet another blank screen for the memorial imagination. Yet Weissman’s concern over the state of memory studies leads to his own purification of memory, as in, for example, his critique of Dori Laub’s important understanding of testimony as ‘an event without a witness’. As Laub has it:

> Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in
spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence .... the trauma – as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock – has not been truly witnessed yet, has not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge de novo. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

(Laub, 1992, pp. 72–9)

Weissman reads this conception of testimony as a confusion of the roles of survivor–witness and interviewer or witness to testimony (2004, pp. 136–7). Such a conception of the testimony seems to transfer agency from the witness to the witness of the witness, yet Laub does not fully conflate the two parties. Weissman’s critique does not account for trauma and belatedness. It is the belated remembrance of, testimony to and cognizance of the traumatic past that makes testimony’s audience party to the creation of meaning. This does not mean that, because testimony in effect produces a meaningful event, the audience somehow precedes the witness in experiencing the Holocaust, as in Langer’s version of testimony, accessing the memory unavailable to the witness.

Weissman’s rightfully placed critical anxiety over the fantasy of witnessing in memory studies and in the practice of cultural memory prevents him from fully considering the possibility that trauma (of a kind) might be transmitted, that trauma might inform the remembrance of events not directly witnessed and that relationship of witness to ‘nonwitness’ might be more proximate than he allows. In fact, Weissman argues that the Holocaust was not the rupture or paradigm-shifting event it was conceived to be and has actually been absorbed and regulated by, in particular, American culture. The fact that the Holocaust is all too representable and therefore mediated feeds back into charges that the event is unrepresentable and that prior representation has been inauthentic. The fantasies of witnessing that posit the event as transcendent are a retrospective attempt to instil a sense of rupture and to compensate for the lack of an adequate moral reaction to the Holocaust in the cultural imaginary (Weissman, 2004, pp. 188–9, 209). What is more, although Weissman’s intention is to examine the paradoxical desire to experience the horrors of the Holocaust that are at the same time conceptualised, indeed, idealised, as sublime, this desire is curiously decontextualised,
apolitical and ahistorical in Weissman’s account. The truth of the Holocaust experience desired in fantasies of witnessing as a kind of ‘sentimental existentialist education’ remains necessarily unspecified – such is its sublime nature – but the same might be said for Weissman’s critical framing of that fantasy (2004, pp. 137–9). The specificities of ‘fantasies’ of witnessing tend to become subsumed under a slightly generalising paradigm: the cultural need for an ethical stance in relation to the Holocaust.

In a general critique of memory studies, Susannah Radstone has argued that the memory in memory studies has now eclipsed history to the extent that the ‘inner world and its very processes has become predominant, and has been taken as “the” world’ (2005, p. 140). Memory texts, be they monuments or memoirs, are taken as direct reflections of the processes of memory and that memory, in its reconstruction of the event, is taken as the ‘sole mediating force’, regardless of the textual properties (which are found consonant with dynamics of memory itself) of the memory text and the ‘mediation of the already-mediated memory discourses, images, texts and representations by the institutions and discourses of the wider public sphere – institutions and discourses that may not be specifically “memorial” themselves, but through which memory may be articulated’ (Radstone, 2005, p. 135–7). Radstone’s concerns could equally apply to the critique of memory studies itself, which needs to situate historically ‘fantasies’ of witnessing, in order to realise the political and ethical significance of collapsing together text and traumas. Radstone sees the proclivities of memory studies as arising from more general postmodernist concerns that sought to dismantle the authority of the grand narrative of ‘History’. Representing the lived, local, subjective and partial experience of the past, memory was thought to counter History’s claims to objectivity and totality. Instead, memory studies created and inverted a hierarchy between memory and history. While Radstone’s general postmodern contextualisation of memory studies is useful, Annette Wievorka tracks the rise of memory over history on a specifically post-Holocaust cultural terrain.

Wievorka is concerned that the Holocaust is primarily understood through memory rather than history in what she has described as the ‘era of the witness’. In this culture of witnessing, memory takes the form of testimony (in its various generic modes), but testimony functions culturally to represent collective rather than individual experience. This is not to suggest that testimony somehow transcends the context in which it is produced, conveyed and received – the irreducible uniqueness of experiences inscribed in testimony register not only in the
historical referents of testimony, but also in the production of testimony in relation to the political, cultural and ideological motivation of the witness and the consumers of his or her text, which production must negotiate at some point. Nevertheless despite its uniqueness, testimony functions synecdochically. A brief rendition of Wievorka’s history of testimony explains why. Immediate post-war testimony in the form of Yizker-bikher, memorial books for lost communities, resonated in a now-absent world in which not just communities but a whole social world and its culture and history had been destroyed. The memorial books effectively restored a cultural context by which they could be understood. In this way, the specificity of the individual historical experience is restored and conferred by and can only exist within the collective. This collectivisation of individual experience laid the cultural groundwork for the reception of Holocaust testimony, no longer confined to Jewish communities, on the national and international stage. For Wievorka, the Eichmann trial was a watershed moment in the ‘advent of the witness’ that ‘transformed the very condition for writing the history of genocide’. The Eichmann trial had marked the cultural moment in which the survivor became the ‘bearer of history’ and the witness ‘the embodiment of memory’. The focus had shifted from what it was in the Nuremberg trial, away from the perpetrators’ actions, the criminalisation of their actions and the creation of legal precedent in international law to judge future transgressions to the experience of the victims. The centrality of the victim (as witness) has had a pronounced effect on post-Holocaust culture. The witness was culturally available for identification (a witnessing of the witness) in unprecedented fashion. A social demand for testimonies was generated that was not only felt in the more recent trials of Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon, but also in cultural events such as the TV miniseries Holocaust, Schindler’s List, and The Visual Shoah History Foundation. Most fundamentally, the ‘advent of the witness’ changed the nature of post-Holocaust historical understanding.

Testimony conveyed a perceived immediacy of history, the affective nature of which offered something closer to the truth of the experience witnessed than traditional modes of historical understanding gained through intellectual distance. As Wievorka, argues, the focus on an individuated and intimate history mystifies the processes and systems of mass murder that are wider than the individual. It is perhaps Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s phenomenology of mass murder from the perpetrator’s point of view, Hitler’s Willing Executioners – the converse of the victims’ testimony orchestrated at the Eichmann trial by Gideon
Hausner – in which the cultural effects of the ‘advent of the witness’ are felt most negatively in terms of deshistoricisation. Wievorka argues that Goldhagen draws on a reservoir of horrific images formed by American popular culture in his confusion of mere description and a new philosophy of history. The refusal to think in general terms about the Holocaust (as opposed to intimate details of killing) and the replacement of history by testimony (urged on by the collection of testimonies before the witness-generation dies out) is the death of history itself. Not only does testimony move away from a wider understanding of events to which testimony is given, but the eager reception of testimony subsumes the political and ideological conditions of testimony’s production and consumption. The return to history advocated by Wievorka, though does not preclude testimony and its inscription of memory. Nor does it preclude an empathetic relation with the witness. (An over-emphasis on empathy actually mirrors, conversely so, the Nazi regime itself, with the collective emotions it strove to instil in the German population at the expense of an intellectual negotiation of the regime.) So, Wievorka does not simply invert the binary opposition of witnessing (memory) and history but rather advocates a dialectical arrangement – the workings of which are beyond the scope of studied concerns for the advent of testimony (Wievorka, 2006, pp. xii–xiii, 25–8, 87–90, 91–4, 116–17, 129–30, 135–9, 145–9).

Given Radstone’s and Wievorka’s concerns over the diremption of history and memory, Saul Friedländer’s historiographical methodology suggests a means of reconciliation. Friedländer’s conceptualisation of Holocaust testimony, the Holocaust diary, chronicle or memoir, renders these related forms as the inscription of memory in which trauma may be registered. This is not a claim to immediacy, in which literary form mirrors the dynamics of memory, or to literality. Rather, it is the positioning of memory in relation to history in what Dominick LaCapra might term ‘a supplementary relation that is the very basis for a mutually questioning interaction or open dialectical exchange that never attains totalisation or full closure’ (LaCapra, 1998, p. 20). Friedländer terms memory, so inscribed, as a form of ‘commentary’ on the linear narrative drive common to much if not all forms of historiography:

The commentary should disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure. Because of the necessity of some form of narrative sequence in the writing of history, such
commentary may introduce splintered or constantly recurring refractions of a traumatic past .... [and] puncture such normality.

(Friedländer, 1993, p. 132)

Commentary, then, holds the claims of history in check, prevents the narrative organisation of the past and its momentum from over-determining conclusions about that past. Conversely, the vagaries of inscribed memory, its disrupted and disruptive representation of the past, is given coherence and anchorage by the conventions of historical narrative. Not quite, then, the ‘articulation’ and ‘mediation’ of memory that Radstone argues memory studies should illuminate, Friedländer’s model historiography at least sees history and memory as mediating each other, making it difficult to overlook their mutual organisation of past happenings, and also that, in dialectical relation, the claims of history and memory are actually buttressed by each other. Radstone’s just concerns that the ‘inner world’ of memory has altogether replaced history are answered (or perhaps pre-empted) by Friedländer’s anchoring of memory to history: they make better sense of the past in relation to each other. Just as Radstone argued that the proclivities of memory studies were born out of postmodernist concerns over ‘History’, so Friedländer has aired concerns over the postmodernist approach to history and its equivocations towards ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ (Friedländer, 1992, p. 20). The inextricability of the event and historical discourse – the event cannot be known outside discourse – raises, for Friedländer, the problem of relativism between interpretations/representations, which has particular urgency when it comes to representing the Holocaust. Recognising the discursiveness of historical reality, Friedländer invests in an irreducible real that remains to be, as Jean François Lyotard would put it, phrased (Friedländer, 1992, p. 20). Without this investment, the differences between history and fiction become eroded. If, in postmodernist criticism, the partial, incomplete and revisionary nature of memory has traditionally been used to shed a deconstructive light on history, then the emphasis on memory raises related problems of relativism, historical indeterminacy and a constructedness akin to fiction. Where Radstone points to the binary relation, erected by memory studies, between history and memory, and memory’s ascendance and subsumption of history, Friedländer’s dialectic does not simply take us back to (reinscribe) the original and invertible relation between the two, which can give way to the reign of memory. As Eaglestone puts it:

[C]rucially, his form of history is an attempt to develop a form of history that has neither abandoned Rankean rigour nor is limited to it,
that flows from memory but is aware of its dangers. It shuttles from
memory to historical knowledge to memory again, holding these
two apart and also together. It is already a deconstructive or ‘post-
modern’ history, which does not mean that it is unrigorous.

(2004, p. 188)

Noting, then, Friedländer’s cautious approach to postmodern history
and its deconstructive methods, Eaglestone argues that Friedländer is
already practising a form of deconstruction. ‘Deconstruction always
occurs in a context, through a tradition’, and in this case that is the
‘discipline of history’, against which must be held in ‘productive ten-
sion’ a different understanding of ‘truth’, that engendered by memory:
‘Positivistic history and its historicism cannot be abandoned, but its
processes and limits must be seen and acknowledge for what they are’
(Eaglestone, 2004, p. 188).

The dialectical exchange between history and (inscribed) memory is
practised in Friedländer’s historiography, namely The Years of Persecution:
Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–1939 and The Years of Extermination:
Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945. In the former, Friedländer com-
plains that historiography has traditionally rendered Jewish victims
into a ‘static and abstract element of a historical background’ unable
to change the course of events (2007, p. 2). However, if the evolving
policies of Nazi Germany are to be fully understood, as they were
perceived at the time, then the perspective of those who fell victim to
Nazism and Germany must be represented: ‘For it is their voices that
reveal what was known and what could be known; theirs were the only
voices that conveyed both the clarity of insight and the total blindness
of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrify-
ing reality .... [voices that] put the Nazis’ actions into full perspective’
(Friedländer, 2007, p. 2). The ‘juxtaposition’ of different levels of reality
in the first volume – ‘for example, high-level anti-Jewish policy debates
and decisions next to scenes of routine persecution’ – aims to prevent
the domestication of this particular past achieved elsewhere by ‘seam-
less explanations and standardised renditions’ and generates a ‘sense of
estrangement that to me reflects the perception of the hapless victims’
facing extreme experiences which were becoming increasingly normal-
ised in Nazi Germany (Friedländer, 2007, p. 5). The problem of course
is that historiography runs the risk of following a parallel course to the
trajectory of destruction, that it veers towards a teleology, against which
the individuation of historical experience offers some friction. ‘The only
concrete history that can be retrieved remains that carried by personal
stories. From the stage of collective disintegration to that of deportation and death, this history, in order to be written at all, has to be represented as the integrated narration of individual fates’ (Friedländer, 2007, p. 5). The same integration of the victims’ voices can be found in the second volume, where, Friedländer argues, they have been positioned to have the same unsettling effects:

[S]uch personal chronicles are like lightening flashes that illuminate parts of a landscape .... They warn us against the ease of vague generalizations .... [the] voices of diarists ... an individual voice suddenly arising in the course of an ordinary historical narrative of events such as those presented here can tear through seamless interpretation and pierce the (mostly involuntary) smugness of scholarly detachment and ‘objectivity.’

(2008, pp. xxv–xxvi)

The dialectic of memory and history could be rephrased as a relation between ‘knowledge’ and ‘disbelief’, the former a product of conventional historiography, which risks domesticating past events, the latter provoked (in the historian and his or her readership) by the (inscribed) voices of the victim that, when integrated into historiography, strain conventions to their breaking point and prevent conventional narrative closure (Friedländer, 2008, p. xxvi).

If the contrapuntal arrangement of different voices, registers and discourses denaturalises the events represented, then the orchestration of a disbelief proper to those events stages their affectiveness. Again, rather than pitting the ‘mythic memory’ of the victims ... against the rational understanding of others’ in binary fashion, Friedländer argues that historiography that inscribes a dialectical exchange between history and memory illuminates a ‘measure of “transference” vis-à-vis the past. Such involvement necessarily impinges on the writing of history. But the historian’s necessary measure of detachment is not thereby precluded, provided there is sufficient self-awareness. It may indeed be harder to keep one’s balance in the other direction; whereas a constantly self-critical gaze might diminish the effects of subjectivity, it could also lead to other, no lesser risks, those of undue restraint and paralyzing caution’ (Friedländer, 2007, p. 6).

Where theories of Holocaust traumatic memory, particularly those revolving around testimonial language and literature and witnessing, have, in resisting the cognitive assimilation of the past and its coherent narrative representation, unanchored the testimonial inscriptions of
memory from the testifying witness and traumatic event, Friedländer has re-articulated the inextricability of history and memory, laying mitigated claims to objectivity and the necessity of disrupted representation. Where theories of traumatic memory have conflated the positions of witness and secondary witness (the witness to a kind of textual trauma), Friedländer has differentiated those positions, historiographically framing the witness but in doing so recognising the possibility of (rather than assuming) a transferential relation between historian (secondary witness) and his or her materials.

LaCapra elaborates on this cautious admission of transference, of the possibility of secondary traumatisation and its differentiation from the kinds of transhistorical or structural traumas encountered so far in Holocaust-related trauma theory. The problem of differentiating between transhistorical absence and historically specific loss is compounded by the affectiveness of the latter. The ‘out of context’ experience of trauma disturbs normative cognitive contexts making mastery over the event difficult, making the affectiveness of the event difficult to map onto a cause. (In other words, if such trauma theory divorces event from witness, it could be said that trauma’s impact does that already.) The traumatised subject may be consigned to repeating the event, the symptom of which is a repetitive and cognitively impaired form of representing the past. While the traumatising event is ‘datable’, the experience of trauma is ‘elusive, ‘bound up with belated effects or symptoms’. The elusiveness of the experience of historical trauma makes it difficult to distinguish it from its transhistorical counterpart, which facilitates imaginary or ‘vicarious experiential identification with certain events and the belief that one actually lived through them’. A form of historical representation is needed that can move from acting out (the repetition of the event) to working through, ‘allowing openings to possible futures’ and that would aid the differentiation between the traumatic event and the experience, direct or indirect, of trauma (LaCapra, 2004, pp. 115–27).

LaCapra positions working through as the means of this differentiation. Working through is here understood to mean ‘work on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as an ethical or sociopolitical agency in the present and the future’. This is not the complete redemption of experience and the full reintegration of the wounded self. Working through loss in a suitably disrupted narrative
form may allow trauma to be registered in language (but does not allow language, or rather representation, to be taken as trauma). As testimony opens up opportunities for some critical distance on the past for those who witnessed traumatic events, for a recognition of traumatic affect (rather than its disavowal) and for the realisation of interpretive agency and socio-political engagement in the present in relation to the past (as opposed to a numbed or compulsive acting out of the past), so other forms of historical representation might offer similar opportunities for working through an affective event not directly experienced (LaCapra, 2004, pp. 115–27).

In other words, LaCapra admits the possibility of a ‘secondary traumatization’ in need of working through. This is ‘virtual’ as opposed to ‘vicarious’ trauma. Vicarious trauma collapses the positions of witness and secondary witness. If trauma is rendered sacred or sublime and completely un-masterable, then it is deemed utterly contagious and transferable without mediation or limits. The vehicle for its transmission, produced by the confusion of historical loss and structural absence, would be ‘aporetic’ and ‘abyssal’ forms of representation taken as trauma itself and which foreclose the very possibility of working through. The theoretical regimes that generate vicarious trauma confuse testimony and fiction – an indistinction that goes beyond the literary devices common to both – and in effect install fantasies of fiction as the event and of reading it as traumatic. It follows that such a practice of reading could be extended to the reading of testimony. In the face of a textual trauma, the secondary witness claims the witness’s experience. As LaCapra puts it, ‘a theorist or commentator [such as many of those discussed above] who speaks … for the victim, or transforms the trauma of others into an occasion for a discourse on sublimity, should not be conflated with a victim who experiences a symptom as a binding memorial to dead intimates, or even by a person possessed by the dead and “mimetically” speaking in their voices’ (2004, pp. 126–32).

How then to respond to trauma in a secondary fashion, to engage with a virtual trauma? LaCapra reinstalls a sense of the remembering self and of objectivity. Where theoretical regimes conflate trauma and the traumatic event, LaCapra argues for a more accurate understanding of the relation between event and experience. The traumatic event imposes a ‘limit’ on what is imaginable or conceivable, on what could be imagined as ‘verisimilar and plausible in its context’, which challenges forms of representation, historiographical or aesthetic, contending with the ‘excess of the event or act over imaginative power’. In terms consonant
with Friedländer’s, for LaCapra understanding the relation between trauma and the limit event calls for objectivity, the attempt to ‘represent the past as accurately as possible’ but in postpositivistic terms:

[Q]uestioning the idea of a fully transparent, unproblematic, neutral representation ... and recognizing the need to come to terms with one’s transferential and affect-laden implication in the object of study by critically mediating perhaps inevitable projective or incorporative identifications, undertaking meticulous research, and being open to ways one’s findings may bring into question or even contradict one’s initial hypotheses. Study and research may change one’s judgments and even affect one’s identity, especially in relation to emotionally charged, value-related issues.

Postpositivism recalls a sense of self in the representation of the past, as a cultural producer or consumer, where the remembering self had been obscured by the giving over of the self to the victimised other, which in effect was the replacement of other by claims to trauma and victimhood. The recovery or historicisation of the self who remembers distinguishes between vicarious and virtual trauma, identification and empathy, where empathy ‘puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of – or speaking for – the other or becoming a surrogate victim appropriating the victim’s voice or suffering’, which would be the case with identification. The empathetic implication in the past and its actors – ‘empathetic unsettlement’ – aim for a form of historical understanding that recognises rather than disavow the possibility of one’s affective relation with the past and actors, which might include a degree of secondary traumatisation in relation to past actions. Empathetic unsettlement is not produced through set types of historical representation through which a relation with a distinct category of past actor (victim, perpetrator, bystander) is made available (or rather prescribed or legislated). Rather, empathetic unsettlement is bound up with performative forms of representation that in their disrupted nature refuse to harmonise representation and the event, thereby symbolically emulating trauma, but which can be used as apparatus in the acting out and working through of the limit event and its affect. ‘Apparatus’ is my term, not LaCapra’s, and it is meant to emphasise (once again) that representation is not in itself traumatic, but that ‘posttraumatic writing’ may be used to act out and work through a transferential relation to the past that exists prior to the confrontation with the post-traumatic text. As opposed to Joshua Hirsch’s notion of post-traumatic cinema,
post-traumatic writing unsettles because it evokes and provokes the realisation of a pre-existing relationship with the past, it does not seek to create that relationship anew (LaCapra, 2004, pp. 133–4, 136–7, 141).

What emerges from LaCapra’s (more than Friedlander’s) postpositivism and empathic unsettlement is a critical sense of the remembering self as much as of those who are remembered. The remembering self emerges in the face of theoretical regimes that would otherwise eclipse it through the universalisation of trauma and trauma’s witnessing, survival and victims. As Hungerford would argue, when trauma is deemed textual, when texts take on the characteristics of the witness, the ‘conflation of texts and persons impoverishes our ideas … of persons, since it renders the fact of embodiment irrelevant, when embodiment is exactly what situates us in history and makes us vulnerable to oppression’. Bodies and identities (of witness and secondary witness) cannot be situated because personification is overly prescriptive. By reducing bodies to texts and cancelling the differences between them, the existence of those remembered (victims), and those remembering vicariously, is scripted. The insistence on experiential rather than historical knowledge of the Holocaust prescribes no other identity in the present than that of the vicarious victim chained to its historical counterpart. Personification renders historical representation, and literature in particular, unfree and impoverished, unable to imagine or remember the difference between past and present and therefore future identities. The importance of literature is its imaginative capacity. Imagination bridges the gaps between persons, consciousnesses, ethnicities and experiences:

The fantasy of the personified text, the fantasy that we can really have another person’s experience, that we can be someone else, that we can somehow possess a culture that we do not practice, elides the gap that imagination – preferable … to identification – must fill. We must find not ourselves in the other (or the other in ourselves) but the other as we can know them without being them.

Loss is best imagined not as recoverable through the imagination of suffering but as lost and consigned to history not the present. Death then makes imaginable ‘the absolute otherness one is not’ (Hungerford, 2003, pp. 21, 151, 155, 157). Conversely that otherness allows the absolute difference of those who remember to emerge in the present, freed from the past. That the emergence of the remembering self is no longer tethered to and confused with the victims of the past is key to the following studies of the literature, architecture and museums and the discourses such forms attract.
2 On Reading Sebald: *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*

2.1 ‘Portable monuments’

In interview, W. G. Sebald has projected an idealised reader thus: ‘A picture, being visual information, can be contemplated, it does not have to be decoded in time. You can just sit and see it, and the ideal reader for me would be a reader who does not just read the text but sees, who lifts out the perennial wasting which occurs in time’ (Bigsby, 2001, p. 156). In other words, Sebald’s idealised reader is one who would participate in the memorative projects of his various narrators in their attempt to reconstruct and remember lives, things and places subject to modernity’s destructive projects, logics and impulses. Reconstruction and remembrance take place by way of what remains: textual traces, stranded artefacts, architectural ruins, deserted spaces and equivocal witnesses. These remnants of modernity constitute Sebald’s compendious narratives as the props of his narrators’ memory work. As Sebald suggests above, just like the remnants narrativised, his texts themselves are rendered fragile in the face of modernity’s ongoing destructive principles. If modernity can be characterised as a process of creative destruction that moves unevenly across its spheres of activity yet inexorably towards a point of oblivion, then, memory is an interruptive force. The idealised reader would participate in the memory work staged by Sebald’s texts, transforming those texts into objects of memory.

In many ways, Sebald is suggesting his texts be read as ‘portable monuments’. For Ann Rigney, the novel, or portable monument, is a prop by which individuals can participate in, following Aleida Assmann’s definition of the term (2004), ‘cultural’ memories of events not directly experienced. In fact the heteroglossic nature of the novel dislocates a series of memories from their original cultural, social and historical contexts and
recombines them, such is the aesthetic freedom of the novel’s form, for the reader’s participation and remembrance. If deemed of cultural significance, those memories can be reactivated, reworked and reappropriated, or associated with new ones in the various cultural scenarios of the text’s reception and afterlife (Rigney, 2004, pp. 365–89).

If Sebald’s texts are to be read as a series of memory texts, ‘portable monuments’ that continue to give the past an afterlife by provoking new memories of it, then questions remain as to how they are to be read memoratively. This chapter explores acts of reading foregrounded by The Rings of Saturn (1998) and Austerlitz (2001). The Rings of Saturn explores, I will argue, how acts and spaces of reading might disrupt the archival organisation of the past that would consign the past to oblivion. The Rings of Saturn is by no means wholly taken up with the problems of Holocaust representation. As we shall see, mention of it is sparse yet significant. What emerges in The Rings of Saturn is a long history of destruction, in which the Holocaust is located, that is inextricable from the unfolding of modernity. What is at stake in The Rings of Saturn is how modernity is read, because, if read in certain ways, the Holocaust loses its particularity and takes its place in a natural history of destruction. This chapter, then, examines how Sebald relates the act of reading to the remembrance and forgetting of the Holocaust. This chapter will then move on to discuss the afterlife of Austerlitz, and the Holocaust memories it represents, in the novel’s critical reception, how that reception is informed by the appropriative tendencies of certain versions of memory and trauma studies, and how the novel might be reread, pre-empting its own appropriation.

2.2 The librarian

W. G. Sebald’s The Rings of Saturn (1998, first published as Die Ringe des Saturn, 1995) comprises its narrator’s recollection of a walking tour of Suffolk in August 1992, during which he encountered ‘the traces of destruction’ that contoured the landscape. Those encounters rendered him in a state of ‘almost total immobility’ and hospitalisation (Sebald, 1999, p. 3). The paralysis is a symptom of melancholia (an inability to come to terms with the past), and the belated narratorial act (and the historical memory it entails) the beginnings of a process of mourning what has been destroyed. Both memory and narrative are mapped onto the land that the narrator walked on, as the narrator recalls the history of significant places and spaces navigated and the historical and literary associations prompted by such navigations, in a manner that is
as digressive as the ambulatory route he has paced out. Arguably, *The Rings of Saturn*’s orchestration of memory has more in common with the act of reading in the library rather than with the archivisation of historical knowledge. Indeed, as this chapter will argue, it is the violent and powerful logic of the archive that informs the very destruction at the root of the narrator’s melancholy state. The library and memorative reading therein structure opportunities for remembrance not wholly dictated by the archive.

A more detailed conception of the library, and archive, is needed at this point in the argument. Aby Warburg’s concept of the library provides a useful pretext for *The Rings of Saturn*, particularly its orchestration of the traces of the past and the way those traces (texts of various sorts) construct the subjectivity of the narrator, who might usefully be considered as a librarian of the Warburgian method. Warburg’s understanding of cultural history revolves around the ‘afterlife’ (*Nachleben*) of the past, particularly of antiquity, in the present. As Christian Emden puts it:

> Throughout his writings, he seeks to understand the forms of this afterlife: Durer’s representation of the death of Orpheus leads him back to ancient reliefs; in Renaissance medals he detects a union of pagan symbolism and theological humanism; on Flemish tapestries he discovers that medieval clothes *alla franzese* are depicted in ancient Greek style; Hellenistic astral mythology survives in Frescoes in Ferrara; and he follows the influence of Greek and Neoplatonic astronomy in the writings of Luther and Melanchthon.

(2003, p. 214)

The afterlife of these images could be described as a form of cultural memory, by which these images and the historical currents they represent are consciously and unconsciously recalled, recycled and recontextualised. The constellation of past and present is for Warburg a polarisation (energisation) of the latent ‘Pathos-Formel’ or emotive nature of the recalled image (Emden, 2003, p. 209). The affectiveness of the image is of course mediated by and contingent upon the context of its transmission (or remembrance in other forms), and then by how that constellation is received; nevertheless, the emotive nature of the image is discerned as an affective trace of the past (see also Confino, 2006, pp. 173–5; and Assmann, 2001, p. 95).

The intellectual contemplation of the image competes with the image’s affective charge. Just as the charge exceeds or lives beyond the image’s successive artistic recontextualisation, so it exceeds the contemplation of the
cultural historian who traces its past. In fact Warburg positions the cultural historian not outside the cultural history he or she traces but part of it, in whose affected reception the image lives on. Put differently, the cultural historian becomes both the enquiring subject and object of cultural history – a conduit for the crystallisations of the past, the embodiment of pictorial memory (Diers, 1995, p. 70). Warburg's library, *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, was designed to stage this performance of cultural memory. Books in the library were placed according to the ‘law of good neighbourliness’, according to their correspondent content (Warburg, quoted in Diers, 1995, p. 73). Given the oscillation between subject and object that such a performance would entail, it has been described by Philippe-Alain Michaud as an endeavour to abolish the distinctions between knowledge, which implies scholarly distance, and intuition (2004, p. 232).

The *Mnemosyne* atlas, created between 1924 and 1929 and housed at Warburg’s newly installed library in Hamburg, was the materialisation of Warburg’s theory of the history of visual culture, as well as paradigmatic of the principles by which he organised his library. The atlas retraces the fate of images from the history of science, religion and art to their modern reincarnation (which is often in mass media form). The atlas’s spacing of images had affinities to Eisensteinian montage by which sequencing is a matter of juxtaposition, proximity a matter of the violent collision of representations and their time frames, and in which proximate images bear a relation to each other that is analogous, anachronous and charged with affect (Michaud, 2004, pp. 242–44). Warburg has described this spatialisation of images ‘an iconology of intervals’. As Warburg puts it:

> The dynamograms of ancient art are handed down in a state of maximal tension but unpolarised with regard to the passive or active energy charge to the responding, imitating or remembering artists. It is only the contact with the new age that results in polarization. This polarisation can lead to a radical reversal (inversion) of the meaning they held for classical antiquity.

(quoted in Michaud, 2004, pp. 281–2)

The display’s diachronic and synchronic dynamic ideally provokes an active form of viewing or intervention. That intervention, much like the performances for which his library was designed, was dependent upon receptiveness to the affective charge that was perceived to accompany visual images. The viewer participates in the cultural memory mapped out in *Mnemosyne* and continues that process of ‘polarization’: the viewer is the ‘receptive surface, a photosensitive plate on which
texts and images surging up from the past reveal themselves’ (Michaud, 2004, pp. 255, 260).

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes has suggested (but without further elaboration or development) that Sebald’s narratives are structured in a manner similar to Warburg’s act of the visual curation of the past (2007, pp. 427–30). Rather like Warburg, Sebald, via his narrator, remediates historical texts – in Sebald’s case verbal and visual – to produce analogies across time and space between the histories for which those texts stand. In these synchronous, diachronous and anachronous analogies and their textualisation, the affectiveness of the past is transmitted and amplified. Like Warburg’s librarian, Sebald’s narrator acts as a conduit for this affective transmission, engorged and disgorged by the temporal flux, both subject and object of cultural memory. The concept of the library allows Sebald’s (Warburgian) narrator to participate in cultural memory by way of reading modernity’s catastrophes (and their antecedents).

2.3 Bipolitics and the archive

The ethical ramifications of reading modernity become apparent in light of Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson. For the narrator, Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson, housed in the Mauritshuis, represents the violence of early modern discourse. Rembrandt’s painting of the Guild of Surgeons depicts the public dissection in January 1632 of the corpse of the petty thief Adriaan Adriaanszoon (alias Aris Kindt), soon after his execution, at the Waaggebouw in Amsterdam, for one of Dr Nicolaas Tulp’s annual anatomy lessons. The ‘spectacle’ constituted ‘a significant date in the agenda of a society that saw itself emerging from the darkness into the light’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 12). The significance for that society lies in the Cartesian perspective illustrated by the painting:

Dr. Tulp’s colleagues are not looking at Kindt’s body … [but] the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of a human being, such as envisaged by the enthusiastic amateur anatomist René Descartes, who was also, so it is said, present that January morning … . In his philosophical investigations, which form one of the principle chapters of the history of subjection, Descartes teaches that one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can be fully understood, be made wholly useful for work, and in the event of any fault, either repaired or disregarded.

(Sebald, 1999, p. 13)
Anne Fuchs has commented that Descartes’ ‘devaluation of the very notion of biological life ... [which] produces a dangerously utilitarian concept of nature that categorises life according to its usefulness’ makes ‘a connection between European rationalism and the biopolitics that made Auschwitz possible’ (2007, p. 125; see also 2006, pp. 172–3). That flesh is made useful, found at ‘fault or disregarded’ is prefigured in the body’s epistemological subjection and consequent representation: a process captured in Rembrandt’s painting by the fact that surgeons look not at the body but at the ‘anatomical atlas in which the appalling facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being’. The flesh or nature is made comprehensible and incomprehensible at the same time, subsumed and othered by its very modern representation. As Sebald’s narrator puts it, ‘[t]hough the body is open to contemplation, it is, in a sense, excluded’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 16).

Sebald’s positioning of this painting in the text is significant in terms of the way his narrator and we, the readers, read the artefacts and landscapes of modernity vis-à-vis the epistemological regimes, and the biopolitics they inform, that characterise modernity, the inception of which are emblematised by Rembrandt. Where Fuchs sees a long history of modernity in which the Holocaust is foreshadowed, Jonathan Long sees the structures and conditions of modernity both preceding the Holocaust and also continuing to the present moment of narration and in fact shaping that narration and how it remembers modernity.¹ For Long, modernity’s nexus of the production of knowledge, industrial production and the production of the subject can be found in the era’s archival tendencies and technologies (2007, p. 10). Long’s Foucauldian approach to modernity (often via Foucault’s Discipline and Punish and History of Sexuality Volume One) sees power imposed not in a top-down fashion and by state prohibition but by the ‘concept of the archive that acknowledges the vast plurality of archival practices that emerge in modernity, and an understanding of power that might account for their biological functioning’ (2007, p. 12). Archives came into being to memorialise and solidify monarchical power and then that of the nation state. Under modern epistemic regimes, ‘principles of identification, classification and gathering’ were able to shape and, indeed, produce modern life and subjectivity. The distribution of bodies in space was of course contingent upon the uneven development of archival practice across modernity’s spheres of activity, the very nature and local purpose of those practices (which took myriad although paradigmatic form), and on those who were disciplined by them (Long, 2007, pp. 12, 30–2).
When exercised through the archive, power is not ‘purely repressive’ but ‘productive’. Bodies are disciplined not through their ‘voluntary submission to explicit regulations’ but through their ‘surveillance, observation, registration, and examination’. This form of discipline produces correspondent documentary apparatus and methods of information storage. The ever-present possibility of observance and recording leads to the modern subject’s internalisation, in a panoptic-like fashion, of regulation. Self-regulation extends to the act of confession (be in the form of memoir, testimony, diary or other form of autobiographical expression, the activities of Sebald’s narrator’s included) in which the articulation of one’s perceived authentic self in the face of (and in seeking liberation from) power is actually a means by which the self is constituted by that power. The articulation of self in this manner is not only inspired by the regime of self-surveillance (the internalisation of regulation) but relates the self to the powerful discourses, practices and institutions that provide the subject with the authority and interpretive method by which he or she understands him- or herself (the truth of the confession) (Long, 2007, pp. 14–17). To understand the extent to which Sebald’s narrator and the act of narrative itself are implicated in the power/knowledge nexus that ruins landscapes and bodies, another look at Rembrandt’s painting is necessary.

Rembrandt’s painting depicts how a power/knowledge nexus lethally produces a disciplined subject, how social control is produced by the archiving of medical knowledge of the body. The painting is also housed in an archival institution, the museum. The legitimising cultural capital amassed in the Mauritshuis has a disciplinary effect on those who visited and visit it – a feeling of belonging to a culturally evolved nation – producing national subjects. This self-regulation or self-surveillance is focused by the spectacular display of art(efacts), and ‘spectatorship … inserts the individual into relations of power, arranging bodies in space and fixing the observer within normative, codified regimes of visual consumption …. The spectacle disciplines by delimiting what is to be seen and determining how it is to be seen’. The transformation of the exhibits in a museum into spectacle, via their distribution and display, allows the viewer a visual mastery over the spectacular object that is paralleled by the ‘workings of the power/knowledge [nexus] that operate through spectacle on the observer himself’ (Long, 2007, pp. 38–9).

Within the archive of the museum, Sebald’s narrator resists the disciplinary effects of display, and finds in Rembrandt’s painting resistance to the power/knowledge nexus and biopolitical regime depicted therein. The ‘much-admired verisimilitude of Rembrandt’s picture proves on
closer examination to be more apparent than real’. The dissection shown has begun with the ‘offending hand’, which is ‘grotesquely out of proportion compared with the hand closer to us’ and ‘anatomically the wrong way round: the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb are in fact those of the right hand. In other words, what we are faced with is a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas, evidently without further reflection, that turns this otherwise true to life painting (if one may so express it) into a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made’. This ‘deliberate … flaw in the composition … signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies. His gaze alone is free of Cartesian rigidity’ (Sebald, 1999, pp. 16–17).

Sebald’s narrator is acutely aware of the viewer’s potential implication in the Cartesian gaze depicted by Rembrandt, despite the visual dissent of the painter’s perspective. As the narrator continues, ‘If we stand today before the large canvas of Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* in the Mauritshuis we are standing precisely, perspectivally at least, where those who were present at the dissection at the Waaggebouw stood, and we believe that we see what they saw then’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 13). Russel Kilbourn is equally concerned: ‘In contemplating the radical reification of an other, the spectator herself, alongside the author (“wir”), is subjected by the painting (reproduced in the book), constrained to view from a site determined by its alignment with the Cartesian coordinates extending outward from the represented visual space’ (2007, p. 143). That those coordinates extend outwards suggests the reader and author (along with painter and spectator) are also perspectively implicated in a new way of seeing that emerged in the early seventeenth century and which is still apparent in the twentieth-century novel: ‘As Sebald reads it, the beginning of modern medical practice is conflated in Rembrand’s painting with the emergence of a new way of seeing. Realism in this context is never separable from the realism of bourgeois capitalist realism, an aesthetic ideology whose progressive phases after the Renaissance extend from the nineteenth-century academic painting to the historical and realist novels and finally to twentieth- and twenty-first century media’ (Kilbourn, 2007, p. 143). This cultural evolution works from a ‘neoplatonic conception’ or ‘Christian metaphysical dualism’, in which representation is predicated on a transcendent and unseen signified, to the ‘hard material’ and self-referential ‘surfaces of commodity culture’ (Kilbourn, 2007, pp. 143–4). Its progress and conclusion, its
various media, argues Kilbourn, are haunted by that unseen shadow, figured as the negative, irrational and, ultimately, deathly. Under a capitalist economy, the deathly is progressively redeemed as ‘productive destruction’ and signifies nothing. For Kilbourn, then, *The Rings of Saturn* is a ‘multi-faceted memento mori, constructed under the sign of the anti-Cartesian scopic regime’ that mourns that which has been redeemed, made fungible, along with memory itself that has been erased from the cultural landscape (2007, pp. 143–5). In sum, *The Rings of Saturn* mourns modernity’s lack of mourning.

According to Kilbourn, painter and author, viewer and reader are implicated in (or, as Long might have it, disciplined by) an aesthetic in which the deathly can only be glimpsed (lingering ‘unseen’ in ‘plain view in the interstices of dominant culture’) depending on, rather like Holbein the Younger’s 1533 painting of the two ambassadors, the position from which the text is seen (2007, p. 144). Where Kilbourn (2007, p. 145) admits a textual haunting and a stubbornly melancholic subject (Sebald’s narrator) at the centre of the text, who cannot mourn the passing of mourning, this chapter suggests a different interpretation of *The Rings of Saturn* in which the possibilities for memory lie in how the text models the act of reading. This is where the actuality and concept of the library found in the text might be usefully differentiated from the archive, of which the library has normally been deemed paradigmatic by critics (see Long, 2007, pp. 7, 10, 12). Sebald’s remediation² of the painting transmits, in Warburgian fashion, its affective charge (registered in the narrator’s shocked empathy). The intermedial constellation of past and present (painting, museum, novel) loosens the disciplinary hold on author/narrator/reader, allowing modern spectatorship to be transformed into an act of reading the texts, artefacts and landscapes of modernity. Through an orchestration of historical representations (akin to Warburg’s), Sebald intends his reader to be constituted by cultural memory rather than wholly by a power/knowledge nexus. In sum, Sebald’s intermediality suggests (pace Kilbourn, 2007) his text is less an archive and more a library.

John Beck has argued that the emphasis on the act of reading in the text and the narratives that follow it makes *The Rings of Saturn* ‘a space of and for reading’ (2004, p. 77). The book contains and becomes a space of reading, a library, aligning the narrator’s and reader’s activities – as before Rembrandt’s painting. What, though, does reading entail in Beck’s argument? The emphasis on acts and spaces of reading and writing suggests a necessary scrutiny: ‘the interrogation of the authority of constructed worlds and how representations shape, influence and legitimate
facts and events – how narratives make and unmake worlds’ which ‘is a direct confrontation with the technology of linguistic power in the modern world’ (Beck, 2004, p. 80). For example, the narrator recalls the office of a colleague, Janine Dakyns, whose academic work (principally on Flaubert) created an ‘amazing profusion of paper, a virtual landscape had come into being’ (Sebald, 1999, pp. 85–6). Dakyns claims to find perfect order in this disorder, which has erased the real world and replaced it with a paper one (Sebald, 1999, p. 86). The same might said of Sebald’s narrative as a whole – Dakyns’s disorderly order writ large – in which the creation of a ‘counter-system, a mirror world that reflects back the … “truth” of historical experience’ that has been ‘deformed’ by ‘Enlightenment rationality … [and] the imperial and capitalist projects it legitimised’. What, though, is to prevent the narrative from staging the ‘uncanny’ return of that deformation? (Beck, 2004, pp. 77, 81). Put another way, the narrative, in revealing the destructiveness of modernity, gains in authority, and its representation of modernity becomes irresistible. Yet, has it substituted one form of totalising representation (a rationality that stems from the Enlightenment) for an equally totalising counter-narrative of modernity? In other words, the digressive nature of the text that records the progress of a body and subjectivity (the narrator’s) through time and space may in fact reinscribe the very representational order it sets out to critique – a disorderly order (self-) legitimised by the intellectual labour of the narrator and his memorial stance (Beck, 2004, p. 81).

As Long argues, Dakyns’s study is a failed archive. This ‘paper landscape … constitutes an archive that is completely devoid of systematicity or a publicly accessible ordering principle, effectively excluding it from structures of power/knowledge …. The disciplinary archive is thus susceptible to failure from within, to the recalcitrance of embodied materiality, and to local subversion by archival and taxonomic practices that elude the power/knowledge nexus’ (2007, pp. 85–6). Failure then is contingent upon the archivist and the archived material, which here is of personal significance rather than of social use. Another such example of useless archival idiosyncrasy would be in Edward FitzGerald’s often-incomplete lexical projects (Sebald, 1999, pp. 199–200; see also Long, 2007, p. 85). However, the failure of these archives does not engender an alternative knowledge or historical memory of modernity, no matter how well placed FitzGerald was, for example, to comment on the capitalist reorganisation in the latter part of the nineteenth century of the rural landscape of Suffolk and those labouring classes who tenanted it (Sebald, 1999, p. 202). A failed archive still retains its potential to
function efficiently, but for Beck, that failure is ensured by the partiality of reading and writing, fore-grounded in *The Rings of Saturn*, which destabilises rather than restabilises the potential tyranny of representation (2004, pp. 79–80). This chapter argues that reading takes a more detailed turn (or reversal), one that is specific to biopolitical regimes and archival practices, and one that offers a qualitatively different hermeneutics than that of keeping watch over failed archives. To be more specific, this suggested reading is informed by Giorgio Agamben’s conception of the ‘state of exception’.

2.4 Reading the law

The state of exception is characterised by the suspension of a code of law through (extra)legal acts that strip subjects of legal recognition in the eyes of the state, national or international order, engendering non-citizens or ‘bare life’. Agamben’s examples include Hitler’s 28 February 1933 Decree for the Protection of the People and the State, which suspended the Weimar Constitution and declared an (extra)legal civil war against Germany’s Jewish citizenry. The legality of such acts under the state of exception is indistinct; the line between what is inside and outside the law is blurred (Agamben, 2005, pp. 23–4). Those (extra)legal acts have the ‘force’ but not the ‘value’ of law (Agamben, 2005, pp. 38–9). Nevertheless such acts are only intelligible with reference to the now suspended body of law, or code, that has been surpassed. In that sense, the legal enunciation works like the relation between langue and parole. Linguistic enunciation (parole) presupposes the existence of a systematised corpus (langue) as the reservoir of possible choices that now recedes behind its materialisation as utterance. Both acts of language and law claim immanence – to be meaningful in themselves without reference to the structures they have subsumed – enacting a pure relationship with reality.

In the state of exception, the (extra)legal activity, without the (now suspended) legal grounds, can appear to be the norm, or normative, because of that suspension. The violent effects of the law appear to be a ‘pure violence without logos’ and ‘claim to realise an enunciation without real reference’. Violence appears to be non-teleological (not the telos of the law), natural and something that ‘purely acts and manifests itself’. A purified violence, emanating from a zone of ‘indistinction’ – it is unlocatable – and immanent to itself it is thereby mythologised (Agamben, 2005, pp. 40, 62, 51, 59). It is in the state of exception that law reveals both its correspondence to an enabling context and
its non-correspondence (to a suspended legal corpus). It is in the state of exception that the structuring of the (extra)legal act – its negative grounds – can be glimpsed and its rhetoric of purity deconstructed.

How, though, to critique the exceptional law (and the exceptional situation) without reinscribing the same logic, without claiming the same immanence of meaning and purity of effect, without paralleling its teleological trajectory, without replacing (extra)legal violence with discursive, representational or rhetorical violence. For Agamben and Eric Santner, this is a case of studying the law rather than practicing it, thereby establishing a non-relation between law and life (Agamben, 2005, p. 64; Santner, 2006, p. 94). That does not mean the imagination of modern life outside of the law in some pure and natural condition, as this is the very thing that the state of exception has achieved in the production of ‘bare life’. Rather, the concept of purity must be appropriated in terms of the ‘deactivation’ of law in relation to life, ‘studied’ but no longer ‘practiced’, establishing not the telos of justice ‘but the gate that leads to it’ and thereby the potential to interrupt mythic violence (Agamben, 2005, pp. 60, 88, 64, 88). In sum, the law must be read.

Drawing on Agamben, Eric Santner argues that Walter Benjamin finds the figure of such reading in Franz Kafka’s ‘The New Advocate’ (2006, pp. 93–4):

Reversal is the direction of study which transforms existence into script. Its teacher is Bucephalus, ‘the new advocate’, who takes the road back without the powerful Alexander – which means, rid of the onrushing conqueror. ‘His flanks free and unhampered by the thighs of a rider, under a quiet lamp far from the din of Alexander’s battles, he reads and turns the pages of our old books … ’ But once we have reached this point, we are in danger of missing Kafka by stopping here. Is it really the law which could be thus invoked against myth in the name of justice? No, as a legal scholar Bucephalus remains true to this origin, except that he does not seem to be practicing law – and this is probably something new, in Kafka’s sense, for both Bucephalus and the bar. The law which is studied but no longer practiced is the gate to justice.

(Benjamin, 1992a, p. 134)

Santner understands the works of W. G. Sebald as an attempted suspension or deactivation of the law that produces biopolitical or, as Santner has it, ‘creaturely life’. This chapter will modify that understanding by focusing on the act of reading. Law and language correspond to
each other in their respective enactments or enunciations. ‘Study’ found in the nexus of Kafka’s, Benjamin’s, Agamben’s and Santner’s work can be usefully thought of in Sebald’s work as reading rather than practicing the law. Where Sebald attends to the biopolitical regimes of modernity, the emphasis on reading (and spaces of reading) suggests a means of deconstructing and critiquing the power/knowledge nexus without reproducing its archival logic or the aesthetic implication that so concerns Kilbourn.3

Such studious reading is perhaps provoked by and most necessary in what for some critics is The Rings of Saturn’s most controversial sequence. On the coastline south of Lowestoft, the narrator ponders the history of herring fishing – a historical memory spatialised by the encounter with the coastal landscape. Put another way, this is walking as reading, as physical progress progresses the narrative because what is encountered generates interpretation (Beck, 2004, p. 78). It is the perception of the ‘indestructibility of Nature’, of which the species, once found in overwhelming numbers, is emblematic, that catalyses its destruction (Sebald, 1999, p. 53). Herring fishing was ‘regarded as a supreme example of mankind’s struggle with the power of Nature’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 54). Not only overfished but also subject to experimentation, this ‘process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 57). This suffering, it was assumed, given the ‘peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher animals in their death throes. But the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 57). Pondering the history of herring, the ‘darkening’ coastline puts the narrator in mind of ‘an article I had clipped from the Eastern Daily Press several months before, on the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange’ whose manor house lay nearby (Sebald, 1999, p. 59). The narrator continues: ‘During the last War, the report read, Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen-Belsen on the 14th April 1945’, after which words the reader turns the page to be confronted by a double-spread photographic image of corpses in thin woodland (Sebald, 1999, pp. 59, 60–1). Neither the article nor the narrator mentions Bergen-Belsen again, and the image is neither captioned nor referred to by the narrator (which is quite typical in Sebald’s work). The implication is that this image is of what those liberators found at Bergen-Belsen.

The relationship between natural history and the history of genocide is troubling. The Cartesian regime evident in the experimentation on and destructive mastery over nature (as in herring fishing) collapses
into the biopolitical regime lethally instituted at Bergen-Belsen. Sebald’s narrative seems not to have withstood the teleological nature of the Cartesian perspective and of the biopolitical regimes that adopt it. Such a perspective, which rationalises all objects in its path, rendering them fungible, naturalises its own progress. If that is the case, then all social history seems to collapse into natural history, as *The Rings of Saturn* is unable to withstand the representational systems it critically stages. The ostensible continuity between herring fishing and genocide, both of which appear to be stages in a natural history of destruction, is underlined by the relation of two images deployed in the text: one probably of the corpses found at Bergen-Belsen, the other of herring fishermen surrounded by piles of dead fish. The contiguity of narratives of fishing and genocide induces a reading of these images as visually rhyming. The equation of the two ‘natural’ events is further underlined by the narrator’s anthropomorphisation of the herring in wondering what they feel. The equation between natural and social history, or the naturalisation of social history, seems apparent elsewhere in the narration of the gradual destruction of Dunwich, a once great port of the Middle Ages that succumbed to a series of natural disasters – ‘catastrophic incursions’ of storm, hurricane and coastal erosion. ‘Dunwich, with its towers and many thousand souls, has dissolved into water, sand and thin air’ (Sebald, 1999, pp. 158–9). If natural catastrophes are confused with social ones, it is not surprising that of all the disasters narrated the narrator seems most affected by the damage done to English trees in the hurricane of Autumn 1987 (Sebald, 1999, pp. 265–7).

Peter Fritzsche takes exception to the comparison of the bodies found at Bergen-Belsen and those of herring, to the naturalising terms used to render social history as natural history (as in, for example, the case of Dunwich), to the absorption of historical particularity (most seriously of Bergen-Belsen), and to the fact that the Holocaust does not command in this text a form and theory of representation specific and appropriate to the nature of its events (2006, pp. 292–4). For Long, Sebald’s lack of specificity can be explained by the text’s failure to escape the archival logic that governs its narrative structure. Despite the narrator’s attempts to resist modernity’s knowledge/power nexus, through a digressive narrative that remembers the ‘semantic density’ of places navigated (a spatialisation of time) that would otherwise be homogenised (effectively forgotten), the narrative ultimately sets up a series of equivalences between narrative events (times, spaces and places encountered and narrated). In this equivalence, no one event can be privileged over another; and quantitative not qualitative differences are registered (Long, 2007,
p. 143). (For example, 14 million trees were destroyed in 1987 (Sebald, 1999, p.265), 60 billion herring caught (Sebald, 1999, p. 57), and 700,000 murdered at Jasenovac (Sebald, 1999, p. 97)). The narrative does not proceed metonymically (the encounter with place stands in for the encounter with time) but metaphorically (what is encountered is rendered formally similar) (Long, 2007, p. 143). A system of similarity, argues Long, is needed to shore up the text’s coherence, as narrative digression and dilatoriness threatens to dissolve into incoherence (Long, 2007, p. 142). In sum, the text has installed a ‘salient technology of modernity into the very fabric of the narrative’, demonstrating an archival mastery of its materials, and the knowledge it generates, from which it cannot escape (Long, 2007, p. 144).

It might be possible that critical commentary has itself succumbed to an archival logic, in not being able to see beyond the archive, as the text’s similarities can be read differently. The affinities suggested by the text task the reader with finding a pattern (a natural history that encompasses all things) where there may be none or with illuminating an arbitrary patterning foregrounded by the narrative. In that sense the affinity is a strategic means of locating difference (Friedrichmeyer, 2006, pp. 80, 82). In the example of the natural history given above, the history of herring fishing and the history of genocide (or the liberation of the camps) are related by what seems to be a tenuous if nonsensical relational thought (of a ‘darkening’ coastline), revealing an associative narrative consciousness unfolding peripatetically (articulating the proximity of two spatialised historical memories), more than a structural continuity between the two histories themselves. Having said that, we must remind ourselves that the histories can be related by Cartesian logic unleashed on bodies and nature. Or, as Mary Cosgrove would argue, the history of global capitalism connects vastly different and devastating industrial processes (such as the processing of humans and animals) that occur unevenly at different times and in different places and which manifest themselves in the shaping of the landscape (be it a body-strewn camp in Germany or a Suffolk coastline) (2007, p. 103). In that sense the social history of capitalist modernity takes the form of natural history.

It must not be forgotten, though, that the narrativisation of a relation between the bodies of Jews and herring takes place within an intertextual framework. Sebald’s narrator is reminded, by the flight of birds over sea and cliffs, of Jorge Luis Borges’s story ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, the theme of which is the construction of the fictional world Tlön, its language and history, which threatens to subsume its own increasingly
unverifiable textual origins and to supersede the real world (pp. 69–70). Sebald proceeds to quote from Borges's story, but he inserts the phrase: ‘in historiography, the indisputable advantages of a fictitious past have become apparent’ (1999, p. 71). Borges's story reminds us of the textual construction of worlds, and the confluence of history and literary narrative, providing a critical distance on the implications of historically relating herring and Jews. There is the possibility that the reference to Borges’s text might institute another tyranny of representation. One total fiction of the world (natural history/Enlightenment rationality) might have simply been replaced by another (as in Borges), but this possibility is undermined by the nature of the intertextual reference, which is as digressive as the narrator's own walks. Sebald does not institute a hierarchy of narrative realms and their possibilities – in which Borges can be used to deconstruct natural history – but places them side by side, blurring the boundaries between the two, creating slippage between them. In this sense, Borges provides not an intertext but a paratext, and the narrative syntagma unfolds paratactically.

Within the reference to this text lies another: ‘The world will be Tlön. But, the narrator concludes, what is that to me? In the peace and quiet of my country villa I continue to hone my tentative translation, schooled on Quevedo, of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* (which I do not mean to publish)’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 71). The narrator's biographical account of Browne's life and writings bookends his own narrative. The narrator believes that Browne was present at the dissection of Aris Kindt (Sebald, 1999, p. 17), which makes Browne's metaphysics an important philosophical resource in countering the Cartesian perspective enacted there and its modern legacies. Just as that perspective is shadowed by the deathly and irrational, so ‘the invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us remained an unfathomable mystery for Thomas Browne too, who saw our world as no more than a shadow image of another one far beyond’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 18). In attending to that which haunts the Cartesian gaze, both Sebald (and his narrator) and Browne share the same narrative style and strategy. The narrator might very well be describing his own writing when he describes Browne as ‘deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one or two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 19). Despite the ‘gravitational’ pull on Browne's prose, due to the weight of allusion and learning that it bears, it does succeed in gaining a sense of levitation.
above the objects of its enquiry, providing both transcendent, critical
distance and microscopic scrutiny (Sebald, 1999, p. 19). ‘And yet, says
Browne, all knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are
no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled
edifice of the world. We study the order of things, says Browne, but we
cannot grasp their innermost essence’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 19). ‘Shorthand’
for such an order or pattern is the ‘quincunx’, ‘which is composed by
using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which
its diagonals intersect. Browne identifies this structure everywhere, in
animate and inanimate matter’ (Sebald, 1999, pp. 19–20). Although
‘one might demonstrate ad infinitum the elegant geometrical designs
of Nature’, Nature’s continuities produce discontinuity, conformity
deformities, seriality ‘singular phenomena’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 21). As
recorded in Browne’s Pseudodoxia Epidemica, the patterns of nature gener-
ate the monstrous exception that proves the rule (Sebald, 1999, p. 22).
This generative destruction is, finds Browne, universal: in ‘every new
thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history
of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world,
does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but
rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without
fail into the dark’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 24). This inherent destructiveness
informs Browne’s fascination for the things that survive, as in Urn
Burial (1658), a ‘discourse on sepulchral urns found near Walsingham
in Norfolk’, which draws on natural and historical sources for precedent
and context in its discussion and cataloguing of the remains of the dead
and buried, the things ‘unspoiled by the passage of time’ (Sebald, 1999,
p. 26). The melancholy difficulty in accepting the immanent destruc-
tion of things is assuaged by the fact that some things remain: ‘Browne
scrutinises that which escaped annihilation for any sign of mysterious
capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars
and moths. That purple piece of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of
Patroclus – what does it mean?’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 26).
Reference to Browne and the meaning of silk reappears in the final
chapter of The Rings of Saturn. The detailed history of sericulture is
prefaced by an account of Browne’s Musaeum Clausum or Bibliotheca
Abscondita, ‘a catalogue of remarkable books, listing pictures, antiquities
and sundry singular items that may have formed part of a collection put
together by Brown but were more likely products of his imagination,
the inventory of a treasure house that existed purely in his head and to
which there is no access except through the letters on the page’ (Sebald,
1999, p. 271). The Musaeum includes a reference to the introduction of
the secrets of Chinese sericulture to the Western world (Sebald, 1999, pp. 273–4). This history of Western sericulture traces its development through the eighteenth century (Sebald, 1999, pp. 282–3) – during which the bodies of silk weavers were tortuously harnessed to weaving machines in a manner that could be described as disciplinary in the Foucauldean sense – through its use in the Third Reich’s aviation technology and as a symbol of the engineering of racial purity (Sebald, 1999, pp. 292–3). The narrative of the final chapter concludes by returning sericulture to Browne, whose father was a silk merchant and who, the narrator recalls but cannot verify, remarked in a passage of the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that in seventeenth-century Holland it was the custom to drape, when there had been a death, ‘all mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 296).

Long points out that, after quoting (indirectly but verbatim) from the *Garden of Cyrus* on the quincunx, Sebald adds something not in but sounding like the original: ‘we are occupied above all by the abnormalities of creation, be they the deformities produced by the sickness or the grotesqueries with which Nature, with her inventiveness scarcely less diseased, fills every vacant space in her atlas’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 21). The term ‘abnormality’ does not enter the German and English lexicons until the nineteenth century. Sebald’s addition converts Browne’s ‘devotional hermeneutics’ that ‘seeks similitude among diverse singularities that remain irreducibly particular while participating in the oneness of divine creation’ into an ‘avatar of a distinctly modern episteme’. This modern ‘secular negative metaphysics’ centres on monstrous abnormality: not the exception that proves the rule but exception as the rule in terms of nature’s generative destruction (Long, 2007, p. 37).

If *The Rings of Saturn* generates spaces of and for reading, then the inter- and intra-textual use of Browne provides a model of how Sebald’s text is structured like a library, facilitating the work of ethical reading (and remembering) by narrator and reader, and therefore commentary on the knowledge/power nexus instituted by archival practice. The compendious narrative style, and its inventory of texts, objects, places, people and histories, shared by Browne and Sebald’s narrator ‘brings the text to a standstill’, arresting plot but allowing the ‘potentially infinite extension of discourse time’. This arresting narrative style brings reading to a standstill as well. Long argues that the leaps, digressions, convolutions and densities both of and within the narrative can be characterised as
a hallmark of modernist difficulty. Such difficulty impedes the reading process or rather reading as consumption and therefore interferes with the text's commodification (Long, 2007, pp. 139–40). More than that, such an uneconomic narrative style also prevents the easy consumption of the text's archival reproduction of the world. Arrested reading affords the opportunity for the kind of study advocated by Agamben. Browne's narratives of destruction may reflect on the irresistible processes of modernity to come later. However, the destructive process leaves something that remains – a materialisation of difference and discontinuity that (pace Long, 2007 and Kilbourn, 2007) might disrupt the power/knowledge nexus that naturalises the history of destruction. It all depends how that remnant is read.

That which survives a natural history of destruction (silk) is not posited as an autonomous and stranded remnant of modernity and not an object in which the memory of modern experience is imminent and inherently remembered outside of the archive. As we have seen from Sebald's narrator's history of sericulture, it is implicated in the disciplining of bodies (in, for example, the industrial production of silk), the power/knowledge nexus (the military and racial technology of the Nazi state) and easing the departure (and forgetting) of the dead. Silk is an artefact, the textual traces (or narrativisation) of which must be constantly read and re-read, or studied (cf. Agamben, 2005), along with the other remains of modernity encountered in this text, in the library that is the text, to prevent the naturalisation of a history of destruction, its archivisation. It is, then, all in the reading, which takes place in the library generated by the text, which Browne also generates in his *Musaeum* in order to read Nature's singularities and similarities.

The foregoing has argued that, given Sebald’s foregrounding of the act of reading, reading the law rather than practicing the law is potentially a means of not contributing to the archival logic produced by modernity. In its totalising apprehension of modernity, the history of modernity, and in particular of destruction, becomes a natural history. Biopolitical regimes and the bare life they produce, and the teleologies of law and history upon which they are predicated, are thereby naturalised. One effect is to render the Holocaust indistinct. Reading (not practicing the law) is the means of deconstructing this version of modernity’s narrative, restoring particularity to its catastrophes, illuminating the discontinuities and continuities between its destructive episodes. Where *The Rings of Saturn* suggests the potential of reading, *Austerlitz*, the following argues, demonstrates how the Holocaust (as Sebald represents it) can be misread.
2.5 *Austerlitz*

Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz* (2001) has had an interesting ‘monumental’ afterlife, as Rigney might put it, particularly in relation to the critical discourses it has attracted. *Austerlitz* is the fictional biography of Jacques Austerlitz who arrived in England in 1939, aged four-and-a-half, as part of a *kindertransport* from Prague. He escaped the Holocaust that claimed his parents but forgot his origins and what he had lost. His subsequent life is, for the most part, ruined, haunted by a sense of exile and loss he does not understand. Susan Suleiman would describe this novel as the fictionalisation of the plight of the ‘1.5 generation’. The literature of the second generation – the children of survivors born after the event – is marked by the challenges of inheriting and making sense of memories of things not witnessed or of reconstructing such experiences in the face of the silence, repression or incomprehension of the first generation. The 1.5 generation, on the other hand, is made up of ‘child survivors of the Holocaust too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, and sometimes too young to have any memory of it all, but old enough to have *been there* during the Nazi persecution of the Jews’ (Suleiman, 2006, pp. 179, 181–2). Susannah Radstone (2008, pp. 30–9) has argued that critics have appropriated W. G. Sebald’s novel of 2001 as a trauma/Holocaust text in the sense that it has been read as the literal inscription, engraving or reflection of the dynamics of the traumatic memory of, as Suleiman might put it, this 1.5 generation.

In light of Radstone’s comments about the critical reception of Sebald, the following will first examine tendencies in memory and trauma studies that might explain the way in which critical apprehensions of Sebald’s text conflate text and trauma. It is the disruptive interplay of photographic images and verbal text, the phototextuality of *Austerlitz* – a characteristic found across much of Sebald’s work – that many critics find akin to traumatic affect. A number of critical responses to the phototextuality of Sebald’s work will be examined and scrutinised, framing a closer investigation of particular passages in *Austerlitz* and the images deployed therein that have taken on a life of their own in critical discourse, given the amount of attention they have received. While this engagement with Sebald’s critics cannot be exhaustive, it hopes to be representative of certain critical tendencies. The focus on those now iconic scenes will illuminate the central thesis of this discussion. Sebald provokes readings of his text that might find in it trauma and the act of reading traumatising, in order to pre-empt such readings – separating text and trauma. Scenes of trauma will be found to be not references to
the traumatic real but a matter of intertextual reference to theories of memory and photography, namely Roland Barthes’s and Walter Benjamin’s. In this provocation and revocation of trauma, traumatic affect is found to be theoretically formulaic. I argue, then, that Sebald does not engage directly and explicitly with recent memory and trauma theory, but perhaps rather with ethical issues of appropriating the trauma of others – an appropriation facilitated by the current theoretical culture of trauma and memory which seems to be informing much of Sebald’s criticism.4

2.6 Memory and trauma studies

Radstone’s comments are part of her larger scrutiny of certain trends within memory studies. The postmodern turn to memory (registering local, partial, subjective and lived experience) sought to dismantle the authority of the grand narrative of ‘H’istory (with its claims to objectivity and totality) but has instead inverted a binary opposition. Where history once stood, memory now stands (Radstone, 2005, p. 140; 2000, p. 84). The memory in memory studies has, argues Radstone, eclipsed history and as a result become overpersonalised (taken out of historical context): ‘the inner world and its very processes has been taken as “the” world’ (2005, p. 40). Any object, discourse or practice can now appear as memory, with a life of its own, free from historical specificity and origin (Klein, 2000, pp. 127–50). The memory in memory studies, then, has been stripped of mediation. Objects of memory (memory texts), such as a memoir or monument, are taken as direct reflections of the processes of memory and considered, complains Radstone, without due attention to their textual or generic properties, their related discourses or traditions (2008, pp. 30–9) or to the mediating discourses and institutions of the public sphere that authorise these texts and facilitate their articulation of the past (2005, pp. 35–7). Wulf Kansteiner (2002, p. 197) might add that if memory texts are regarded as unmediated reflections of the processes of memory, then questions of reception are ignored. Texts may be read differently than intended by their authors or authorising institutions and discourses, or not read at all as significant to memory.

The notion of an unmediated memory text is, arguably, informed by, or at least relates to, what could be described as canonical trauma studies. In trauma studies, memory and trauma are, ostensibly at least, antithetical. Canonically defined, trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation. However, not only have recent studies of trauma (Luckhurst, 2008) found that trauma compels
rather than impedes narrative, there is a logic in canonical studies that, as the following argues, suggests trauma as a pure, unmediated, form of memory. The emergence of trauma studies as an academic discipline in the 1990s has been largely credited to the work of Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992). Of late a critical consensus has developed around their work, focusing on the universalisation of trauma found therein. Before that consensus can be represented, a canonical definition is needed, and will be taken from the work of Caruth and Felman. For Caruth, the response to the traumatic event, as in flashback, hallucination or dream, is the literal repetition of the event. Literality is guaranteed by the belatedness of the event: the event is forever returning, because missed (unassimilated first-time round), and repeatedly missed second time round (as in the intrusive response). Although the response may seem symbolic, the trauma constitutes an ‘enigmatic core’ by a literal inscription that is conveyed belatedly in this repeated incompleteness of knowing (1995, pp. 4–5; 1996, pp. 60–2). As Caruth puts it, ‘in trauma … the outside has gone inside without any mediation’ (1996, p. 59).

For the literal inscription of trauma to take place, the unconscious must be a blank space, preserving the event in its literality, free from association (Caruth, 1995, p. 9). If trauma is only experienced in its belatedness – an experience the witness still cannot claim – and if the witness has become a vessel for trauma, it follows that the trauma has become unmoored from its historical origins (the witness’s original experience). Unmoored, trauma demands a new kind of witnessing: the witnessing of the witness who conveys trauma to those who listen. Trauma threatens ‘contagion’: ‘the traumatisation of the ones who listen’ (Caruth, 1995, pp. 8–10, 11). Trauma has departed from its origins and arrived in the cultural memory of events not directly witnessed. The experience of trauma extends to the act of reading as well as listening, in which trauma registers in the aporias of texts – in their structural absences. For Caruth’s critics, any textual space becomes capable of registering trauma (Leys, 2000, p. 290); and the inherent failure of reference attributed by poststructuralist thought to language means that the text becomes the real site of trauma (Hungerford, 2001, pp. 81–3). Literary language as such is able to transmit trauma from one person to another because it has been severed from any prior relationship between (direct) witness to historical trauma and his or her testimony. ‘By cutting experience free from the subject of experience, Caruth allows trauma not only to be abstract in the extreme but also, by virtue of that abstraction, to be transmissible’ (Leys, 2000, p. 297). If the text is traumatic, the contagion
of trauma extends to the act of reading. Trauma’s contagion, which spreads via the language community, has the potential to victimise all who are affected by the language of trauma, thereby confusing distinctions between victim and perpetrator and those who would relate to each category of historical agent.

The same could be said about Felman’s theory of trauma and testimony. For example, according to Felman, the poetry of Paul Celan ‘strives to defetishise his language and to dislocate his own aesthetic mastery, by breaking down any self-possessed control of sense and by trying to disrupt any sense of unity, integrity or continuity of conscious meaning’ (1992, p. 37). Through the deformation of words, phrases and syntax, through the insertion of space and thereby silence between and within words, through the breakdown of poetic sound, Celan attempts to convey the experience (his) of witnessing that which resisted witnessing and the attribution of conscious meaning. ‘Through their very breakdown, the sounds testify, henceforth, precisely to a knowledge they do not possess, by unleashing, and by drifting into, their own buried depths of silence’ (Felman, 1992, p. 37). Celan’s experience as witness is not in doubt, nor is the testimonial nature of his poetry. What might be problematic here is the embodiment of trauma in language. It is the conflation of traumatic memory – no matter how inaccessible that memory is, as in ‘sounds testify … to a knowledge they do not possess … drifting into … their buried depths of silence’ – and language, positing language as witness, which is problematic here. As in Caruth’s concept, trauma then is endlessly transmissible.

As Hungerford argues, that language can embody rather than represent trauma reveals a certain irony about the deconstructionist origins of much trauma theory. The very rejection of language as representational by deconstructionism gives way to a kind of sacralisation of language: not a representation of trauma but the trauma itself in terms of language’s embodiment or performance of trauma’s disruptions (see also Ball, 2000, pp. 1–44). This positioning of trauma shifts the focus of Holocaust studies away from the survivors’ acts of survival in the camps to their acts of witnessing, in which anyone, potentially, can participate. ‘The implications of that deconstructive shift from language as representation to language as performance – apparent in the idea that survivors can be produced on the basis of trauma that is experienced by being read – suggests that Felman’s evident concern with the actual violence experienced in the Holocaust may be unnecessary to trauma theory at its most abstract level’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 80). The logic of Felman’s argument about the participatory nature of trauma is that
the direct experience of the camps is exemplary (in the extreme but exemplary nonetheless) rather than unique in that it illuminates a crisis of language and identity at the ‘very core of our common life’ (Hungerford, 2001, p. 80). According to Felman’s version of deconstruction, language’s inherent failure of reference makes all literature testimonial: Felman conceives of testimony as the ‘literary – or discursive – mode par excellence of our times’ (1992, p. 5). As the contagion of trauma spreads throughout the language community, it is language that institutes or perhaps constitutes a series of traumatised identities – and the experience of traumatic events in history merely exemplifies a trauma that has already been felt at the core of identity. The question remains as to whether Sebald’s critics render his text testimonial in the sense described above.

2.7 Traumatic apertures

The interplay of image and text in Sebald’s work in general and Austerlitz in particular makes for unsettled reading. As Jonathan Long notes, the photographic images found in Sebald’s works have a disorienting, doubling effect. Someone in the real world, outside of the text, must have taken the photographs and yet they are purported to have been taken by a fictional character. The character has ‘no extra-textual referent’, yet the images do, and because they do provide traces of the apparatus and person that produced them in the real world, they provoke an ontological confusion between the textual and the extra-textual, the real and fictional. The narrative device of having the protagonist, in this case Austerlitz, carry a camera wherever he goes cannot naturalise the images that he produces, nor effect a seamless incorporation of them into the narrative account of his life and memory (Long, 2007, pp. 149–50). That the photographic images flicker, illuminating their reality and unreality, conveying the presence and absence of their referents suggests a reflection of Austerlitz’s own memorative processes of trying to recover his traumatic past. Silke Horstkotte (2004, pp. 271–3, 279, 283–5) develops the ways that a disturbed reading not only reflects Austerlitz’s memory, but also participates in it. In reconstructing the relationship between image and text that has been absent – the provenance of the images unclear, their illustrative capacity curtailed – the reader opens up and occupies a third, liminal signifying realm in which different temporalities coincide: the present moment of verbal reference and the return of the past staged by the photographic image. This reflects other moments of the text in which historical artefacts provoke the past’s intrusion in
the narrator's and narrated subject's present. On the one hand, this coincidence of temporalities is framed by the memorative subjectivity of the narrator and narrated. On the other, that frame is exceeded when the reader is drawn into this liminal realm. The reality or documentary effect of the images is cast into doubt by their non-correspondence with the verbal text and *vice versa*, even though it was the referential promises of both that provoked the reader into investigating the differences between them. The deconstruction of both orders of signification compounds the ambiguity of the ‘imagetext’, making it dependent on the reader to fill its ‘fantastic gaps’ and become the subject of memory (remembering subject) in whom different temporalities coincide.

If, for Horstkotte, the text leaves excessive room for the reader's participation, Amir Eshel suggests that the photographs which provoke such an excess, appear to stand outside, at least temporarily, their narrativisation. Before they depart for the last time, Austerlitz gives the narrator the keys to his house and access to his collection of photographs. Those photographs have all the while been illustrating the narrative and will continue to do so. The emplotment of those images has less to do Austerlitz's unfolding narration of his own life and more to do with the narrator's orchestration of their appearance in that life story. The narrator has smuggled them into the narrative before their narrativisation becomes apparent. In this attempt at ‘bricolage’ – a defiance of an inevitable ordering process – the narrator seeks to stave off time and oblivion: the rationalisation of modern experience by its temporal organisation into linear patterns, subsuming the lived and the particular, and the rationalisation of the violence of such an organisation in the name of progress. This has a particular reparative resonance for a German writer (and, by implication, narrator) writing the life of a Jewish subject. For Eshel, the narrator's desire to stave of (modern) time gives rise to a type of narrativity that strives for immediacy by which Austerlitz and those he stands for can ‘transgress the border between textual and transtextual realities’ (Eshel, 2003, pp. 81–3, 94). The emergence of Austerlitz from the text is of course a rhetorical effect of the narrative. Nevertheless from Horstkotte to Eshel, the borders of the text are becoming increasingly permeable, and the differences between memory and literature worn thin. Furthermore, the insertion of photographic images disrupts narrative progression, introducing an alternative temporality to the obliviousness of modern time. The reading of images ‘relates the spectator to temporality – they make one aware of both the now that is frozen in the image and the now of the spectatorship, of the reading process’, which incorporates the
‘time of reading’ into the ‘narrative’s temporal fabric’. What, though, is to prevent the time of reading slipping into the time of memory, the temporal convolutions of reading merging with Austerlitz’s memorial dynamics, no matter Eric Santner’s suggestion that the images only signify diegetically – their significance is beyond the reader’s world and grasp – thus remaining a silent presence in the novel (2006, p. 152)? Put another way, readings of *Austerlitz* that move text and memory closer together implicate author and narrator in an appropriation of Jewish memory rendering the text transparent to that memory.

What stands in the way of reading as an act of appropriation is perhaps the melancholy stance of author (and narrator). For Eshel, the incorporation of the time of reading into the narrative resists, for the time being, the ‘poetic figuration’ of the historical – an aesthetic redemption of the past (2003, p. 96). Santner has explored the different ethical implications of a melancholic posture. On the one hand, melancholy maintains fidelity to the lost object, whereas mourning seeks to replace it. Mourning is a process of adaptation, not only to loss, but also to a ‘reigning ideological formation’ that might normalise or forget loss, in opposition to which melancholy wants to create a different reality. On the other hand, melancholy can lead to a structural confusion. If loss has been appropriated – in the sense of a German writer or narrator (or a reader for that matter) over-identifying with a Jewish subject – the melancholy in fact makes tangible that which has not been lost (but only imagined, because of German over-identification, as lost). In this case melancholy not only disavows loss, but also the fact that there was nothing to lose (at least for the melancholic) in the first place. The act of appropriation is thereby disavowed but in a process in which loss or its affect is made tangible in a confusion of psychic structures and historical reality. The second version can be seen in the trauma ascribed to phototextuality, which is structural as opposed to historical, and thereby appropriate. Santner positions Sebald as writing from a third melancholic position: a kind of cautious neighbourliness between German writer/narrator and Jewish subject that prevents the first version of melancholy slipping into the second or something akin to the second. (The first version might not have enough traction on historical reality so that the inability to accept loss denies history altogether, and the disavowal of loss becomes a purely psychic, internal affair. (Santner, 2006, pp. 89–91, 166–7).) Or, alternatively, this third way would prevent melancholy from having too much historical traction and would prevent a romance of the ruins of modernity in which they would be made whole again and history redeemed (or effectively reversed) (Schmitz, 2004, pp. 306–7).
2.8 Trauma in the text

So far, examples of criticism have been deployed to introduce a general critical sensibility by which Austerlitz’s phototextuality might be received as traumatic memory itself or as portals to traumatic memory in reading practices engendered by the logic if not the intentions of such criticism. Acts of reading threaten, under these critical regimes, to make manifest a loss that was never the author’s, narrator’s or reader’s to begin with but which has potentially been made available to the reader by the aporias of phototextuality. Santner’s version of melancholy usefully frames an evaluation of Sebald’s gaze on history, the critics’ and that of the reader. In what follows, Sebald’s melancholy posturing can be measured by the way his text anticipates the proclivities of certain strands of criticism (and the theories of traumatic memory implicit in them) and the regimes of reading they generate. This anticipation is best illustrated by turning to two passages, and the images deployed in them, that have, in critical discourse, taken on a life of their own.

The first passage concerns Austerlitz’s journey to Prague in search of traces of his parents, where he finds an old family friend and former nanny, Věra. Věra gives Austerlitz two photographs, which had slipped, years ago, from a copy of Balzac’s story of Colonel Chabert, possibly lent to Agáta (Austerlitz’s mother) who placed them there in ‘the last weeks before the Germans marched in’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 256). Věra at first thought one of them might be of Agáta and Maximilian (Austerlitz’s parents) on the set of a provincial theatre before the war (perhaps in Reichenau or Olmutz) on which Agáta performed (Sebald, 2001, pp. 265–6). The other is of Austerlitz, dressed for a ball, taken in February 1939, six months before he left Prague (Sebald, 2001, p. 259). Austerlitz is struck by Věra’s observation that these photographs had ‘the impression of something stirring in them, as if one caught the small sighs of despair … as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the role that we the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 258). Věra’s suggestion is that the photographs are haunted by the referents (subjects) they bring back to life – and haunting for those who view them.

In the haunted and haunting nature of these images is an unmistakable reference to Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida. As Barthes would have it, the photographic image constitutes a form of witnessing, given its indexical nature. The referent is not in doubt, but its representation can appear chimerical, because the ‘intractable’ ‘that-has-been’ of the referent is ‘absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred’. Put
another way, photographs anticipate the death of their referents: the catastrophic ‘equivalence’ of the ‘absolute past of the pose’ and ‘death in future’. Whether or not the subject actually dies, every photograph is temporally structured in this way (Barthes, 1982, pp. 76–7, 96). In this sense, the photograph animates its referents, turns them into living corpses, as Barthes might have it. It is the reality effect of the photographic image (or the habitual ways in which that effect is culturally valued), the viewer’s confusion of sign and referent, that enhances the perception of reanimation (Barthes, 1982, p. 78).

The contextualisation of these photographs is worth noting. They are interleaved in Balzac’s novel about the return of Colonel Chabert, who, knocked unconscious at the battle of Eylau and interred in a mass grave, rose from the dead and returned years later to reclaim his wife, estate and name (Sebald, 2001, p. 394). Risen from the dead, he is unrecognisable and his claim to life seems arbitrary and in need of authorisation by the lawyer Derville. The other photograph, that of Austerlitz, is verified by his grandfather’s inscription on its reverse and later by Věra’s confirmation (Sebald, 2001, p. 259). As in Chabert’s story, witnesses are needed to corroborate history; the past and past objects cannot speak for themselves (that is, they are not autonomous). Although photographs are inscribed with the agency of witnessing – the act of photographing the past event; the image as index to that happening – they cannot witness themselves. In response to the photograph of the couple who might be Agáta and Maximilian, Austerlitz projects a befitting drama onto the mountain scenery of the set: ‘Wilhelm Tell, or La Svolamblula, or Ibsen’s last play’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 257). Ironically, the photograph turns out not to be of his parents. Of the photograph of himself, Austerlitz could not ‘recollect myself in that part’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 259). Although unrecognisable to himself, ‘I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting … for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 260). It is therefore Austerlitz who animates these photographs with a life they do not possess on their own.

The temporality of these images is focused by what Barthes would describe as their puncta, idiosyncratic details that signify only in the eye of the beholder: ‘I add to the photograph what is nonetheless already there’. The puncta overwhelm the act of looking but only because the observer has given him- or herself up to the image. The ‘wound’ of the punctum disturbs the studium – the cultural field shared by the photographer and viewer that would make the image recognisable and meaningful. The convoluted temporality of the image – ‘that is dead and
that is going to die’ – makes the moment of recognition also a moment of misrecognition. The image is brought to life, particularly through its punctum that ultimately serves to heighten its deathliness. That is why Barthes describes the photographic image as a ‘countermemory’ because the loss it reveals cannot be redeemed by the cultural codes (studium) that promise meaning. (What is more, the failure of the image as a form or prop of memory – ‘it cannot transform grief’ – is entirely subjective (in the eye of the beholder). Barthes’s meditation on photography, informed by the pursuit of an essential image of his mother, ‘The Winter Garden Photograph’, cannot show that image, because its memorial failure, its (un) recognisability, exists only for him.) (Barthes, 1982, pp. 27, 51, 55, 43, 96, 90.) Like Barthes, Austerlitz pursues, among other images, the mother-image, and it counters memory-work for both melancholics. Sebald’s staging of a Barthesian melancholy, though, does not conflate literature and memory as if they were the same thing. It rather establishes a pretext for Austerlitz’s memory-work and therefore Camera Lucida as the novel’s intertext.7 Should readers wish to participate in Austerlitz’s frustrated acts of recall, they would be following a theoretical formula.

Critics who find in Austerlitz a rendering of Barthes’s Camera Lucida seem to override the very intertextuality by which they find textual symptoms of trauma (realising perhaps the logic of Caruth’s version of trauma). For example, Maya Barzilai argues that Sebald’s insertion of photographic images into his narrative replicates ‘on the affective-aesthetic-level the characters’ and the narrators’ experience of unexpectedly facing certain previously inaccessible recollections’. What emerges in the photographic image’s isolation of a moment of time is not memory (a dynamic reconstruction of the past), but the literal past itself. Or put another way, Barzilai reads traumatic memory as the literal inscription of the past moment, which lies ‘lurking beneath the surface, or in the shadows of consciousness’, only to reappear with ‘exactness’. In general, this reading is based on a misreading of Barthes, whose idea of the complex and convoluted temporality of the image, the viewer’s animation of the subject and the chimerical return of the dead is interpreted by Barzilai as the simple, linear retrieval of the unmediated past. This is a literal return of the dead that is not a description of haunting but something that actually ‘haunts’ the readers, ‘who are themselves potential addressees for these spectral pieces of evidence’. Paradoxically, Barzilai claims that the insertion of photographic images thus constitutes an alternative narrative dimension that, unlike its verbal counterpart, is nonlinear. The idea of linear, photographic traumatic memory that actually emerges from her reading also rests upon
a misreading of Ulrich Baer's work (2002, pp. 7–8) in which the image captures an experience of which the subject may not be fully conscious, but which does not mean that, as Barzilai has it, the past remains fixed as a literal imprint in the memory of the traumatised, photographed subject. Barzilai’s other source is Lawrence Langer’s conception of ‘deep memory’ (1991, p. 6) which actually fits her theory of the image rather well, as for Langer, ‘deep memory’ is the unconscious, the unmediated, inassimilable and un-symbolisable past – an authentic register of trauma – that haunts the ‘common memory’ of conscious narration yet remains, somehow, unmediated (uncontaminated) by it (Barzilai, 2006, pp. 207, 208–9, 212–17).

In Barthes’s reading (in Camera Lucida) of the photographic image, the realisation of the ‘catastrophe’ of death that is to come but which has already happened belies the anaesthetised surface of the image by which the reality effect has temporarily staved off those temporal convolutions and the dead subject-referents pass themselves off for the living. Where Barthes argues that those convolutions compound the affectiveness of the punctum, Samuel Pane, in a modification of Barthes’s argument, suggests the belated realisation of the punctum – it is realised with the image out of sight, after viewing – and is akin to the time scheme of trauma itself: that which resists symbolic coding (of the studium) cannot be cognitively processed when witnessed. Pane follows Caruth in arguing the appearance of images in the text, and the narrator’s and protagonist’s discussion of them, are acts of repetition compulsion – attempts to master what was missed first time round (2005, p. 48). For Pane, trauma is structured into the photographic medium rather than historically specified: ‘The trauma that emerges upon their viewing of photographic images does not reside exclusively in the subject of the photographs they [Austerlitz and his narrator] consult throughout the novel, but rather it seems to reside in the photographic medium itself’ (2005, p. 39). If trauma is structural, then it contaminates the narrative and, implicitly, the reader: ‘since photographic media in Austerlitz is inherently traumatic, there can never be any complete recovery and documentation of the narratives of that past. Hence, narrative itself in Austerlitz must also be traumatic; it constantly returns to photographic images and constantly fails in its search for commensurability with human experience’ (Pane, 2005, p. 41). In short, Austerlitz has been diagnosed as contagious.

The work of Barthes, alongside that of Walter Benjamin, is also apparent in Austerlitz’s reading of the Nazi propaganda film made of the Theresienstadt ghetto in preparation for a Red Cross visit, which
was successfully designed to create the illusion of better conditions for the ghetto’s prisoners. In the film that became known as Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt (1944–5), or rather a patchwork of surviving scenes, Austerlitz hopes to find an image of his mother, who was sent to Theresienstadt before her fatal deportation farther east. Typically, and as with other images related to his parents, Austerlitz frames his viewing of these images with his dramatic imagination, underscoring the unreliable nature of the images, their propensity for dissimulation.

So, before seeing the film, he imagines his mother as ‘a saleswoman in the haberdashery shop, just taking a fine pair of gloves carefully out of one of the drawers, or singing a part of Olympia in the Tales of Hoffman which … was staged in Theresienstadt in the course of the improvements campaign’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 343). As Carolin Duttlinger points out, without realising the import of this thought, Austerlitz’s imagination is complicit with the Nazi’s strategy of illusion in which the brutal realities of the ghetto were veiled by Nazi propaganda (2004, p. 167). Initially the film reveals nothing of his mother, just a series of images that ‘seemed to dissolve even as they appeared’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 345). However, by making a slow-motion version in which the original 14 minutes are extended to an hour, ‘previously hidden objects and people’ emerge (Sebald, 2001, p. 345). The slow-motion version reveals damage to the film stock that was ‘hardly noticed before, [but which] now melted the image from its centre or from the edges, blotting it out and instead making patterns of bright white sprinkled with black which reminded me of aerial photographs taken in the far north, or a drop of water seen under a microscope’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 348). The deceleration of the moving image effectively returns it to a series of composite frames. Austerlitz’s reading of the film recalls – and rather deliberately, I argue – Walter Benjamin’s sense of the optical unconscious.

Benjamin describes how ‘photography reveals the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams’ (1997, p. 243). Elsewhere, Benjamin finds new ‘structural formations of the subject’ in the camera image: ‘a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses’ (1992a, pp. 229–30). Austerlitz’s microscopic view allows him to see flaws in the film that ‘disrupt and undermine the coherence of its staged, deceptive reality’ (Duttlinger, 2004, p. 160). What is more, the deceleration allows the emergence of a figure, in the audience
of a musical performance, whom Austerlitz believes to be his mother: ‘at the left-hand side, set a little way back and close to the upper edge of the frame, the face of a young woman appears, barely emerging from the black shadows around it, which is why I did not notice it at all at first’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 350).

A number of critics seem to corroborate Austerlitz’s findings. Despite her comments about the theatrical (propagandistic) setting and her perceptive identification of the way that Austerlitz’s description of his ‘mother’s’ jewellery does not match the image, illuminating Sebald’s framing of how we should read the image, Duttlinger seems to concur: ‘Austerlitz discovers his mother’.9 Or rather, to be fair to Duttlinger, Austerlitz discovers his mother within the context of his own memorialive desires, the illusions of Nazi propaganda and the ambiguity of the photographic image, compounded by association with the theatrical connotations of other photograph images found elsewhere in the text. While Duttlinger points to that context’s ironisation of Austerlitz’s discovery – there is a collusion here between author and critic/reader who know better than the protagonist – the suggestion remains that the image may exceed Austerlitz’s symptomatic reading of it and, indeed, its literary bounds, given Duttlinger’s more general framing of photography. Her incisive theory of photography in Sebald’s work elicits a textual trauma that overcomes or exceeds its literary and theoretical bases. Duttlinger identifies the way that photographic images acts as a protective shield (as in Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’) that makes inaccessible unwanted stimuli and providing a conscious alternative, as in Austerlitz’s projection onto the theatrical set that allows a confrontation with the trauma of the loss of his parents that he did not witness. Yet, for Duttlinger, ‘the discourse on photography ... cannot be reduced to a theoretical, cultural or aesthetic exploration, since it derives its complexity, as well as its literary potential from the fact that it figures as a symptom of the protagonist’s traumatised psychological disposition’. This is in effect corroboration between critic and protagonist on nature of the discourse of photography, which figures rather than critically reflects on trauma. The discourse suggests that the textual symptom of trauma transcends its literary bounds and the very theorisation that identified it (Duttlinger, 2004, pp. 159–60, 163, 169).

Marianne Hirsch reads the scene of the Theresienstadt image as illustrative of ways that that tropes of memory are brought to the past, creating a screen onto which present desires are projected – in this case a fantasy of rescuing the feminine, maternal victim (2008, pp. 120–2).
For Hirsch, though, this cautionary tale serves the concept of postmemory. (Postmemory can be defined as the highly mediated memories of those who did not witness the traumatic events of, in particular, the Holocaust, but who have inherited, by way of an cultural affiliation or familial legacy (even though that traumatic inheritance may be one of silence and the failure of witnessing) memories so affective they feel as they have originated in the postmemorial generation. Although postmemory affords the critical distance to work through rather than act out past events that were too traumatic to be cognitively apprehended by those who witnessed them, this form of memory also gives rise to fantasies of over-identification, as in Austerlitz’s imaginative projection onto the Theresienstadt still. Austerlitz’s fantasy may show how the performance of memory overrides the index of photographic images, but Hirsch’s reading is curious in that, despite her recognition of the intertext of *Camera Lucida* – the search for the mother image – and despite the highly mediated nature of postmemory itself, this cautionary tale is deemed illustrative of the problems of the cultural transmission of memory, as if what we are reading is memory (no matter how fantastical) rather than literature (Hirsch, 2008, pp. 124–5). Barzilai argues, in a far less tempered reading, that it is Agáta who emerges from the Theresienstadt film, just as she emerges from Austerlitz’s unconscious. Her strangeness to Věra, and indeed to Austerlitz, can be explained by the fact she embodies the uncanny – the familiar made unfamiliar (2006, p. 212).

The characteristics of the decelerated film hint not at the emergence of what had until recently resided in the unconscious, that is, Agáta, but at Austerlitz’s metaphysical desire to conjure up that referent. So, rather like Barthes’ punctum, which can only exist in the eye of the beholder, the ghostly emanations of the image are, likewise, not the intrusion of the unconscious but of another form of latency. As Benjamin explains: ‘the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it’ (1997, p. 243). Benjamin relates the optical unconscious to memory-work to come, provoked by the apprehension of a provocative aspect of the image. This of course is a subjective projection of a provocation onto the image and onto the past moment of its making. Given Sebald’s Benjaminian scheme, the Theresienstadt image of Agáta remains unverifiable; the only verifiable image that Austerlitz does find of her is in the
Celetná theatrical archives in Prague, in the records for 1938 and 1939 (Sebald, 2001, p. 353). Even this image has to be treated with suspicion, given the readiness with which Věra identifies it. If all images have so far proved unreliable, the immediate verification of this one seems conspicuous. More important, though, than identifying the limits and excesses of Austerlitz’s historical imagination is the theoretical terrain on which this takes place – on which Sebald orchestrates Austerlitz’s responses to the past. The fact of the allusion to another theory is as important as what the theory does. In other words, a series of intertexts keep the memory work done in this novel within theoretical bounds, thereby generating an isomorphic rather than contagious relationship between traumatic memory and text.

The intertextuality of *Austerlitz* is often used by critics to elicit trauma from the text – a trauma in which the reader might participate – which, once found, subsumes the intertextual means of its discovery. In other words, trauma found in this way expunges its own theoretical origins. Intertextuality can instead be used to qualify such readings, arguing that Austerlitz’s phototextuality does not open up traumatic apertures in the text and does not facilitate the reader’s participation in trauma. Rather, intertextuality keeps the memory work done in the novel within theoretical bounds – finding trauma is a matter of following theoretical *formulae* – generating an isomorphic rather than contagious relationship between traumatic memory and text.

Where Long argues that Austerlitz is an archival subject, I would argue that he is an intertextual one. Long’s argument (2007, pp. 149–67) is that *Austerlitz* stages not the psychodrama of the recovery of its protagonist’s repressed past and origins but rather the evacuation or complete externalisation of his inner his life. In other words, he is an entirely archival subject, devoid of interiority, whose only resources for that recovery are mnemotechnical devices, be they the photographic props or archives in which he tries to find himself (and his parents). It is, then, in external storage systems of data that he continues to mine for self-constitution (self-origination). This is ironic considering the subject of his academic expertise – ‘the architectural style of the capitalist era […] in particular […] the compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident in lawcourts and penal institutions, railway institutions and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwellings built to rectangular grid patterns for the labour force’ (Sebald, 2001, p. 44) – is itself an archival project that not only shielded him from the past, going as it did not further than the late nineteenth century, but which identified an architectural organisation of society that
foreshadowed the Nazi regime (Sebald, 2001, pp. 197–8). In attempting to transcend the archive that once precluded the discovery of self – a self that was originally missing from the archives of his Welsh foster father, the Welsh social services, the Foreign Office, the Aid Committee that oversaw the transport of Jewish children to Britain – he has further constituted an archival subjectivity (Long, 2007, pp. 149–67). Where Long argues that Austerlitz cannot exceed his archival subjectivity, which means he can never gain traction on the past, the foregoing, in arguing Austerlitz to be a prophylactic against trauma’s contagion, positions Sebald’s writing as melancholic in the sense that it disavows not historical trauma but rather the reader’s potential trauma – or rather a trauma he or she seeks to share with Austerlitz via a confusion of the structural and the historical.

2.9 The Limits of transference

Sebald seeks to restore historical specificity to Austerlitz’s representation of its protagonist’s trauma, which means stemming the universalisation of trauma. Trauma is neither structural nor integral to the photo-textuality of the novel. Although Sebald has deployed Barthes to pry trauma and the novel apart, Barthes’s theory is also in need of scrutiny. Following the pattern of Sebald’s criticism discussed so far, Bernhard Malkmus ascribes autonomy to the images of ‘the inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking’ found near the beginning of the novel (see Sebald, 2001, p. 3). For Malkmus they represent ‘the uncanny-familiar gaze of history out of the dark’ (2005, p. 234) and figure a repressed history emerging, photographically. Malkmus’s comment that photography with its ‘primordial quality of something real, outside systems of representation’, suggests that history now exceeds the text and looks back on it (Malkmus, 2005, p. 234). Malkmus overlooks the fact that these are not photographs and ascribes to these images an affectiveness that is associated with and which essentialises the photographic image.

The images of human eyes are those of the faces of Wittgenstein and the artist Jan Peter Tripp. They are both reproductions of the artwork of Jan Peter Tripp. It is unclear whether they belong to the narrator’s photographic collection or Austerlitz’s. More likely, the images could be drawn from the author’s own collection, after all Sebald and Tripp had been collaborators, lifelong friends, and Sebald had written essays on Tripp’s work (see Sebald 2004; 2005). What is
to be made of what seems like an authorial intervention or such an explicit declaration of intertextuality? Sebald writes of Tripp in relation to Barthes:

Roland Barthes saw in the by now omnipresent man with a camera an agent of death, and in photography something like the residue of life perpetually perishing. What distinguishes art from such undertaker’s business is that life’s closeness to death is its theme, not its addiction. It confronts the extinction of the visible world in an interminable series of reproductions by the deconstruction of phenomenal forms. Accordingly, Jan Peter Tripp’s pictures, too, have always an analytical, not synthesising tendency. The photographic material that is their starting point is carefully modified. The mechanical sharpness/vagueness relationship is suspended, additions are made and reductions. Something is shifted to another place, emphasised, foreshortened or minimally dislocated. Shades of colour are changed and at times those happy errors occur from which unexpectedly the system of a representation opposed to reality can result.

(2004, p. 84)

Sebald positions Tripp’s aesthetics as an antidote to Barthes’ melancholy phenomenology of the photographic image. Under the auspices of this phenomenology, as we have seen, the realism of the image serves to dislocate the referent, to present absence, which means, as Sebald might have it, that loss is universalised – subsuming particular historical losses. Tripp’s ‘deconstruction of phenomenal forms’ through the modification of photographic pretexts generates a critical distance from the affectiveness of the photographic image. Implicit in this is Sebald’s wariness that traumatic loss, which, as we have seen, has been found traumatic in so many renditions of Barthes, resides in the text, from where it can contaminate the reader.

His characterisation of photography aside, Malkmus is one of the few critics to actually put Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, and its memorative dynamics, in a (post-1989) German context. Malkmus argues that the instability of the text’s images locates the reader historically. The status of the photographic image, oscillating between the ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’, never functioning as ‘mere illustrations’, ‘entangle the reader in a subtext of interpretation and anticipation. Images are both trigger and residua of memory, they transcend and undermine temporal (narrative) categories and simultaneously establish an idiosyncratic mnemoscape from where the reader’s act of remembering can depart’. The instability of the images and their
disruption of the text create a space within the text for the reader's own memory work or rather for the intersection, staged by the novel, of personal and collective memory. Put another way, the novel stages a participation in post-1989 cultural memory, in which previous commemorative cultures, of East and West Germany and their tactics for normalising the past, have to be rethought: the novel is a ‘realm of translation between idiosyncratic condensations of historical memory and its return into collective topicality’. As a template for a kind of interactive cultural memory, the novel does not offer unmediated access to the past but rather a consideration of the ways remembrance is always mediated (by, for example, the narrator and author, their German identities and contexts, the media of their remembrance) (Malkmus, 2005, pp. 214–16).

By positioning *Austerlitz* within a cultural history of memory, Malkmus has foregrounded the way that the text and relationships to it may be mediated by the discourses of the public sphere. It is this positioning that allows a reconsideration of how trauma might be transferred culturally (if at all) and of the limits of transference. Jean Laplanche relates the work of cultural production – the production of a cultural, communicative artefact – to the analytical situation of transference. Laplanche describes clinical transference thus. In a clinical scenario, the offer of the analyst is transference, which entails the ‘re-opening of … [an] originary relation’, which undoes the ‘repression’, the ‘internalisation of the other’, and its ‘closure’ via the ‘unconscious’. The scenario of analysis offers a field of containment in this ‘unbinding’ of the subject and the ‘liberation of psychical energies’ from ‘psychical, egoic, ideological, symptomatic formations’. From a position of ‘benevolent neutrality’, the analyst offers the analysand a ‘dimension of interior alterity’ that allows his ‘interpellation by the enigma … of originary situation’. In other words, the traumatic enigma or otherness that has to be repressed in the formation of subjectivity can be accessed (in a way) because transferred onto the analyst, in an analytical scenario in which the analysand is unbound (but contained). For Laplanche, the traumatising enigma confronted in subject formation is, paradigmatically, that of adult sexuality, which must be ‘sealed off’, given ‘closure’ in ‘ideological form’, and its ‘residue of messages’ from a resistance to symbolisation repressed (1999, pp. 227–30). If through transference the analytical scenario allows the exploration of subject formation through its confrontation with a traumatic otherness, then Laplanche suggests a means by which trauma, transference and subjectivity might be considered in the cultural realm. This is not to say that structural traumas will be mapped onto historical ones, or that historical traumas will be considered as examples of structural
ones. Rather, the mapping of a clinical scenario onto the work of culture illuminates how historically specific transferential relations might work in the continued, historical formation of subjectivity.

Laplanche begins with the question of artistic intention. ‘Why create in order to communicate, and communicate through creating? And above all, why communicate in this way – that is, by addressing no-one, aiming beyond any determinate person?’ (1999, p. 223). Despite the ostensible and pragmatic intentions behind communication – ‘to communicate is to manipulate, to produce an effect on someone’ – ‘cultural production is situated from the first beyond all pragmatics, beyond any adequation of means to a determinate effect. The problem of the addressee, of the anonymous addressee, is an essential part of any description of the poetic situation. The addressee is essentially enigmatic … an other who is out of reach’ (Laplanche, 1999, pp. 223–4). In fact, the addressee implies a relation of direct address, which is not the case. Laplanche prefers the term recipient to describe the reception of that which is not explicitly addressed to him or her (1999, p. 224).

Analysis is, then, ‘allied to the site of culture’ in the way that the cultural message in going beyond the addressee is hollowed out, maintains an enigma and provokes a transferential relationship with the recipient, is open to his or her desires and so is a continuation of the analytical scenario. ‘The site of the cultural, as the site of enigmatic interpellation, with many voices and ears, remains privileged in that it concerns the transference of transference’, that is, the analytical scenario is transferred onto the cultural scene (Laplanche, 1999, p. 233). Perhaps the photographic images found in Austerlitz could be theorised in Laplanche’s terms. This chapter’s argument with various critics has augmented those images’ ambiguous status. The argument has been that the affectiveness of the novel’s phototextuality wanes when revealed to be formulaic and pre-emptive of its own theorisation. This waning of affect – or taking the traumatic real out of the text – could be understood to provoke a transferential relationship with the recipient of this cultural artefact. The evacuation of meaning (which is not the same thing as the traumatic repression of the past) presents Austerlitz, or at least its images, as an enigma in Laplanche’s terms. The transferential relationship with those images, provoked by their enigmatic nature, reveals something of the history of subject formation.

LaCapra might describe the critical focus on Sebald’s phototextuality in the context of transference. The critical apprehension of phototextuality as traumatic in itself is an example of what LaCapra has described as the confusion of structural absence and historical loss. In such confusion,
mourning is without end because the historical object of mourning is displaced by the focus on the structural (taken as the historical) (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 22–3). (As discussed above, Santner warns against just this kind of melancholy.) Individual or group identities formed in relation to a structural trauma turn ‘existence into a fundamentally traumatic scene’ that obscures the ‘relation between differentiated experiences of agents and subjects in the past and the differentiated experiences of observers or secondary witnesses’ (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 23–4, 37). In short, the structural universalisation of trauma universalises the category of victim. Critical readings of Sebald that would partake of a trauma believed to be historical (Austerlitz and what he represents) but which are actually fixated on a structural trauma (phototextuality) also contribute to the universalisation of the category of victim. While this may appear as a sacrifice of the self to the historically othereed victim, it is, as LaCapra might put it, in fact the sacrifice of that other in the service of self-identification – an obliteration that echoes the very logic of the sacrificial scapegoating of Nazism’s victims (2001, pp. 24, 30–1). (Under Nazism, this was a form of role-reversal, in which the victim represented that part of the (Nazi) self that had to be expunged.)

Rather than a form of structural trauma, I would argue that Sebald’s phototextuality is actually a version of what LaCapra would call the ‘middle voice’. Taking a disruptive and disrupted form of representation, it can offer fidelity to the victim’s voice without claiming it. The middle voice is empathetic rather than over-identificatory, where identification is the ‘unmediated fusion of self and other in which the otherness or alterity of the other is not recognised and respected’ and in ‘which aspects not acknowledged in the self are attributed to the other … and aspects of the other are taken into or encrypted in the self’; and where in empathy ‘one does not feel compelled or authorised to speak in the other’s voice or take the other’s place, for example, as surrogate victim or perpetrator’, and this is fundamental to an ethical stance towards the other. The middle voice therefore allows proximity to and distance from the other, its subjective stance anchored by a faith in some degree of objective history. However, the middle voice is not stylistic formula but rather a strategy of representation that can relate to various historical agents and subjects and reveal the subject positions of those who, through remembrance, empathise with them. Where structural trauma, displacing historical specificity, can create an ‘undifferentiated scene of horror … beyond ethical considerations’, the middle voice can restore historical particularity to the past and the present moment of remembrance or rather to those who remember (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 27–8, 30, 35, 41).
Historical representations of the Holocaust may be ‘formally identical’ but will be meaningful in different ways because they are often belied by specific transferential relations between past and present determined by ‘Whether the historian or analyst [or the reader or producer of such texts] is a survivor, a relative of survivors, a former Nazi, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazis or collaborators, a younger Jew or German displaced or distanced from more immediate contact with survival, participation, collaboration, or a relative “outsider” to these problems’ (LaCapra, 1996, p. 46). What the middle voice can do is to provide the apparatus by which these transferential relations are illuminated. As in Sebald’s phototextuality, the aporetic nature of representation does not convey trauma and induce a transferential relationship with the traumatic past and its others. Rather, it illuminates one’s pre-existing implication in transferential relations. One is always already in a middle voice, transferred, positioned; this is not the case of adopting a voice (LaCapra, 2001, p. 198). It is the aporetic nature of the middle voice, Sebald’s phototextuality, or, as Laplanche would put, Austerlitz’s enigma that opens up a space in which the addressor’s (writer’s) and addressees’ (reader’s/critic’s) pre-existent relationship to trauma can be elicited and explored. This is fundamentally different from the idea of the text actually transmitting trauma. It is in this space that a differential relationship to the traumatic event can be established, perpetrators can be distinguished from victims, witnesses from secondary witnesses, the universalisation of trauma and its victims stemmed, and relationships to the traumatic event illuminated rather than just claimed. In this sense, Sebald’s text does not claim to be ethical, but it offers a departure point for an ethics of reading, having what LaCapra might describe as empathetically unsettled the reader, revealing his or her positionality. The ‘crucial issue is how one responds to or comes to terms with that initial positionality – and here one confronts the issue of how to deploy various modalities of acting out, working over, and working through’ (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 189, 36) Although the middle voice is not inherently traumatic – trauma does not inhere in language and discourse – it provides an index to traumatisation and in doing so it allows engagement with, critical distance from and self-reflexivity towards transferential relations rather than their disavowal. In short, the middle voice generates a sense of ‘empathetic unsettlement’.

By anticipating theories of trauma and loss that might otherwise elicit trauma in the text, Sebald’s phototextuality acts more as a prophylactic to trauma’s contagion rather than as a conduit. A traumatic text would suggest an ability to share the victim’s experience. In LaCapra’s
terms, this ‘identification’ by German author and narrator with Jewish Holocaust victim would have entailed a dangerous sacrificial logic in which the reader could participate. The text’s provocation of trauma and then its revocation sound like the kind of irony advocated by LaCapra that checks proximity to trauma with distance, acting out with working through. This is not to say that trauma inheres in the text or that the text traumatises the reader, but that its provocations and revocations – its hollowing out – affords the reader not an opportunity to indulge in a textually contagious trauma, (over)identification, but the space to locate his pre-existing positionality in relation to the trauma of historically specific loss.
3

Holocaust Memory and the Air War: W. G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur (‘Air War and Literature: Zürich Lectures’)

The last chapter argued that Sebald’s work pre-empts formulaic theorisations of trauma, that his work resists the conflation of literature and traumatic memory, and that, through a series of provocations and revocations, it ultimately accommodates the reader’s transferential relation to the trauma of the Holocaust rather than traumatisation itself. This chapter continues the argument that trauma must always be thought through in various mediating contexts. Whereas the last chapter introduced the implications of the German-ness of Sebald’s authorial position, this chapter looks more closely at that context, particularly in relation to the controversial issue of German victimhood that gained prominence in the mass media, literature, history, film and television in the 1990s and 2000s. The controversy lies in the fact that discourses of German suffering might inform in German cultural memory an equivalence between the suffering of Germans and the suffering caused by Germans. In the first of two chapters on the idea of the German victim, the following argues that Sebald’s lectures (and subsequent publication) on the German cultural memory of suffering caused by the Allied bombing of German towns and cities do not argue for that equivalence but rather that memories of the two types of suffering have become thoroughly entangled. The only way to disentangle them is to acknowledge that entanglement.

3.1 Narrative fetishism

In 2003 German protesters took to the street demonstrating against the war in Iraq. They carried signs that proclaimed, ‘We know what it’s like to be bombed’ (Huyssen, 2003a, p. 166). For Andreas Huyssen, this kind of historical relativism, which equates the Allied bombing of
Dresden with the US bombing of Iraq, confuses and misstates a critique of US military and foreign policy. Nevertheless such relativism perhaps signals once and for all the end of what has been perceived as a taboo on the German remembrance and public articulation of suffering caused by Allied bombing of German cities during World War II, the Luftkrieg. Huyssen explains the 1950s and 1960s origins of this putative taboo:

The right spoke of Dresden and the expulsion from the East, the left spoke of Auschwitz. Both sides displayed resistance to the other memory. Both instrumentalised memory for political purpose. Grief and mourning remained for the most part alien to this discourse. In this highly politicised memory climate, the arguments of the left in favour of public forgetting were politically legitimate. The notion of German victimhood, tied to longstanding nationalist discourse after Versailles, was fundamentally reactionary, and it had to be fought for the country to arrive at a new consensus regarding the crimes of the Third Reich. The price paid was the forgetting of the Luftkrieg, the taboo to speak publicly of that traumatic national experience.

(2003a, p. 165)

Robert Moeller argues that it is mistaken to argue the bombing was completely absent in West German public memories from the 1950s to the 1980s, and it was certainly present in private, familial memory. (The Cold War context made it much easier for East Germany to remember the bombing and to criticise the Western powers that had conducted it (Moeller, 2006, pp. 114–16; see also 2005, pp. 147–94).) So, it might be more accurate to describe the presence of the air war in cultural memory as marginalised in the face of an orthodox, evolving remembrance of the Holocaust.

If the strategic ‘forgetting’ of the Luftkrieg has allowed the establishment of an orthodox Holocaust memory, has the recent public articulation of memories and histories of the air war threatened the relativisation of the Holocaust by making comparisons between German suffering and the suffering caused by Germans? Jörg Friedrich’s widely read 2002 publication Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg: 1940–1945 was something of a test case.¹ Friedrich was taken to task, argues Huyssen, for his suggestion that the bombings were war crimes and for his ambiguous use of Holocaust-related language: air raid shelters are compared with crematoria; bomber crews with Einsatzgruppen, the bombing of libraries with Bücherverbrennung. The very title of the book, Der Brand,
approximates a German translation of ‘Holocaust’. For Huyssen, the comparison between genocide and bombing remains ‘subliminal’, or at best implicit, and certainly not supported by the explicit argument of Friedrich’s book:

Despite such inexcusable slippages, there is wide agreement that Friedrich is not the Nolte of a second historians’ debate. This is not a revisionist book about Germans as victims as much as it is a book about German victims whose experiences needed to be acknowledged and absorbed into the national narrative about the war and the postwar years.

(2003a, p. 167)²

For Moeller, Friedrich’s book was exactly that, a revisionist text of the order of Nolte’s that uses the terminology of the Holocaust to generate a sense of victimhood and which socially, culturally and religiously homogenises Germany to create empathy for its victimised people and their destroyed Heimat. What is more, Friedrich’s insistence that he was breaking a taboo on the topic (which did not exist in the first place) becomes a rationalisation (or enabling rhetorical device) for the articulation of suffering on a par with the Holocaust (Moeller, 2006, pp. 116–9).

In June 1986, Ernst Nolte precipitated the Historians’ Debate (Historikerstreit) by publishing an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in which he rationalised the Holocaust by referring to Hitler’s fear of invasion from the East:

Nolte’s central thesis boils down to the following proposition: with the benefits of historical hindsight, we can identify the Bolsheviks as the main originators and perpetrators of crimes against whole populations in this century, and therefore Nazi crimes are neither singular nor original but can be seen to derive in a causal mimetic way from their Bolshevik predecessors. In fact, Nolte states that all the monstrous deeds attributed to National Socialism had been described in the literature of the Soviet Union of the 1920s, ‘with the sole exception of the technical process of gassing’.

(Wood, 1999, p. 47)³

That the Soviet Union created a precedent for the genocidal activities of the National Socialist regime, that genocide can be rationalised in the face of invasion from the East, that eastern Bolsheviks are Jews by
default and were subject to a necessary ‘Asiatic deed’ (Nolte’s term) smacks of ‘narrative fetishism’. Eric Santner defines ‘narrative fetishism’ as ‘consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place’ (1992, p. 144). Santner diagnoses Nolte’s contribution to the Historians’ Debate in this way because it compares totalitarian regimes only to preclude the possibility of coming to terms with the German version. The narrative of the suffering of Germans in the face of an ‘Asiatic’ threat becomes fetishised over the narrative of suffering caused by Germans.

If Huysen has declared Friedrich tactless without going so far as to equate him with Nolte, and Moeller declares him revisionist, what is the status of W. G. Sebald, who in 1999 published his 1997 Zürich Lectures on literature and the air war, Luftkrieg und Literatur (‘Air War and Literature’)? In many ways, Sebald’s lectures and essays served as a prelude to Friedrich’s publication (and many of the authors discussed by Sebald are also discussed by Friedrich.) The opening page of ‘Air War’ appears to make a claim for unparalleled suffering:

The strategic bombing surveys published by the Allies, together with the records of the Federal German Statistics Office and other official sources, show that the Royal Air Force alone dropped 1 million tons of bombs on enemy territory; it is true that of the 131 towns and cities attacked, some only once and some repeatedly, many were almost entirely flattened, that about 600,000 German civilians fell victim to the air raids and 3.5 million homes were destroyed, while at the end of the war 7.5 million people were left homeless, and there were 31.1 cubic metres of rubble for everyone in Cologne and 42.8 cubic metres for every inhabitant of Dresden …. The destruction [was] … on a scale without historical precedent.

(2003, pp. 3–4)

Suzanne Vees-Gulani argues that his ‘ranking’ of suffering, which invites implicit comparisons with the Holocaust, undermines the scrutiny of post-war German culture that follows this opening statement. Such an implication is buttressed by the fact that Sebald mentions many instances of German suffering, but only a few of suffering caused by Germans (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 122; see also Vees-Gulani, 2006, p. 339). Vees-Gulani (2006, p. 340) argues that the essay’s third chapter, which was not based on the Zürich Lectures as the other two were, was in effect an exercise in damage control – a response to the controversy stirred up by the lectures and an attempt to clarify his position on
German suffering. So, for example, the essay concludes that the bombing of German cities found its precedent in the Luftwaffe’s exploits:

The real pioneering achievements in bomb warfare – Guernica, Warsaw, Belgrade, Rotterdam – were the work of the Germans. And when we think of the nights when the fires raged in Cologne and Hamburg and Dresden, we ought also to remember that as early as August 1942, when the vanguard of the Sixth Army had reached the Volga and not a few were dreaming of settling down after the war on an estate in the cherry orchards beside the quiet Don, the city of Stalingrad, then swollen (like Dresden later) by an influx of refugees, was under assault from 1,200 bombers, and that during this raid alone, which caused elation among the Germans troops stationed on the opposite bank, 40,000 people lost their lives.

(Sebald, 2003, p. 105).

Although not explicitly stated, Sebald’s argument is that German expansion in the East is unthinkable without the genocide that made room for *lebensraum*.

If the reader should be in any doubt about Sebald’s position on the air war, his conclusion makes it clear that the German suffering cannot be considered without the suffering among civilians caused by Germans: ‘The majority of Germans today know, or so at least it is to be hoped, that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived’ (2003, p. 104). However, this is not an *ad hoc* response to the controversies prompted by his lectures. As this chapter will argue, Sebald’s ‘Air War’ demonstrates the inextricability of memories of the Holocaust and of the air war – an inextricability that is essential to Sebald’s thesis rather than mapped onto it afterwards. It is only through demonstrating the entanglement of memories in German culture that Sebald can begin to find an adequate means of representing and remembering the war in the air that, as this chapter will argue, does not eclipse the Holocaust.

### 3.2 The inability to mourn

It is not Sebald’s intention to compare suffering but to address why ‘we do not grasp what it all actually meant’:

The destruction [caused by the air war] ... entered the annals of the nation as it set about rebuilding itself only in the form of vague
generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussions of the internal constitution of our country.

(2003, p. 4)

‘Air War’ focuses on what is perceived by Sebald to be the failure of most German literature to adequately address the war in the air.5 Despite Vees-Gulani’s accusations,6 Sebald does take into account the psychological conditions of post-war Germany that might account for this failure; Sebald is clearly familiar with the work of the Mitscherlichs.7 In the third section of the text, which deals with responses to the Zürich Lectures – particularly reminiscences of familial life sent to the author in letterform – Sebald comments on

the ... distortion that continues to make itself felt in retrospective accounts of this kind, but it must be something to do with the particular form taken by petit-bourgeois life in Germany. The case histories presented by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern make one at least suspect some connection between the German catastrophe ushered in under Hitler’s regime and the regulation of intimate feelings within the German family. At any rate, the more of these reminiscences I read, the more likely it seems that there are psycho-social origins to the aberration which developed with such momentous consequences.

(2003, p. 85)

Despite moments of ‘insight’, the preponderance of a ‘harmless, conversational tone’ in such missives not only confirms the unreliability of eyewitness accounts – their tendency to change over time as the desires of memory dictate – but also the continuing effects or legacy of the syndrome the Mitscherlichs identified in their 1967 publication.8 The Mitscherlichs identified a ‘collective ego-ideal’ embodied by Hitler: ‘He was the object on which Germans depended, to which they transferred responsibility, and he was thus an internal object. As such, he represented and revived the ideas of omnipotence that we all cherish about ourselves from infancy; his death, and his devaluation by the victors, also implied the loss of a narcissistic object and, accordingly, an ego- or self-impoverishment and devaluation’. According to this diagnosis, German mourning should have begun with ‘Adolf Hitler as
a real person, but above all his disappearance as the representation of
the collective ego-ideal'. However, the ‘traumatic devaluation’, brought
about by the devaluation and death of Hitler, the collective ego ideal
and the internalised ego-ideal, triggered not mourning but ‘new defense
mechanisms [that] were needed to prevent a sense of utter worthless-
ness from flooding in’. Hence ‘the most important collectively practiced
defense was to withdraw cathecting energies from all the circumstances
related to former enthusiasm for the Third Reich, idealisation of the
Fuhrer and his doctrine and, of course, actual criminal acts. The use of
this psychic defense tactic serves to make the memory of the 12 years
of Nazi rule increasingly dim and ghost-like’. Rather than mourn the
loss of Hitler and all he stood for, Germany collectively withdrew its
libidinal investment without fully recognising what had been lost.
More importantly, the failure to recognise fully the loss of Hitler and
what he embodied was a missed opportunity to recognise a collective
implication in the regime. This was not the absolute forgetting of the
past, particularly of the Holocaust, but its dissociation. The avoidance
of the ‘traumata’ of defeat, devaluation, impoverishment and worthlessness
was therefore a ‘general de-realisation’ of the Nazi period (M. Mitscherlich

The Mitscherlichs argue that the trajectory of a newly evolving
German and West German society continued to foreclose opportuni-
ties to mourn. As the Mitscherlichs report, representations of the Nazi
period, such as in media reports of war crimes trials, merely served to
increase the distance perceived by the populace between those events
and themselves. The economic ‘miracle’ of (West) German development
actually shored up a deflated collective ego, but without attending to
the reasons for its deflation. In general, the redevelopment of West
Germany, politically, socially and psychologically, had been imposed
from without: ‘correction had been applied from the outside [and]
about the fantasies that may continue to exist behind this perhaps only
pragmatic adjustment to reality, we still know very little’ (M. Mitscherlich
and A. Mitscherlich, 1975, p. 22). In many ways, the Mitscherlichs fore-
shadowed Jurgen Habermas’s call for a ‘postconventional identity’ in
the course of the Historikerstreit and, later, in the face of German reunifi-
cation.9 West Germany had not been given the chance to work through
its past internally. This memory work had been imposed by the Allies,
as in the easily evaded assignation of collective guilt. Perversely, the ina-
bility to mourn Hitler meant an inability to mourn Germany’s victims. In
fact, the Mitscherlichs identified (West) Germany’s proclivity to assume
victim status, thereby displacing Germany’s victims. If Germans did
acknowledge the war years, it was as victims of the Nazis rather than of Allied bombs.10

More recently, Moeller has argued for a slightly different model of memory and forgetting than that put forward by the Mitscherlichs. In Moeller's version, for West Germany the Holocaust was present in memory, but West Germans preferred to remember their own status as victims alongside their memory of the Holocaust. This victim status was fostered by the expulsion of ethnic Germans from territory that came under Soviet administration and by the number of German prisoners of war held in the Soviet Union (Moeller, 2003, pp. 15–18). 'Expellees and POWs permitted West Germans to become legitimate participants in a moral competition over who had suffered most in the war' (Moeller, 2003, p. 4). That was in the 1950s, when 'descriptions of German suffering focused mainly on the losses inflicted by the Red Army, not on cities destroyed by American and British bombers' (Moeller, 2003, pp. 5, 181), but as discussed above, memories of bombing were not absent. It was only with the end of the Cold War that such memories gained legitimacy (Moeller, 2006, p. 117; 2005, pp. 153, 172).11 Whatever model of German memory and forgetting is followed, Moeller's or the Mitscherlichs', the assumption of victim status of one kind or another provided a mechanism by which Germans could distance themselves from the suffering caused by Allied bombs and the suffering meted out in the Holocaust.12

Sebald's essay on the literature of Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer uses the Mitscherlichs' book The Inability to Mourn to contextualise West German literature’s failure to engage with the idea of collective guilt – a guilt induced by a collective involvement in the Holocaust at some level.13 Read in dialogue, this essay and ‘Air War’ map out more comprehensively the psychosocial and psychopolitical dynamics of post-war German and West German cultural memory. Independently, ‘Air War’ argues that Holocaust memory was buried along with the memory of area bombing and its impact: ‘the lifting of the heavy burden of history that went up in flames between 1942 and 1945 along with the centuries-old buildings accommodating homes and businesses in Nuremberg and Cologne, in Frankfurt, Aachen, Brunswick and Würzburg, a historical burden ultimately regretted by only a few’ (Sebald, 2003, p. 12). In fact it was memories of the bombing’s impact that sometimes recalled the memory of the Holocaust, but which invoked a Holocaust-related guilt and so an active forgetting of both traumas:

Later, our vague feelings of shared guilt prevented anyone, including the writers whose task it was to keep the nation’s collective memory
alive, from being permitted to remind us of such humiliating images as the incident in the Altmarkt in Dresden, where 6,865 corpses were burned on pyres in February 1945 by an SS detachment which had gained its experience at Treblinka.

(Sebald, 2003, p. 98)\(^{14}\)

Having related the suffering of Germans to suffering inflicted by Germans, Sebald condemns the ‘perverse pride’ fostered by a post-war cultural climate in which Germans could think that ‘no one in human history’ had ‘endured such suffering as the Germans’ (Sebald, 2003, p. 44).

### 3.3 Reconstructing memory

If the Holocaust and the air war have become entwined in German cultural remembrance and forgetting, how then should Sebald’s introductory statement – ‘destruction on a scale without historical precedent’ – be read, given its ostensible ranking of suffering, and what is to be made of what feels like an obsessive preoccupation with German suffering? Critics often read the text biographically, explaining the text as symptomatic of a cultural trauma deeply felt at a personal level – or of a personal sense of historical displacement. A brief survey of those readings is useful to differentiate them from my argument.

For Vees-Gulani, Sebald is traumatised by something he did not experience or witness; his search for adequate literary responses to the air war is an attempt ‘to live through and to experience first-hand the events whose full reality eluded him, but which cast such a strong shadow over his life’. These were events that lay ‘completely outside of normal human experience’, and those who did witness them ‘can never reproduce them in their totality as there is always horror beyond language’ (Vees-Gulani, 2003, pp. 129–30). So, for Vees-Gulani, ‘underneath the surface of a critical analysis lurks a very personal quest by Sebald’: an attempt to live through the experience of the air war through the literature of others in order to ‘drag these shadows into the open and make them controllable’ (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 120).

As Anne Fuchs might argue, this working through entails acknowledging a loss of Heimat and its reconstruction. Not only tainted by National Socialist ideology, Heimat, and nostalgia for it, has been literally and figuratively left in ruins by the Allied bombing of Germany. Sebald’s narrator in Vertigo describes his memory of watching newsreels as a child, in which ruins had replaced or become the new Heimat: ‘almost every week we saw the mountains of rubble in places like Berlin or Hamburg,
which for a long time I did not associate with the destruction wrought in the closing years of the war, knowing nothing of it, but considered them a natural condition of all larger cities' (2000, p. 187). Looking back at his past, Sebald seeks a way of reconstructing a Heimat, which at the time he did not know he had lost. How can such a cultural nostalgia be exercised without the taint of National Socialism? The obsessive and repetitive tonality of the text suggests that it is a working through of a personal sense of loss, but it is a working through that does not reclaim lost, plenitudinous origins but which rather ideologically transforms the concept of Heimat. According to Fuchs, Sebald’s text stages a difficult re-inhabitation of the ruins as Heimat. (Sebald’s graphic descriptions of bombings and their aftermath re-enact the destruction of the old Heimat.) As Fuchs puts it, the ‘ruined buildings are hybrid places where the interior and exterior meet; they perforate the strict demarcation between inside and outside, the familiar and the alien that characterised the National Socialist discourse on Heimat’. Furthermore, although Sebald does not mention it, the ruins were occupied by ‘displaced people, refugees, strangers’. In fact, ‘uprootedness’ seemed to be a typical characteristic of the German wartime population, Jewish and gentile, which made permeable the boundary between the ‘familiar and alien’. Not only was an idealised Heimat belied by the uncanny, figured by ruins, Sebald’s text stages the ruins as the site of an encounter with and remembrance of otherness and strangeness – a site that cannot be easily occupied and therefore from which otherness cannot once again be configured and expelled (Fuchs, 2006, pp. 290, 296, 299). This attempted re-inhabitation might explain why the ‘memory contests’ of the 1990s – such as the debates over the planning of national Holocaust memorial in Berlin; the controversy surrounding the publication in German of Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners; the public argument between Walser and Bubis’s over the instrumentality of ‘Auschwitz’ in cultural memory discourses; and the public’s reaction to the Crimes of the Wehrmacht Exhibition – have been circumnavigated by Sebald’s text (Fuchs, 2006, p. 291). Although these discursive events have energised and agitated German cultural memory to the extent that it looks very different from the hypostatised version painted by Sebald, as I understand Fuchs, Sebald’s ‘obsessive’ autobiographical trajectory necessarily bypasses recent memory debates to return to a new sense of (personal though ethically transformed) German origins.

Huyssen also argues Sebald’s text is symptomatic of an obsessive search for German origins. For Huyssen, Sebald’s attack on a previous
generation of writers for failing to adequately represent the air war is an act of ‘compensation’ for ‘the fact that Sebald, a member of the first post-forty-five generation, born in the Allgäu in 1944 far away from the stream of bombers, has no access to experience or memory of the air war except through these earlier texts that he is compelled to rewrite, in a kind of literary version of transgenerational traumatization’ (Huyssen, 2003, p. 150). In Sebald’s thesis, the texts of Nossack, Kluge and Fichte are exceptions that prove the rule of cultural silence surrounding the air war – a ‘tacit agreement’ among cultural producers, as Sebald has it. Yet those texts still compel their supplementation. For Huyssen, ‘Air War’ is a rewriting of those texts – a compulsive rewriting or repetition of them – and the symptoms of transgenerational trauma can be found in the acting out of a compulsive repetition or rewriting, in the form of the essay itself, of the texts of Nossack, Kluge and Fichte. This is a rewriting of the texts of those who experienced the bombings as adults (Nossack) or as children (Kluge and Fichte).

Just as Fuchs argues that Sebald searches for his and Germany’s traumatic origins among the ruins, Huyssen argues that the rewriting of the trauma of the bombing is also an attempt to reconstitute the origins of an identity. Sebald’s search for an originary traumatic experience is consonant with a larger pattern of cultural history. The upheavals of 1968, as inscribed in that generation’s literary and cultural production, repeated but did not wholly enact the ideological, psychological and political break with the Nazi past that was supposed to happen in the 1945 – a past that was in various ways normalised in the FDR of the 1950s. The years 1989–90 were marked by calls for another ‘new literature, embodying a purer aesthetic beyond the allegedly dominant Gesinnungästhetik (aesthetics of conviction) of the previous period’ to correspond with the so-called conclusion of West German history, politics and culture and the inauguration of a new Germany ushered in by the Wende (Huyssen, 2003, pp. 144–5). However, as Sebald points out, the radical break failed once again to materialise. Unification, and more precisely the promises of capitalism now available to both East and West, inhibited Germans from once again working through the historical context of a previously unified Germany:

Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves of that context now, when the project of creating a greater Europe, a project that has already failed twice, is entering a new phase, and the sphere of influence of
the Deutschmark – history has a way of repeating itself – seems to extend almost precisely to the confines of the area occupied by the Wehrmacht in the year 1941.

(Sebald, 2003, p. 13)

Critical of the failures of German cultural memory, Sebald’s text corresponds with the post-1989 phase of an attempted return to origins, or rather new German origins – a ‘Nullpunkt’ – different from those projected by National Socialism. This break with the past entails a recognition or working through of that past. However, a repetitive history of returns stages the departure of the new Germany from the old but in doing so represses the very thing from which the supposedly new fails to depart, such is the traumatic inaccessibility of those origins (Huyssen, 2003, p. 149). In effect, then, this is a repetition of the old, or, as Huyssen argues a post-traumatic, compulsive repetition of German history:

Clearly this trauma is made up of various layers—the feeling of humiliation of total defeat, which is not erased by emphasising that capitulation was also liberation; the deep feelings of guilt about the Holocaust, itself not a German trauma but rather the trauma of its victims, which as such blocks the desired normalisation; the experience of expulsion from the East and the experience of the bombardment of German cities, both of which have been used either to constitute the German as victim in an Aufrechnungsdiskurs, a compensatory discourse of moral equity (look how we suffered), or as a cathartic argument that retribution was justified (serves us right!) with permanent implications for national identity and statehood.

(2003, p. 146).

These traumas have become thoroughly imbricated, as each phase of cultural or literary return to German origins is both a symptom (an acting out of the past) as much as it is an attempt to articulate ‘unresolved’ traumata, and each phase re-enacts the failures of the previous ones (Huyssen, 2003, p. 146). Huyssen does not suggest, though, an undifferentiated scene of cultural trauma in which traumatic events or points of reference can no longer be seen as distinct and specific, but rather a cumulative cultural history of trauma (and traumatic cultural history) in which he situates Sebald’s subjective or autobiographical reconstruction of traumatic origins.
The problem with these readings (Fuchs’s, Vees-Gulani’s and Huyssen’s) is that they render ‘Air War’ a compulsive text, returning to inaccessible origins of trauma. Admittedly, Huyssen’s version of the return is more progressive than merely symptomatic, and Fuchs’s suggests an ethical impetus. Nevertheless these critics foreclose the possibility of the idea that ‘Air War’ might be more self-reflexive and performative than compulsive. As Simon Ward might argue, to fixate on the compulsive would ignore the dialectical arrangement between the materials Sebald deploys in his text (2004, pp. 66–7).

With such a deployment in mind, this chapter argues that Sebald draws on tropes of Holocaust remembrance, not to find equivalence with suffering caused by area bombing, but to open up a dialogue between ways of seeing distinct histories. This dialogue not only differentiates between those histories, which have become entwined in cultural memory, but it furnishes Sebald with a way of structuring the memory of a trauma he did not witness – and therefore a way of gathering the necessary materials of (post)memory. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory has been discussed at length elsewhere in this book, but to reiterate its brief definition, ‘postmemory’ typically describes ‘the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right’. Having defined the concept of postmemory in terms of ‘familial inheritance’, Hirsch has broadened its application to a more general, cultural inheritance that can transcend ethnic or national boundaries. Postmemory therefore is ‘defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by an unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after .... Postmemory would thus be retrospective witnessing by adoption. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story’ (Hirsch, 2001, pp. 9–10). It is the belated nature of traumatic memory that fuels its transmission and adoption. If the traumatic nature of the event defies its own witnessing, cognition and remembrance, then for Hirsch it makes sense that the next generation is in a position to work through traumatic experience and its symptoms, narratives and images bequeathed but not fully remembered or known by the previous one (2001, p. 12).15

Vees-Gulani has identified Sebald’s attempted remembrance of the air war as postmemorative but argues that, given the cultural silence
around that trauma and the consequent paucity of the German cultural imaginary, there simply are not the materials to reconstruct memory:

the problem Sebald faces is that the amount of cultural and public memory in Germany of the air raids after the war is not at all representative of the actual events and their effects. So even though the experience of the bombings is present as an undercurrent in society, the situation characterised by shame, guilt, and psychological trauma prevented the stories from becoming dominant narratives for post-war generations. Post-war German society did not offer much space or points of departure for . . . [the work of postmemory by] which some of the gaps between the actual experience and its available memories can be bridged for those who are only indirectly exposed to them.

(2006, pp. 344–5; see also 2003, p. 126)

Rather than a compulsive narrative that fails because it does not allow itself the cultural grounds on which to construct a memory of things not witnessed – one of Vees-Gulani’s complaints is that Sebald ignored or marginalised literary accounts of the air wars in his representation of an impoverished, repressive and unrepresentative cultural memory – I argue that it is Sebald’s dialogue with Holocaust memory and its figures that allows him to muster the materials of postmemory.

Although later in this book I offer a critique of Hirsch’s conception of postmemory in relation to the exhibition of photographic portraiture, her concept is still extremely valuable in understanding the dynamics of second-generation memory and fits Sebald’s performative and self-reflexive project rather well. Under Hirsch’s theoretical regime, postmemory ‘might be generalizable to other contexts’ of trauma and not restricted to the Holocaust (2001, p. 11). Furthermore, in line with Sebald’s aims, the postmemorial generation’s artistic recontextualisation of the images of trauma ‘has been able to make repetition not an instrument of fixity or paralysis or simple retraumatisation (as it often is for survivors of trauma), but a mostly helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past’ (Hirsch, 2001, p. 9).¹⁶

Just as Huyssen’s palimpsestic conception of German cultural trauma should not be taken as the mapping of an undifferentiated traumatic scene, so Sebald’s orchestration of a postmemorial dialogue that encompasses the air wars and the Holocaust does not, as this chapter will argue, constitute a form of traumatic writing that erases historical difference. As Huyssen asks, recalling LaCapra’s caution about the confusion of structural absence and historical loss to which some forms of deconstructive
representation give rise, ‘how can we read the repetitive mise-en-scène of the traumatic experience, if that is what it is, without denying historical difference in the various successive repetitions and without getting stuck in the dead end of poststructuralist trauma theory?’ (2003, p. 146).

It is Sebald’s postmemorative stance that makes ‘Air War’ more than a symptomatic text, and, if that, more than just a simple reinstatement of the Mitscherlichs’ thesis upon which it ostensibly seems to rely. Where Vees-Gulani finds a problem with Sebald’s postmemorial approach to the past – it is the limited scope of Sebald’s analysis that attenuates German cultural memory making postmemory both the only means of recovering the past and an impossibility – Sebald explains the problem in terms of the limits of those memory texts, literary and documentary, which constitute cultural memory, in the face of trauma.

Sebald argues that the stereotypical descriptions issued by most eyewitnesses are symptoms of trauma: ‘The apparently unimpaired ability – shown in most eyewitness reports – of everyday language to go on functioning as usual raises doubts of the authenticity of the experiences they record. The death by fire within a few hours of an entire city, with all its buildings and its trees, its inhabitants, its domestic pets, its fixtures and fittings of every kind, must have inevitably led to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in escaping’ (2003, p. 26). It is partly for this reason, then, that as Sebald puts it, ‘images of this horrifying chapter of our history have never really crossed the threshold of the national consciousness’ (2003, p. 11). For the survivors, experience has outstripped the capacity of language to explain it, inducing Sebald’s postmemorial desires: ‘The accounts of individual eyewitnesses, therefore, are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals’ (2003, p. 26).

A dialogue with Holocaust memory buttresses that supplementation. Huyssen mentions that curiously in ‘Air War’ Sebald never acknowledges the trauma theory that accompanied the rise of memory studies in 1990s academia and which certainly pervades The Emigrants.17 ‘The mediating link’ between these two texts is ‘the memory problematic of the second generation, of Germans who were born and who grew up after the war’ (Huyssen, 2003, p. 148). The memory problematic is the question of remembering that which was not witnessed: Holocaust-related lives of Jewish exile and loss in The Emigrants; the experience of the area bombing in ‘Air War’. This essay will focus on such problems of representation, which can be common to both traumas, with particular reference to photography. This is not only a common problematic, but
as we have seen the remembrance and forgetting of the two traumas have become thoroughly entangled. As Hirsch privileges photographs (in private and public places) as the affective prop by which traumatic memory is transmitted across generations (both within and outside of family boundaries), this chapter will also focus on the way in which Sebald’s use of photographs in ‘Air War’ illuminates these problems as it musters the materials of postmemory.  

3.4 The pornography of war

Recent work on Holocaust photography has drawn attention to the perspectives, focused by photographic images on the various stages of genocide, and refocused by the exhibition or reproduction of such images in discourses and practices of memorialisation. As discussed in the previous chapter, one such image can be found in *The Rings of Saturn*, in which Sebald’s narrator stumbles across a newspaper article concerning Major George Wyndham Le Strange, near whose manor house in Henstead the narrator had ventured. ‘During the last War, the report read, Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on 14th April 1945’ (Sebald, 1999, p. 59). Following this briefest of introductions, the following two pages of the narrative are fully taken up with the reproduction of what is presumably a liberator’s photograph of the scene that confronted the British troops on that day. The photograph is of piles of naked corpses that are strewn throughout woodland in the camp’s grounds (Sebald, 1999, pp. 60–1). The reader is ill prepared to confront this scene of devastation, especially as he or she has to turn the page to see it. The image is, typically, without caption, and the photograph’s referent can only be determined by the reader’s inference based on what the narration of Le Strange’s wartime activities, found on the previous page, implies. (We do not know whether this is what he saw, and the provenance of the image is not confirmed by Sebald’s text.)

The confrontation with the image and, if we infer correctly, its unwitting re-objectification of Holocaust victims, parallels the confrontation, in exhibitionary and memorial contexts, with atrocity images made by perpetrators. Hirsch comments on the latter:

When we confront perpetrator images, we cannot look independently of the look of the perpetrator. The images of executions and burials are ruled by what we might term a murderous National Socialist gaze that violates the viewing relations under which we normally operate. The lethal power of the gaze that acts through the machine gun and the
gas chamber, that reduces humans to ‘pieces’ and ashes, creates a visual field in which the look can no longer be returned, multiplied or displaced. All is touched by the death that is the precondition of the image. When looking and photographing have become coextensive with mechanised mass death, and the subject looking at the camera is also the victim looking at the executioner, those of us left to look at the picture are deeply touched by that death.

Hirsch describes the type of photograph taken before the act of execution, but which prefigures that act and in which the subject is unable to return the photographer’s/executioner’s gaze. The photographic gaze is monolithic in the way it lethally positions the subject. The same visual logic often applies to images of the aftermath of mass murder, especially those taken by liberators as they encounter the camps. In other words, the lethal gaze that generated mounds of bodies in the first place continues to overwhelm the field of vision in photographs of mass graves and piles of corpses taken by the liberators (Hirsch, 2001, p. 24). ‘These images are the epitome of dehumanization .... They show, perhaps better than any statistics can, the extent of the destruction, the multiplication of victims that transforms corpses into what the Nazis called “Stücke” (pieces) even by the liberating armies’ (Hirsch, 2001, p. 19). In other words, the liberators of the camps unwittingly looked upon and represented the victims in the very terms of the perpetrators. In confronting these images in a postwar, memorial context, ‘it becomes necessary to find a vantage point mindful of the danger of voyeurism and aware of sharing the viewpoint of the one who took this picture’ (Hell, 2003, p. 33).

The image of Bergen-Belsen introduces the ‘ethics of the gaze’ (Hell, 2003, p. 33). Julia Hell orchestrates a dialogue between the images in *The Rings of Saturn* and those in ‘Air War’. The ethical gaze developed by the strategy of visual confrontation is usefully deployed in ‘Air War’, for the images found in both texts can provoke voyeuristic responses. But Hell overlooks an important stepping-stone between the two texts: the story of Hazel, reported by the narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*. Sebald’s narrator, in his peregrinations around East Anglia, stumbles across Somerleyton Hall, no longer in its former nineteenth-century glory but still tended by a gardener, William Hazel. Hazel informs Sebald’s narrator of his obsession with air war launched from airfields of East Anglia:

People nowadays have hardly any idea of the scale of the operation, said Hazel. In the course of one thousand and nine days, the eighth
air fleet alone used a billion gallons of fuel, dropped seven hundred and thirty-two thousand tons of bombs, and lost almost nine thousand aircraft and fifty thousand men. Every evening I watched the bomber squadrons heading out over Somerleyton, and night after night, before I went to sleep, I pictured in my mind’s eye the German cities going up in flames, the firestorms setting the heavens alight, and the survivors rooting around in the ruins . . . In the early Fifties, when I was in Luneburg with the army of occupation, I even learnt German, after a fashion, so that I could read what the Germans themselves had said about the bombings and their lives in ruined cities. To my astonishment, however, I soon found the search for such accounts invariably proved fruitless. No one at the time seemed to have written about their experiences or afterwards recorded their memories. Even if you asked people directly it was as if everything had been erased from their minds.

(Sebald, 1999, pp. 38–9)

Hazel’s findings corroborate those of Sebald in ‘Air War’. In the absence of adequate eyewitness testimony, Hazel can only imagine the impact of the bombing in the most general, and perhaps clichéd, terms. The statistics he quotes, rather like those Sebald provides at the beginning of ‘Air War’, are not fleshed out by testimony. Put another way, statistics give no indication of the traumatic experience of area bombing for those on the ground. Hazel’s frustrated search for knowledge bespeaks the obsession of the would-be voyeur – a desire to see suffering.

Sebald’s deployment of a postliberation image from Bergen-Belsen serves to invite reflection on the act of seeing. If Sebald is developing a repertoire of postmemorial strategies drawn from Holocaust memorialisation, then The Rings of Saturn demonstrates the need for an ethical practice of visual memory. Read in dialogue with parallel images in ‘Air War’, the image of Bergen-Belsen illuminates how the reader must confront images of catastrophe ethically. This is not to suggest that Sebald meant specific images to be read in some dialectical fashion as if they some how redeem each other or cancel each other out. Rather, postmemorial strategies deployed in relation to the Holocaust can be seen at work in relation to the air war – and seen more clearly in comparison. As Sebald demonstrates:

Later, our vague feelings of shared guilt prevented anyone, including the writers whose task it was to keep the nation’s collective memory alive, from being permitted to remind us of such humiliating
images as the incident in the Altmarkt in Dresden, where 6,865 corpses were burned on pyres in February 1945 by an SS detachment that had gained its experience at Treblinka. To this day, any concern with the real scenes of horror during the catastrophe still has an aura of the forbidden about it, even of voyeurism, something that these notes of mine have not entirely been able to avoid. I was not surprised when a teacher in Detmold told me, a little while ago, that as a boy in the immediate post-war years, he quite often saw photographs of the corpses lying in the streets after the firestorm brought out from under the counter of a Hamburg second-hand bookshop and examined in a way usually reserved for pornography.

(2003, pp. 98–9).

The detachment of SS who cleared away the corpses in Dresden had gained experience in such things at Treblinka. If we are to avoid looking at those bodies of Bergen-Belsen in the same way as the SS looked upon the corpses at Treblinka, we must also be wary of the way in which we look at the bodies of German civilians. We must develop, to use Hell’s phrase, ‘an ethics of the gaze’. As Hirsch might argue, one way of looking prefigures killing or kills again and the other does not. It is important not to conflate the two acts of seeing (Dresden and Treblinka), but it is also necessary to be mindful of voyeurism. As Hell puts it, ‘an ethically committed post-Holocaust art needs to construct a new spectator – neither voyeuristically aligned with the perpetrators of genocide, nor lost in unproblematised identifications’ (2003, pp. 33–4). For Hell, the notion of ‘unproblematised identifications’ pertains to sharing the perpetrator’s gaze in unwitting fashion, or to over-identifying with the victim. That the victims of bombing should not be seen through the eyes of the perpetrators – a lesson learnt from Holocaust memorialisation– might suggest an alignment of ways of looking. It is not my intention to suggest that in avoiding looking at victims of bombing in a way that re-objectifies them places them in the same line of ethical vision as that focused on victims of the Holocaust. Sebald does not attempt to equate suffering, to align historically specific ways of seeing, which are isomorphous but not the same, but rather holds those ways of seeing in a tense co-presence to elicit from them similar means of de-objectifying the victim of suffering. A distinction between the two orders of suffering – the suffering of Germans and the suffering caused by Germans – is maintained in Sebald’s visual schema.
In mustering the materials of postmemory and particular ways of seeing and remembering them, Sebald’s narrator demands that the reader negotiate his or own voyeurism and develop an ‘ethics of seeing’. For example, Sebald’s description of ‘Operation Gomorrah’ against Hamburg in 1943 begins with statistics of ordnance dropped, areas and structures targeted, damaged and destroyed, and of the damage done by the blast and firestorms. However, the description moves almost compulsively to details of a different kind:

   Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish little phosphorous flames flickered around many of them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size. They lay doubled up in pools of their own fat, which had sometimes already congealed .... Elsewhere, clumps of flesh and bone or whole heaps of bodies had cooked in the water gushing from bursting boilers. Other victims had been so badly charred and reduced to ashes by the heat which had risen to 1,000 degrees or more, that remains of families consisting of several people could be carried away in a single laundry basket.

   (Sebald, 2003, pp. 26–8)

The narration of this scene suggests something bordering on voyeurism, building towards the climax of the photographic image, which illustrates the narrative (Sebald, 2003, p. 29). In fact, this kind of narrative detail is the very thing that Hazel, in The Rings of Saturn, would have relished in his search to flesh out the details of the aerial bombing of Germany. However, rather than pornographic revelation, this reproduction follows an indication that ‘any examination will necessarily carry traces of a voyeuristic gaze’ (Hell, 2003, p. 31). Mention of the furtive way in which photographs of the casualties of bombing raids have been handled reminds the reader of his or her own potentially illicit grasp of this image.

   By emphasising Sebald’s foregrounding of voyeurism, this argument differs somewhat from Caroline Duttlinger’s reading of the same section of ‘Air War’. Duttlinger argues that the discussion of pornographic handling of catastrophe images, because separated in the text from the narration of Hamburg’s bombing, constitutes a ‘passing comment’ on rather than the self-reflexiveness of that narration (2007, p. 169). The descriptions of aerial bombardment from above and death from below are congruent with what can be found in the two photographic images – one taken at ground level, one taken from above – that accompany this narrative, but there
is no further (or rather immediate) commentary on the ground-level photograph. That, for Duttlinger, suggests a departure from the critical framing of photography found elsewhere in Sebald’s prose work, where an ethical distance is gained on images (reproduced or just described) that depict suffering and, more precisely, were implicated in that suffering – in other words, where photography is part of the apparatus of annihilation. (Duttlinger takes as an example the description but not reproduction in The Rings of Saturn of the perpetrator-generated image of Branco Jungic, decapitated with a saw in a Nazi-sponsored episode of ethnic cleansing carried out by Croats in Bosnia.) However, no such critical distance can be found, argues Duttlinger, in the ‘clinical’ and ‘dispassionate’ tone of the narration of death on the ground, which is as cold as the perspective of the camera that focuses on the corpse-filled aftermath of the bombing (2007, pp. 167–8). Although, the imaging of the Hamburg corpses is not directly involved in the killing process, ‘nevertheless, the graphic image of bodies strewn on the street highlights a similar discrepancy: that between photographer and referent, viewer and image, ultimately, between the living and the dead’ (Duttlinger, 2007, p. 169). On the contrary, this chapter argues that Sebald’s use of photographic images is not a departure from the critical framing of photography and its relation to the processes of destruction found elsewhere in his work, but rather a continuation of that framing. As this chapter argues, the positioning of images implicates the reader in a voyeuristic attitude, and the interval between the Hamburg images and the later discussion of the pornographic handling of such images, not to mention the cognitive distance that must be travelled between ‘Air War’ and The Rings of Saturn, facilitates that implication (especially in the absence of a moralising authorial intrusion). Put differently, Sebald provokes the reader’s difficult ethical engagement with the images – an engagement that cannot presume an innocent point of departure.

In cautiously and critically marshalling the materials of a postmemory of the air war, Sebald is not just compulsively displaying scenes of trauma. In suggesting a critical engagement with trauma, this chapter disagrees with an interesting essay by Mary Cosgrove in which she argues Sebald attempts to render trauma in a literal and unmediated fashion. As she puts it, ‘Behind this preference for the body [as photographically displayed] is a sneaking regard for the power of the signification of the literal’ (2009, p. 166). Sebald’s reproduction and positioning of images of the ‘bombed body’ emblems the logic of contemporary trauma theory (represented by Caruth) that has informed representations of German suffering. Caruth’s theory has been discussed at length in
Chapters One and Two but Cosgrove’s gloss is insightful and worth repeating. Cosgrove argues that the problems of trauma theory arise from its deconstructive emphasis on the ‘structural limits of signification’. The ‘gaps and silences’ in language give rise to a ‘universal anonymous emptiness’. If language can only ever convey lack, how can it ‘articulate an authentic sense of loss?’ What is more, how can literature convey a subjective engagement with the past and individual suffering, how can it perform mourning, in the face of the ‘indifferent structure of language’? The opposition between the structural and historical is paradigmatic of the very problem faced by Sebald in his attempt to move from abstract to authentic representations of the bombing. The ‘bombed body’ occupies the ‘ethically invested discursive position as mediator’ between the two poles of the ‘abstraction of total destruction and the concrete moment of organic decay’ (Cosgrove, 2009, pp. 166–8). How, though, Cosgrove asks, can an individual moment of traumatisation be somehow more authentic, less abstract? As I have argued in the preceding chapter, and as Cosgrove argues, trauma theory bridges the abstract and the authentic. Paradoxical demands are placed on trauma. For it to be authentic, it must occupy an ‘extra-linguistic realm of nonsignification’, and yet it must also speak; it must be literal and symbolic. Theory’s emphasis on the structural traumas of language finds just such an oscillation between the abstract and the specific: a conflation of the historically specific and the structurally universal. In its attempt to move from the abstraction to the specification of bombing via the ‘catastrophe signifier’ of the bombed body, Sebald’s narrative is for Cosgrove following the paradoxical logic of trauma theory (2009, pp. 168–9). ‘Air War’ is not a compulsive attempt to return to the scene of trauma, as Vees-Gulani and, to a lesser extent, Huyssen would have it in their respective ways. Nor is it an attempt to move from the symbolic to the literal, as argued by Cosgrove. Rather, Sebald’s narrative is something more ad hoc – not posttraumatic, but to borrow Hell’s phrasing, ‘melo-traumatic’ (2003, p. 35). 19

3.5 On natural history

The problem of abstraction does, though, remain for Sebald. His project of remembrance is positioned against a set of overwhelming and totalising narratives. Sebald argues that the air war, no matter how limited its impact on German industry, infrastructure and morale might have been, had an unstoppable momentum. With the weight of British industry behind the production of military hardware, it ‘ran counter to any
healthy economic instinct’ to allow British bombers to stand idle on the airfields of eastern England. This industrial logic not only absorbed men and materials of England, it also aligned itself with

the innermost principle of every war, which is to aim for as wholesale an annihilation of the enemy with his dwellings, his history, and his natural environment as can possibly be achieved …. The war in the air was war pure and undisguised. Its continuation in the face of all reason suggests that … the victims of war are not sacrifices made as a means to an end of any kind, but in the most precise sense are both the means and the end in themselves.

(Sebald, 2003, pp. 19–20)

Both civilians and members of the armed forces became fungible in an ineluctable industrial enterprise dedicated to the industrial production of corpses. Sebald finds in Kluge’s account of the bombing of Halberstadt, Geschichte und Eigensinn, written some 30 years after the event, a concurrence that bureaucratic, psychological, technological and industrial processes at work in preparing the men and materials of the air war had but one outcome: ‘under the pressure of all the accumulated potential, it had to happen in the end’ (Sebald, 2003, p. 65).

In the aftermath of the bombings, nature continued what industry had started: ‘At the end of the war, some of the bomb sites of Cologne had already been transformed by the dense green vegetation growing over them’ (Sebald, 2003, pp. 39–40). Sebald comments that it looked as if the proposed Morgenthau Plan for the pastoralisation of Germany (by the removal of its heavy industry) had been implemented after all (2003, pp. 40–1). If the natural is displacing the social, then humanity is affected accordingly, regressing to a more primitive stage, ‘torn from its civil existence and its history, thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers’ (Sebald, 2003, p. 36). Such was life in the ruins. Given its irrefutable logic and seemingly natural results, destruction and ruination were apparently a force of nature.

Sebald finds the idea of naturalisation not only in the comments of Solly Zuckermann, who was directly involved in the discussion of bombing strategies and their effectiveness and who visited Cologne at the war’s end to see their impact for himself,20 but also in literary work of Hans Erich Nossack, particularly Der Untergang. For Sebald, Nossack is one of the few German authors who approach the subject of the air war with any objectivity (2003, p. 51). Nossack more or less resists mythologising the war in the air and Germany’s destruction. In the
essay ‘Between History and Natural Destruction’ (1982), which preceded and informed the Zürich Lectures, Sebald discusses Nossack’s work in more detail. Nossack’s more or less documentary style ‘puts distance between the subject and object of the narrative process’ which ‘implies something like the perspective of natural history, in which destruction and the tentative forms of new life that it generates act like biological experiments’. For Nossack, life in the ruins corresponds to ‘no social norms’ and can be understood only in terms of a ‘biological reflex set off by the destruction’. The reversion to an earlier type of ‘archaic’ and ‘primitive’ existence or behaviour that ‘broke through’ once ‘civilisation fell away’ is ‘a sign that collective catastrophe marks the point where history threatens to resort to natural history’ (Sebald, 2005b, pp. 81–5).

For history to give way to natural history, social processes must have given way to natural processes. Human agency can no longer alter the course of events, nor can interpretation shape those events or intervene in the relationship between past, present and future. History gives way to natural history in the sense that the historian can merely observe and record the unfolding of natural processes in quasi-scientific manner, as in Nossack’s documentary distance. Drawing conclusions from Nossack’s sense of natural history and from Kluge’s notion of (naturalised) industrial logic, Sebald asks:

Can materialistic epistemology or any other such theory be maintained in the face of such destruction? Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature?

(2003, p. 67).

In answer to the opening question, Huyssen thinks not. Huyssen argues that between the 1982 essay and the 1999 revision and publication of the lectures, Sebald has lost faith in the possibility of historicising area bombing. As Huyssen argues, in Sebald’s historical consciousness the possibility of history has quite literally been ‘bombed into oblivion’ (2003, p. 155).

3.6 The angel of history

It is tempting to agree with Huyssen, especially if we consider Sebald’s concluding image, taken from Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. Sebald sees in Kluge’s writing a resignation before the industrial
and naturalised logic of history: we are unable to learn from history, as it is now out of our hands. Kluge therefore shares the ‘fixity’ of Walter Benjamin’s “‘angel of history’” (taken from Klee’s *Angelus Novus*),

whose ‘face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress’.

(Benjamin quoted in Sebald, 2003, p. 68)

For Huyssen, Sebald’s reference to Benjamin is little more than an attempt ‘to provide a respectable pedigree to what remains a metaphysics of nature in his own writing’ (2003, p. 150). In this reading of Benjamin’s image of the angel, Sebald cannot resist the storm or progress of past events. In other words, Sebald has succumbed to the idea of natural history governed by metaphysics – and to the belief that his own writing is metaphysical in its inability to restore a materialist approach to history. If Sebald has articulated the entanglement of the German remembrance and forgetting of the Holocaust and the air war, his narrative’s succumbing to the natural history of the latter would subsume the former under a generalised sense of natural(ised) catastrophe.

The impossibility of history is compounded by the dynamics of post-war recovery. The German populace ignored the devastation that surrounded them, which ‘did not register on the sensory experience of the survivors still living at the scene of the catastrophe’ and was accompanied by ‘the declaration of a new beginning, the unquestioning heroism with which people immediately set about the task of clearance and reorganization’. This reconstruction after the ‘devastation wrought by Germany’s wartime enemies was tantamount to a second liquidation in successive phases of the nation’s own past history [and] prohibited any backward view. It did so through the sheer amount of labour required and the creation of a new, faceless reality, pointing the population exclusively towards the future and enjoining on it silence about the past’. The Mitscherlichs concur that the psychic energy demanded by the economic miracle facilitated the forgetting of the recent past. Post-war forgetting finds its expression in the cultural artefacts of the economic miracle: ‘witness the postcards that
travellers in Germany can buy today at news-stands of Frankfurt am Main’ (Sebald, 2003, pp. 5–8). These cards compare, for visual consumption, the city bombed and rebuilt. The culture of capitalism has expunged the memory of trauma through its very representation, constituting a perfect example of narrative fetishism. From the industrial logic of bombing to the amnesiac logic of capitalism, what has emerged, it seems, is what Benjamin might describe as historicism.

Benjamin’s concept of historicism finds its roots in nineteenth-century modernity, but is particularly pertinent in the face of twentieth-century war and its aftermath. Nineteenth-century modernisation brought about the perception of cultural obsolescence at a rate that closed the distance between the past and the present, between antiquity and modernity. Consequently the modern became the site of an eternal present. The dominant ideological response to this crisis in memory and history (the inability to distinguish past from present) was the idea of historiography as a science and history as progress. Rather than remembering lived experience, this ‘historicism’ sought to reestablish the continuity between past and present in an abstract and chronological form. Benjamin recognises the commodity as central to the ‘homogenous empty time’ of ‘historicism’ in which historical events appear as undifferentiated mass-produced articles. Benjamin’s project was to relaunch historiography as remembrance – the remembrance of a counterhistory of modernity (Osborne, 1994, pp. 82–3).

To pit memory against historicism, Sebald has to negotiate the problems of witnessing. As we have seen, he finds witnesses’ accounts lacking. ‘Air War’ has scrutinised eyewitness accounts and finds in them, with few exceptions such as Nossack’s, ‘clichés’ in the face of the ‘reality of total destruction, incomprehensible in its extremity. […] Their function is to cover up and neutralise experiences beyond our ability to comprehend’. In his description of Operation Gomorrah, quoted above, Sebald reconstructs the scene of devastation presumably from the accounts of others. The scene is rendered in the documentary style he finds lacking in witnesses’ accounts, but the documentary gives way to the subjective, as the possibilities of voyeurism present themselves. The surfeit of detail moves beyond the necessity of documentation and into the realm of voyeurism. However the reader and narrator position themselves, the possibility of voyeurism reveals the subjective nature of the narrative, indicating that this is the work of subjective (post)memory rather than history. The limitations of Sebald’s historical imagination are declared and claims to objectivity surrendered: ‘No one knows for certain how many lost their lives that
night, or how many went mad before they died’ consumed by the flames (2003, pp. 25, 28).

However, if postmemory has been defined as a critical engagement with traumatic affect, rather than its compulsive acting out, then we could argue that the staging of images in ‘Air War’ is, in Hirsch’s words, not ‘repetition’ as an ‘instrument of fixity or paralysis or simple retraumatisation (as it often is for survivors of trauma), but a mostly helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past’. Not the literal rendition of trauma (Cosgrove), purely illustrative (Fuchs) or uncritically framed (Duttlinger), the exhibition of images orchestrates a figurative relation with trauma. As Vees-Gulani argues (albeit with different interpretive aims in mind), the images figure for ‘the difficulty of translating the usually sensory perceptions into language and into the coherence of a story’. The ‘interplay of text and photography’ addresses ‘what often defies full expression through language. These photographs can enhance or subvert, support or oppose the written text. In this manner, Sebald adds spaces in which meaning can arise that would otherwise fall into the gaps, and also illuminates the sensory and non-verbal quality of many traumatic memories’ (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 123). With the relationship between trauma and photography in mind, the angel of history can be reread.

3.7 Rereading the angel

For Hell, ‘Sebald’s paradox’ is ‘the desire to write with the wide-open eyes of Benjamin’s angel. He wants to write as an eyewitness with immediate visual access to things that have long since disappeared’ (2003, p. 30). Sebald has only highly mediated postmemories of the air wars, or at least he is trying to muster them, rather than the immediate access of the witness. Contrary to Hell’s implication, the eyewitness has no more unmediated access than the postmemorative, vicarious witness. (Sebald’s use of photography registers the failure of language and memory’s indirect relation to the referent.) In Huyssen’s reading, Sebald’s reference to Benjamin’s angel means that Sebald has succumbed to metaphysics. The ‘fixity’ of the angel is Sebald’s paralysis before the onslaught of the industrial processes that he must witness vicariously but which he cannot historicise. Duttlinger offers a similar reading to Huyssen’s.

Duttlinger finds in Sebald a misreading of Kluge (as homogenising and abstract on suffering) that not only corresponds with Benjamin’s fixity, but also reflects on Sebald’s own unwitting abstractions (2007, p. 170).
Duttlinger ponders why Sebald quotes from Benjamin the thesis on the ‘angel of history’ rather than ‘Thesis VII’ on history as written by the victors. ‘Thesis VII’ would have provided a critical frame for the photographic images reproduced in ‘Air War’ that Duttlinger has found lacking all along (as discussed above). Without this reminder from Benjamin, Sebald lacks the ‘profound suspicion [displayed elsewhere in his work] of images taken by those in positions of power and authority ... [of] historical photographs documenting periods of oppression and persecution [which] threaten to impose complicity between photographer and viewer, between the oppressor and retrospective witness’ (Duttlinger, 2007, p. 171). Sebald, then, reproduces the oppressors’ or victors’ perspective, which focuses his memory work and which is sanctioned by the fixity of Benjamin’s angel, detached and unable to engage empathetically in suffering. In effect, Sebald is reproducing the Allied perspective, and here Duttlinger refers to Wilms (discussed above) who reminds us of the geo-political context in which Sebald grew up, in which West German memory was informed by a Cold War political alliance with the nations who bombed Germany. In turn, this might explain why Sebald dismisses individual testimonies as clichéd because they interfere with the victor’s perspective to which he is consciously or unconsciously loyal. Sebald can never quite leave that perspective behind, and his attempts to do so, which entails a move from abstraction to the individuation of suffering, ‘cements’ those perspectival poles, producing an ‘oscillation between panoramic detachment and voyeuristic exposure [that] precludes any empathetic middle ground’. ‘The result’, argues Duttlinger, ‘is a history written if not from the perspective of the victors then certainly from that of the survivors: a history based on photographs whose apparatic gaze cements the distance between viewer and image, between the living and the dead, and between personal experience of destruction and its retrospective detached analysis’. Ultimately, this is an impediment to mourning and to ‘unravelling the psychological mechanisms that underpin German responses to this aspect of the war’ (Duttlinger, 2007, pp. 172–3). Duttlinger’s reading of Sebald hinges on her reading of Benjamin’s angel. A closer scrutiny of Benjamin’s figure is called for to reveal how it might otherwise function in Sebald’s narrative.

What does the angel see? Sigrid Weigel’s reading of the angel in Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ is instructive. While we see the progress of time (‘a chain of events’), the angel, with a look of amazement on his face, sees the convolution of that time. The angel sees the inseparability of past and present (in ‘one single catastrophe’), as the past insistently and violently intrudes upon the present – despite
the angel’s ineluctable advance through time (Weigel, 1996, p. 162). The
remains of a traumatic, catastrophic history are hurled into the present
moment of seeing, rather than being confined to a linear past. In this
sense, ‘history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homog-
enous, empty time, but time filled by presence of the now [Jetztzeit]’
(Benjamin, 1992c, pp. 252–3). As Weigel emphasises, the angel's look of
amazement marks the limits of our understanding. We cannot see what
he can, but his gaze allows us to at least configure and conceptualise
what cannot be fully known. ‘It is the other gaze [the angel's] which is
the condition of possibility for perceiving the catastrophe of history’
(Weigel, 1996, p. 162). Klee’s depiction of the intrusion of the past
upon the present, and the amazement it causes, could be described in
terms of the dynamics of shock or trauma. Put another way, the angel
might configure the concept of a traumatic history, which belatedly
intrudes on the present as the angel finds significance in remnants of
the past thrown at his feet. The angel is amazed (shocked, traumatised)
by what he sees but which we cannot. The angel, then, allegorises a
traumatic and intrusive past that we cannot fully know. Although we
cannot fully make sense of the historical memory that returns, because
of its (disruptive) traumatic affectiveness, this site of return offers us, as
Weigel argues, the possibility of perceiving that past, if not its full com-
prehension. We may not have the knowing look of the angel, but we do
know of its remote possibility, which charges earthly sites of return with
potential meaning. In more general terms, at such places the possibility
of a history of modernity emerges, which is contrary to the distanced,
fixity of the angel found in Huyssen’s and Duttlinger’s reading.

Where Huyssen and Vees-Gulani to varying extents see Sebald acting
out the trauma of area bombing repeating a history he cannot under-
stand, and Cosgrove argues that Sebald stages a literal trauma, Sebald’s
use of Benjamin suggests a working through of trauma – a performative
exploration of its potential. What the angel sees is a different kind of
aerial perspective than that researched by Hazel in The Rings of Saturn
(an official history, quite literally, from above, by Vaughan-Thompson, a
BBC reporter who delivered a live broadcast from on board a Lancaster
bomber during its run over Berlin) (Sebald, 2003, pp. 20–1). Benjamin’s
angel of history therefore offers Sebald a way of conceptualising his
secondary shock or trauma of area bombing and harnessing it to disrupt
historicism.

Shock of trauma promises deliverance from ‘historicism’ and its ‘homog-
enous, empty time’. For Benjamin, ‘to articulate the past historically does
not mean to recognise it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to
seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’. It is in such a dangerous moment of memory that historicist thinking ‘suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions’, which ‘gives that configuration a shock’, affording the opportunity to take ‘cognisance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history’. Shocking memory as it returns to the present is ‘a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time’ (Benjamin, 1992c, pp. 247, 254–5). Shot through with messianic time, history does not prefigure its ends, conclusions and the sum of historical knowledge, for this would be teleological; rather, as Peter Osborne puts it, this is ‘a fleeting experience of the “legibility” of history as a whole’, a ‘perspective’ on the redemption of history (1994, p. 68). Restaging the trauma of area bombing (rather than acting it out), Sebald offers a glimpse of what the angel of history sees – a history of disruption and a disruptive history – without subsuming this thoroughly convoluted past into a totalising narrative.

3.8 Romancing the ruins

With history loosened from a totalising historicism, it is possible to return to the earthly sites of catastrophe, particularly the sites of ruin, in order to reread them within a Benjaminian frame. Where ruins were once evidence of a natural history of destruction, Benjamin would argue that ruination has the potential to blast objects from the historical continuum of which they had been a part. Blasted in this way, ruins can be read in the narration of a counterhistory that remembers what historicism (in this case natural history) forgets; ruins contain the seeds of their rehistoricisation (Buck-Morss, 1993, p. 312; Benjamin, 1997b, p. 229). The continuities between the industrial logic of bombing and the post-war reconstruction of (West) Germany suggest an overarching narrative of capitalism that has subsumed the experience of the bombing, and which resists and indeed absorbs counterhistories and countermemories of the war. The postcard of Frankfurt reproduced by Sebald would seem to be the very artefact of capitalist amnesia. If Sebald has begun to ‘blast’ this era ‘out of the homogenous course of history’ by mobilising traumatic affect, then his attention to Germany’s ruins suggests an attempt to preserve them in memory outside the progress of capitalism, as the props of a counter-memory of the war in the air.

What, though, is to stop Sebald from brooding over the ruins of the air war? Just as Sebald’s text worked through the possibilities of the
voyeuristic gaze, so it must also be mindful of gazing over the ruins of Germany in an appropriative manner. Drawing on Benjamin's *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Max Pensky might liken this appropriative gaze to ‘brooding’ over the remnants of the past: a ‘tormented sense of occluded significance indwelling in apparently the most insignificant things’ (1996, p. 170). Ultimately such activity runs the danger of degrading both subject and object, turning the object into ‘fodder for reflection’ – a mirror for the subject’s desires (Pensky, 1996, p. 170). The remnant of the past is thus hypostatised in the solipsistic gaze of the brooder, becoming a mummified object. Subjective remembrance (brooding) might add a false coherence, linearity and continuity to the historical memories prompted by these ruins and fold them back into something akin to the very historicism or natural history from which Sebald’s text promises deliverance.

How then to read and write the historical ‘script’ presented by the ruins of Germany? In Benjamin’s schema, ruins demand an allegorical narration. Benjamin would have described the language of ruins as allegorical (1994, p. 177). In such a language, signs or ‘words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious profane meaning’. (Allegorical language pursues the truth of the catastrophic history but cannot fully know it (Benjamin, 1994, p. 36; see also Benjamin, 1997a).) In its pursuit, allegorical language differentiates itself from the bastardisation of sacred knowledge found in the claim of Romanticism, for which the symbol, falsely apprehended, unites name and object. It is the task of the allegorist to pursue the historical truth of this landscape, but to confirm its mortification rather than to render it symbolic and therefore simply make it a reflection of his or her interpretative desires (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 160, 182).

### 3.9 Photography and allegory

Sebald’s apprehension of the ruins is allegorical in that his representation of ruins provokes yet denies a Romantic reading. Ulrich Baer describes how within European Romantic landscape art, the ‘environment [...] came to be seen as an aesthetic entity to be contemplated by an enraptured subject in a process of introspection and increasing self-awareness’. The Romantic sensibility bequeathed to modernity allows the modern subject to understand himself within a larger and thus ‘potentially historical, context’. Following Joseph Koerner, Baer argues that a Romantic sensibility allows the landscape to ‘locate us in our own
subjectivity as landscape [art’s] true point of reference’. Baer introduces this reading of Romanticism to see how it might fare when applied to the landscape photographs of Dirk Reinartz and Mikael Levin. Reinartz’s and Levin’s photographs are of the sites of Sobibór and Ohrdurf respectively. They are landscape photographs in that they depict what seem to be natural landscapes without trace of human activity. Their referent is absence: the radical decontextualisation of Jewish life transposed onto these places of death; the processes of killing that took place there; the Nazi regime’s attempts to erase traces of the killing; and the passage of time that further dislocates these events from the present moment of looking. Given the way in which these scenes are structured by what has absented itself, they are ‘placeless’ places. They render a Romantic reading impossible. Subjectivity cannot be found within these representations of landscape, for there is nothing to inhabit. These images reveal the inhospitality of the places they depict. Rather than depicting the ineffability of the Holocaust, they depict the difficulties of showing a nothingness that outstrips and destroys explanatory frameworks: ‘For the *nothing* to be “translated” into sight, it must be shown as *nothing*, rather than as the absence of something we could know’. These photographs represent, for Baer, the temporality of trauma. Just as the origins of trauma cannot be fully know or seen (witnessed), these photographs return us to site of trauma that is no longer there – a placeless place – that resonates with the ‘*sense* – the premonition or uncanny aura – that something has disappeared’.

Without conflating different orders of evacuation and nothingness, Baer’s reading of photographic figures of trauma are useful when considering the images of ruins found in Seballd’s text. Not strictly landscape images in the Romantic sense, they threaten to become so as nature encroaches on the social and historical. A visual regime of inhospitality also focuses the way in which we look at these images. Although we might be tempted to brood over the ruins of the air war in Romantic fashion, to find ourselves reflected in such a landscape, we are also confronted with what has been evacuated from these landscapes. In dialogue with images of ruins, the visual and linguistic references to corpses reminds us of who once dwelt in these buildings. With this knowledge, it becomes hard to inhabit such a landscape (and their places), to locate ourselves within it. Access to these photographs is further blocked by the nature of photography itself. By the very act of reproducing photographic images of ruins, Seballd performs a particularly traumatic temporality. Levin and Reinartz curtail the ‘landscape genre’s power of absorption, its lure for viewers to project themselves
into an imaginary pictorial depth, by marshaling the melancholic dimension of photography:

In every photographic image, the viewers' *here and now* – their ability to draw on different explanatory contexts – is read against the photographed moment’s *then and there*. Regardless of subject matter, photographs show a moment of the past as inalterable, as something that has been brought back against time's passage .... This site is here, immovably preserved and printed, but you are elsewhere. Before yielding information, all photographs ... signal that we have arrived after the picture has been taken, and thus too late.

(Baer, 2002, p. 76)

Knowledge of the pastness of the photograph excludes us and works against the seductions of the landscape genre that draw us into the image. The viewers' exclusion or ‘sense of nonbelonging’, though, is dependent on the ‘retention of the referent found in all photographs’. ‘Because something of this retained past has not been allowed to depart but is still there, where the present should have swallowed it up, we who view the picture in the present feel excluded’. The general structure of photographic reference conveys an illusion (or aura) of presence or the particularities of the referent. It is the illusion of presence that ‘draws our gaze’ but which makes us realise our exclusion. Although we should know better, we are returned to an uninhabitable scene that we cannot enter. Sebald's landscape photographs, in postmemorial fashion, perform this return or, to use Baer's term, ‘trespass’.26

3.10 Conclusion: Vertigo

By trespassing on the ruins of modernity, Sebald, following Benjamin, preserves those ruins against their incorporation as symbols of a natural history of destruction. This is not to suggest that such a terrain cannot be known and remains ‘the *terra incognita*’ of the air war, as it was for the inhabitants of Germany's bombed cities (Sebald, 2003, p. 31). Rather, Sebald’s performative text seeks to harness the (secondary) trauma of the air war rather than act out its affectiveness symptomatically. Photography has functioned in several ways in this text. Sebald has learned the photographic lessons of Holocaust memorialisation in order to muster the materials of a postmemory of the war in the air. This borrowing of tropes reflects a cultural entanglement of memories of different traumas. Holocaust memory should not be dependent of
memories of the war, but Sebald has argued a general de-realisation of the war years in certain phases of German cultural memory. To forget one aspect of life under the National Socialist regime entails forgetting other aspects. Photography has therefore been used to explore the limits of vision, particularly when it threatens voyeurism and a pornography of the dead, but also to induce, at least potentially, a post-memorial sense of loss. It is this loss that allows Sebald to disrupt the natural history of destruction in its various paradigms. If ruins can be read as the evidence of a natural history of destruction and also as props of a countermemory, the materialisation of trauma, then Sebald’s use of photographic images teaches us how to trespass on these ruins. Photography augments or buttresses the ruination of natural history by our very exclusion from the scene of catastrophe. The ruin is the petrifying imprint of historical time on the (primordial) landscape of natural history. The ruin materialises the distance between text and nature; it is a historical script as opposed to a natural landscape. Yet reading the ruin as fragment invokes a productive tension between melancholia and mourning: a melancholy desire to return to what is perceived as prehistorically symbolic whole of which the ruin is a remnant that is interrupted by the mourning of historical loss (Rampley, 2001, p. 138). Or, as Benjamin puts it, with the ruin ‘the observer is confronted with the \textit{facies hippocratica} of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been ultimately, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather a death’s head’ (Benjamin, 1994, p. 166).

The photographic image’s exclusion of the viewer from the scene of ruination, is by its fleeting and unstable reference to the past, the presentation of what is now absent. As Eduardo Cadava puts it:

\begin{quote}
 Only when the Medusan glance of … the camera has momentarily transfixed history can history \textit{as} history appear in its disappearance. Within this condensation of past and present, time is no longer to be understood as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial …. The photographic image [then] … interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, one that spaces time and temporalises space. \\
(1997, pp. 60–1)
\end{quote}

In short, the photographic image cannot stabilise the past referent long enough for a natural history (historicism) to form around it. The interruption of (a natural) history allows Sebald a vertiginous glimpse of what the angel of history sees: the beginnings of a necessarily
disorientating history in all its traumatic convolutions and disruptions rather than its completion. Duttlinger offers a different sense of this vertigo. Duttlinger notes Sebald’s spatialisation of time and temporalisation of space in ‘Air War’ in the section that relates the description of Corsican memorial plaques to those deported to Auschwitz, to a picture in the Corsican church at Morosaglia, of ‘Christ before his Passion seated deep in thought in the moonlit, nocturnal Garden of Gethsemane’, to the ‘self-same picture that hung over my parents’ conjugal bed for many years’. The picture, Sebald’s parents told him, was purchased in Bamberg in 1936, where his father was a sergeant in the cavalry regiment. ‘Such is the dark backward and abysm of time. Everything lies all jumbled up in it, and when you look down you feel dizzy and afraid’ (Sebald, 2003, pp. 73–4). The dizzying association between Auschwitz, the air war and Sebald’s familial implication in National Socialism undermines, Duttlinger argues, Sebald’s position of mastery over the war (and its victims) exercised through visual (photographic) distancing techniques: ‘what starts out as a position of mastery, an ordered overview, can suddenly tip over into a state of vertiginous disorientation at the sight of destruction’ (2007, p. 177). Yet, for Duttlinger, this is typical of Sebald’s oscillation between voyeurism and detachment. However, Duttlinger and I both agree that ‘a constructive alternative to the detachment of historical enquiry can be achieved only through an approach which abandons any secure positions in favour of a memory process which continues to reflect on its material beyond and against any taboos and established truths’ (Duttlinger, 2007, p. 177). However, I have argued that this is what Sebald, through the mustering and marshalling of postmemorial materials, has been doing all along. His photographic approach to the past is vertiginous in its deliberate yet dizzying association of the Holocaust, bombing, perpetrators and victims. This is not a lapse into vertigo because of the failure to master history, but a form of memory that allows one history to arise from another in which the victims of the air war give way to the victims of the Holocaust and Sebald’s familial implication in National Socialism.
4
Grey Zones of Memory?

4.1 The innocence of memory

In the last chapter we saw how Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur deployed certain postmemorial strategies in order to reconstruct and remember the trauma of the Allied bombing of German cities without displacing or subsuming the position of Nazi Germany’s victims. In doing so, Sebald placed a conception of victimhood in tense co-presence with that of German perpetration. Not only recognising the actual imbrication of memories of the war and the Holocaust, Sebald’s postmemorial strategies, I argued, could not remember bombing outside of the context of the perpetration as a means of distancing that context. This chapter further elaborates on the relationship between victim and the perpetrator identity in strategies of cultural remembrance. It does so by considering a series of well known case studies from testimonial literature (Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski), recent memory theory (Marianne Hirsch), philosophy (Jürgen Habermas and Gillian Rose), historiography (Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber) and film (Steven Spielberg). These case studies will be used to explore the ethical and political ramifications of various approaches to relating to and identifying and empathising with the perpetrator in Holocaust representation and cultural memory, asking in particular what happens to the figure of the victim in those approaches. The assessment of these schemes of identification will inform an interpretive framework to be exercised in the next chapter in a scrutiny of the novels of Bernhard Schlink, namely Der Vorleser (1995, published as The Reader, 1996) and Die Heimkehr (2006, published as The Homecoming, 2008).

We begin by asking how in theoretical regimes of secondary memory and witnessing does the perpetrator figure? Such regimes are often organised around ethical principles by which the perpetrator's perspective
is eschewed and over-identification with the victim resisted. The mass
distribution of images made by the perpetrators in current realms of
cultural memory is particularly disturbing to such theoretical regimes
because it threatens to naturalise that perspective.

Marianne Hirsch, for example, has focused on the iconic photo-
graphic image of a little boy contained in what is commonly known
as ‘The Jurgen Stroop Report’ – an SS report on the liquidation of the
Warsaw ghetto – but was originally entitled ‘The Jewish Quarter of
Warsaw is no more’. Stroop added this caption to the image: ‘removed
from the ghetto by force’ (quoted in Hirsch, 2003, p. 21). The image
shows a young boy, his arms raised in surrender, standing amidst a
group of Jews being herded out of underground bunkers towards the
Umschlagplatz to await deportation. Hirsch critiques the ubiquitous
reproduction of this image in post-Holocaust art that unwittingly remo-
bilises the perpetrator’s perspective.¹

Even if done ironically, the reproduction of such images cannot neces-
sarily escape the genocidal gaze focused in the original image. Photography
was part of the machinery of destruction and a means of prefiguring the
death awaiting those framed in such images. The subjects of Nazi pho-
tographs are unable to return the Nazi gaze that relieves them of agency
and turns them into objects. They are unable to look back as subjects.
‘A system that reduces humans to “pieces” and ashes through mechanised
genocide creates a visual field in which no look between perpetrator and
victim can be exchanged or returned’ (Hirsch, 2003, pp. 24–5).

The last chapter described, citing Baer, ‘the retention of the referent
found in all photographs’ by which the present-day viewer is excluded
from the image: ‘In every photographic image, the viewers’ here and now –
their ability to draw on different explanatory contexts – is read against
the photographed moment’s then and there. Regardless of subject matter,
photographs show a moment of the past as inalterable, as something
that has been brought back against time’s passage .... This site is here,
immovably preserved and printed, but you are elsewhere. Before yield-
ing information, all photographs ... signal that we have arrived after
the picture has been taken, and thus too late’ (Baer, 2002, p. 76). Hirsch
argues that no matter the critical irony of the image’s reproduction and
recontextualisation and no matter our exclusion from the photographic
image, we cannot be free from the deadly gaze (the ‘finality of the photo-
graphic take’) that focused the image in the first place:

In the context of the ‘total death’ of Nazi genocide and its destruc-
tion not only of individuals but also of an entire culture, such an
act of undoing seems doomed and the photographs' finality utterly, hopelessly irrevocable. No retrospective irony can redeem or humanise these images produced in the context of Nazi genocide. These images can signal nothing less than the lethal intent that caused them and that they helped carry out.

(2003, p. 25)

It is not only a deadly gaze that is naturalised by the recycling of the Nazi, perpetrator images, but perpetrator idioms, such as the figuration of victims as feminised and infantilised, become deshistoricised (along with the agency of individual photographers responsible for these images), loosened from the original ideological contexts in which those objectifying figures were a prelude to death (Hirsch, 2003, pp. 22–4). In sum, victims, specifically Jewish ones, become remythologised through the current iconicity of images of them.

The mythologisation of iconic images is compounded by the fantasies to which they give rise. Hirsch argues that if victims are endlessly infantilised or feminised through the recycling process, then, the viewer assumes the hypermasculinised position of the photographer and all those who were able to look through his lens or see things from his point of view (2003, p. 22). Ironically, for those who were not there, the masculine omnipotence of this viewing position can engender fantasies of the rescue of women, and particularly, children – with the latter, especially, transformed into a symbol of innocence (Hirsch, 2003, p. 29; see also Hirsch, 1999a, p. 13). Whether the image focuses a murderous or liberating gaze, the two optical consequences are tantamount to the same thing: the victim is shorn of the particularities of his or her identity. For the so-called liberating gaze, the mantle of innocence propped up by infantilisation and feminisation makes it easier for the viewer to colonise the image with facile notions of rescue and resistance and the benefit of hindsight. This kind of affiliative act of looking, which is at the same time a form of forgetting, also produces a split in the subjectivities of those who look (Hirsch, 2003, p. 29).2 Affiliative looking is not just retrospective in the sense that it is motivated with hindsight; it is also an attempt to witness the events depicted as their contemporary – to, in fact, witness from the point of view of the image’s subject (Hirsch, 1999a, p. 15). Whether these acts of over-identification consist of witness by proxy or the fantasy of rescue, it helps if the images on which they play out are evacuated of the specificities of referent, photographer and context of production – if, in other words, such images are iconic.
Such are Hirsch’s concerns about what she would describe as postmemorial art, leading to a theoretical imperative for an ‘aesthetic based on a mediated, nonappropriative, indirect form of identification that would clarify the limits of retrospective understanding rather than make the past too easily available’ (2003, p. 29; see also 1999a, p. 10). Rather like Dominick LaCapra’s differentiation between empathy and identification (discussed elsewhere in this book), Hirsch draws on Katja Silverman’s terms of ideopathy against which: ‘Heteropathic memory (feeling and suffering with the other) means, as I understand it, the ability to say, “It could have been me; it was me also”, and, at the same time, “but it was not me”’ in formulating that aesthetic (1999a, p. 9).

For Susannah Radstone, Hirsch’s call for a more self-reflexive (and heteropathic) postmemorial aesthetic suffers from a blindspot typical of the North American canon of trauma studies: ‘The testimonial perspectives of [Cathy] Caruth, [Shoshana] Felman and [Dori] Laub and their followers mobilise a dialogics of witnessing to testimonies of trauma – to the overwhelming and well-nigh unrepresentable experiences of innocent victimhood’ (2001, p. 61). In other words, concern over over-identification with the victim presumes not only the absolute innocence of the victim, but also that of those who remember or witness vicariously through the victim. Put differently, fantasies of rescue, provoked by Nazi photographic idioms (of feminisation and infantilisation), attribute innocence to those who are imaginatively rescued, yet that innocence is compounded by the critical anxiety surrounding over-identification. For Radstone, postmemorial art-work’s ‘ethical value lies’ not in its self-reflexive capacity to eschew the perpetrator’s perspective but in ‘its capacity to move its spectator through fantasy identifications with perpetration as well as with victimhood’ (2001, p. 61). Radstone argues that if ‘history is not to repeat itself, the task of witnessing and remembering the suffering of others ought not to be separated from the difficult acknowledgement of testimonial witnessing’s darker side’ (2001, p. 61). Radstone begins her explanation of the dangers of historical repetition by very briefly drawing on Primo Levi’s concept of the ‘Grey Zone’ as well as the work of Gillian Rose, before moving on to contextualise recent theories of trauma and testimony and their presumptions in relation to the psychosocial dynamics of postmodernity. It is to Gillian Rose’s theory that I turn first in order to address the presumption of absolute innocence that underpins the idea of postmemory and more generally concepts of secondary witnessing and memory informed by canonical trauma theory.
4.2 Gillian Rose: The representation of fascism and the fascism of representation

Gillian Rose’s critique of postmodern philosophy centres on the characterisation of the project of modernity within postmodern discourse and where that project might lead. For Rose, as postmodernism has it, the ultimate conclusion of the project of modernity was Auschwitz, rationalised by the master narratives of modernity. However, ‘The demonstration that Fascism and representation are inseparable does not lead to the conclusion, current in post-modern aesthetics, philosophy and political theory, that representation is or should be superseded. On the contrary, the argument for the overcoming of representation, in its aesthetic, philosophical and political versions, converges with the inner tendency of Fascism itself’ (G. Rose, 1996, p. 41). If, for (Rose’s version of) postmodernism, representation is contaminated by what it has rationalised in the past, then how do we know that the postmodern reluctance to represent – its tendency to place things beyond representation – does not unwittingly repeat the mistakes of the past? Placing Jews beyond representation surely echoes the Nazism’s abstraction of Jewish identity? Rose advocates re-inhabiting representation, the project of modernity and its impetus to rationalise, to see where representation might converge with Fascism: ‘Only the persistence of the always fallible and contestable representation opens the possibility for our acknowledgement of mutual implication in the fascism of our cultural rites and rituals’ (1996, p. 41).

Foeclasing the possibility of representation that knows it is contestable and fallible, as opposed to teleological in terms of what it might find, the representational alternative renders the event ineffable. A Holocaust ‘piety’ reigns:

According to this view, ‘Auschwitz’ or the ‘Holocaust’ are emblems for the breakdown in divine and/or human history. The uniqueness of this break delegitimises narratives and names as such, and hence all aesthetic or apprehensive representation .... To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of ‘ineffability’, that is, non-representability, is to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear it may it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human.

(G. Rose, 1996, p. 43)
What is at stake, then, is not just the abstractness of the victims and the possibility of unwittingly representing them by the very figures that facilitated their murder – as Radstone puts it, testimony must acknowledge its dark side lest history repeat itself – but an inability to see ourselves in the role of the murderer, to share a common humanity, which equally mystifies the Holocaust.

Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) is, for Rose, pious before the Holocaust. However, the film ostensibly suggests otherwise, given the mirroring of the two protagonists, both Nazis, both of Austrian Catholic background. In fact, ‘the continuity between the banality of Schindler’s benevolence and the gratuity of Goeth’s violence, should mean that the reader and pari passu, the audience, experience a crisis of identity in their own breasts’ (G. Rose, 1996, p. 43). Given the commonality between the two and the continuity of their actions and characterisation, both should be available for identification, an identification that produces crisis given the ‘difference in the individual outcome of their common origins’. This crisis is not allowed in the film.³ ‘Instead we enjoy vicarious revulsion at the handsome sadist, Goeth, who appears invincible in the film, but is imprisoned much earlier on the book [Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark*, upon which the film is based], and we applaud the bonvivant Schindler in his precarious outwitting of him’ (Rose, 1996, p. 46).

One central example from the film demonstrates why no crisis ensues from an identification with Schindler. In the infamous scene in which Schindler’s female Jews are taken to what might be a gas chamber, Spielberg takes us to a threshold of ethical representation in his seeming willingness to show death therein. Consequently he seems willing to show what could only be witnessed by those who would die, and to what only perpetrators could give testimony to witnessing – from their perspective. (Even the *sonderkommando*, charged with herding victims into the gas chambers, clearing chambers after gassing and feeding the crematoria with bodies, were themselves mostly murdered after two or three months of such work. They were murdered to prevent them from becoming witnesses.) I discuss the shower scene in more detail below but for now two points need to be made. It is important to note that Rose’s objection to the potential of the scene is not based on its actual contents. As I understand it, her argument is not based on what is shown but on how it is shown. She is not redeeming the very concept of ineffability with which she began her critique of postmodern Holocaust representation. Ineffability rests on silence over comprehension. The gratuitous nature of the scene does not add to comprehension – what
is the point of showing it if it does not bring about understanding? – but only represents things in a voyeuristic fashion, or, worse, from the perpetrators’ perspective – a perspective the viewer inhabits un-self-consciously even though he or she may find the scene bracing. The consequent ‘regressive identification’ with these women that the scene orchestrates is one in which the viewer is philosophically innocent of the complications and connotations of his or her perspective. As these women are saved (water not gas), that identification also emerges from the gas chamber unscathed. (Our looking at them has not been implicated in their deaths; we did not see them die. Our gaze, argues Rose, is not ultimately one of violence shared with the perpetrator.) The scene therefore licenses such an uncomplicated identification (free from the connotations of perspective) across the film, prior to and after this moment. We are freed from voyeurism (a crisis of representation), or at least from thinking about it, to sentimentalise (mythologise) the figure that allowed us to be free from seeing the ultimate moment of Holocaust death – a figure (Nazi, war profiteer, factory owner and rescuer of these women) who is himself still implicated in the system of genocide. We are freed from thinking about our own predation. The film is anxious that ‘our sentimentality be left intact … it leaves us … in a Fascist security of our own unreflected predation’ (G. Rose, 1996, pp. 47–8).

Primo Levi, on the other hand, presents a much more disorienting approach to Holocaust representation. According to Levi’s essay ‘The Drowned and the Saved’, in the camp the perpetrators and victims could not be divided into a ““we” inside and the enemy outside, separated by a sharply defined geographic frontier’ (1995, p. 23). In other words, the system of National Socialism caused the victims to emulate their victimisers: ‘It is a gray zone with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge’ (Levi, 1995, p. 25). Various reasons are given beyond those of the logistical necessity of letting the victims run their own camps, at least to a certain extent, in a time of war when German personnel were needed elsewhere: an invitation to collaborate with the regime makes resistance to it less likely or worthwhile, as does the instigation of guilt through collaboration; the greater the level of oppression, the greater the willingness to collaborate to alleviate that burden; and perhaps, most significantly, ‘an attempt to shift onto others – specifically the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence’ (Levi, 1995, pp. 27, 28, 37). This last factor pertains to witnessing. Collaboration contaminates the perspective
of the witnesses. Under such a system, the ‘deprivation to which they [the victims] were subjected’ meant that ‘the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero’ (Levi, 1995, p. 33).

As the responsibility for blurring the boundaries between victim and perpetrator lies with the ‘system, the very structure of the totalitarian state’, judgement should be mitigated for those who have experienced the camps or similar situations, or who know what it means to ‘act in a state of coercion’ (Levi, 1995, p. 29). Those who should not be judged are the sonderkommando, who unknowingly destined for the gas chambers themselves, were responsible for maintaining order among those newly arrived at the death camps, extracting the corpses from the chambers, processing bodies (shaving women’s hair, pulling teeth, sorting personal belongings), and feeding and emptying the crematoria – tasks they could only refuse with the alternative of suicide or execution (Levi, 1995, pp. 34, 42–3).

However, for Rose, Levi’s position, or status as victim, is always clear from the beginning, which means that no matter how much he blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, the reader finds the perpetrator’s perspective oppositional and resistible. The perpetrator’s perspective is eschewed and not seen as inhabitable, unlike Tadeusz Borowski’s This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentleman (1959), which catapults the reader into a grey zone. Borowski ‘makes you witness brutality in the most disturbing way, for it is not clear – Levi always is – from what position, as whom, you are reading. You emerge in horror at yourself, not in admiration for the author’s Olympian serenity (Levi)’ (G. Rose, 1996, p. 50). The reader has little chance to reject what is suddenly apparent as the perspective of perpetration. Borowski was a Polish, non-Jewish Kapo in Auschwitz, imprisoned for his political views. Borowski offers us predation carried out by the victim from the victim’s point of view, informed by his own experiences. While Levi refuses to judge the sonderkommando, he offers us, as Rose might have it, a less complicated perspective with which to identify. The reader identifies with him as he refuses to judge the sonderkommando. As Levi points out, ‘I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and that I was not a murderer’ (1995, p. 32). He is of course right, and it would be obscene to accuse him otherwise, but he is systemically implicated through no fault of his own – an implication just by mere virtue of his status in the hierarchy of the camp.

The opening scenes of Borowski’s ‘This Way for the Gas Chamber, Ladies and Gentleman’, the story with which the collection of the
same name opens, are indeed confusing, and the reader is thrown into a quandary as to the moral perspective of its protagonist and even led to question whether he is prisoner or guard. Yet, even in comparison with Borowski, Rose’s emphasis on the serenity of Levi may seem overstated, and Bryan Cheyette argues a more fraught version of Levi’s writing, marked by ‘ethical uncertainties’: a continual ‘negotiation’ between documentary realism and narrative failure brought about by the failures of language to remember or narrate things witnessed; and a realisation that his voice of reason and rationality (scientific understanding) is implicated in the very structures that generated Auschwitz, a biological and ‘social experiment’ as it is described in If This is a Man (Levi, 1994, p. 93; see also pp. 111–2). ‘He understood from the very beginning, that even he, in his memoirs, is forced to work within the very categories which decide who is, and who is not, human’ (Cheyette, 1998, p. 279).

4.3 The Historikerstreit

Where Levi and Borowski more or less blur the boundaries between victim and perpetrator and where Spielberg suggests a facile empathy for the perpetrator, further examples will illuminate the politics of cultural memory when it enters what might be called the ‘grey zone’. The first example is a series of extracts from the Historikerstreit or Historians’ Debate of the mid-1980s in West Germany (FDR). In many ways, the Historikerstreit was catalysed by the controversy surrounding Reagan’s visit to the German military ceremony at Bitburg, on 8 May 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of the World War II and of the Nazi dictatorship. The FDR experienced an ideological shift under the government of a Christian Democratic-led coalition, headed by Helmut Kohl. One of the central concerns of the new conservatism was the normalisation of the past – a past that was starting to emerge after so much displacement – and this ceremony was designed to contribute to that normalisation. It was discovered that 47 members of the SS were also buried in the cemetery. The equation of Waffen SS and Wehrmacht soldiers was not intended at the time but fitted well the campaign of normalisation that did not see the SS as exceptional for their activities under the Nazi regime but equally worthy of commemoration as other soldiers and victims of the Third Reich and, more generally, the World War II.

This relativisation was continued by the work of Ernst Nolte, whose article, ‘Vergangenheit, die nicht bergehen will’ (The Past that will Not
Pass Away) appeared in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on 6 June 1986, and was at the core of the Historikerstreit. Nolte argues that

[a] conspicuous shortcoming of the literature of National Socialism is that it doesn’t know, or doesn’t want to admit, to what extent everything that was later done by the Nazis, with the sole exception of the technical procedure of gassing, had already been described in an extensive literature dating from the 1920s .... Could it be that the Nazis, that Hitler carried out an ‘Asiatic’ deed only because they regarded themselves and those like them as potential or actual victims of an ‘Asiatic’ deed?

(quoted in Habermas, 1989, p. 213)

‘What is involved here is an attempt to make Auschwitz unexceptional’ (Habermas, 1989b, p. 211). ‘Was not the Gulag Archipelago more original than Auschwitz? Was not the ‘class murder’ of the Bolsheviks the logical and factual prius of the race murder of the National Socialists’, continues Nolte (quoted in Habermas, 1989, p. 212). Nolte’s thesis is this: state-sponsored mass murder committed by the Soviet Union (the gulags) prior to the World War II generates a precedent for Auschwitz. Nazi crimes are not just mimetic; Nolte’s thesis implied a ‘causal’ relation: without the original, no copy could have been made. The Nazi copy is only different in its technical innovation of gassing (see Wood, 1999, p. 47). By labelling the genocidal deed as ‘Asiatic’, Nolte is dealing in stereotype, equating Jews and ‘Bolsheviks’ (both characterised as Eastern), the implication being that victims are akin to perpetrators and so deserving of their fate.

That the Soviet Union created a precedent for the genocidal activities of the National Socialist regime, that genocide can be rationalised in the face of invasion from the East, that Eastern Bolsheviks are Jews by default and were subject to a necessary ‘Asiatic deed’ (Nolte’s term) smacks of ‘narrative fetishism’, as discussed in the last chapter. Santner diagnoses Nolte’s contribution to the Historians’ Debate in this way because it compares totalitarian regimes only to preclude the possibility of coming to terms with the German version. The narrative of the suffering of Germans in the face of an ‘Asiatic’ threat becomes fetishised over the narrative of suffering caused by Germans (Santner, 1992, p. 144). Historical revisionism then ‘served the need of political legitimation rather than critical reflection; it also sanctioned a form of historical narration that, in its very telling, obscured crucial moral distinctions’ (Wood, 1999, p. 48).
What emerges from Nolte’s statement is the attempt to make Germans see things from the perpetrator’s point of view and to see themselves as ‘potential or actual’ victims of an ‘Asiatic’ deed. The focusing of this perspective appropriates Germany’s Jewish victims in order to normalise Germany’s relationship to the past. In the name of nation, Jews are once again excluded, thanks to a categorisation of victimhood that is both inclusive and exclusive. That Germans, West Germans at least, were still potential victims is supposedly confirmed by the continuing Cold War threat posed by the Soviet Union, against which the FDR pits itself having taken its place in the ‘Atlantic community’ (signalled by Bitburg) – an assumption of place dependent on the FDR having come to terms with a normalised past (Habermas, 1989, pp. 213–15; Wood, 1999, p. 48; Wolin, 1989, p. xviii).

If the implication of Nolte’s statement is that the ‘Asiatic’ deed should be seen (rationalised) from the perpetrator-cum-victim’s perspective, then Andreas Hillgruber’s contribution to the Historians’ Debate elevates empathy for that reconstructed perpetrator. The publication of Hillgruber’s ‘Two Sorts of Destruction’ in 1986 was, as Omer Bartov puts it, a scrutiny of events in the Eastern Provinces ‘through the soldier’s rifle sight’ (1996, p. 78). To quote Hillgruber:

Looking at the winter-catastrophe of 1944–5, the historian is left with only one position, even if in specific cases it is difficult to sustain [einzulösen]: He must identify with the concrete fate of the German population in the East and with the desperate and costly [opferreichen] efforts of the German Eastern Army and the German Navy in the Baltic Sea, which sought to defend the population of the German East from the orgy of revenge of the Red Army from the mass rapes, the arbitrary murders and the indiscriminate deportations, and to keep open the flight routes to the West over land or sea for the East Germans in the very last phase [of the war].

(quoted in Bartov, 1996, p. 78)

The empathetic historiography of Hillgruber separates the Holocaust and the war on the Eastern Front by staging an empathy with the combatant that bypassed ‘our retrospective knowledge’ of what the Wehrmacht did there (Habermas, 1989, p. 217). As Bartov reminds us, ‘The Wehrmacht had pursued a policy of “scorched earth” and “desert zones” ever since its first retreats in the winter of 1941–2, and it played a major role in the ruthless exploitation of the Russian civilian population to the point of widespread starvation; it was centrally involved in
the mass murder of prisoners of war and in the extermination of other political enemies and biological Untermenschen’. Hillgruber’s historicisation, in seeking empathy, renders amnesiac the historical participants about whom he writes, as well as his readers. Ironically, the former cannot be the objects of empathy as intended, for that empathy rests on a kind of cognitive impairment on their part in which they are detached from their own experiences (Bartov, 1996, p. 74; see also Bartov, 2000, pp. 165–71).

Admittedly, Hillgruber does concede that as long as the front was held, the gas chambers in Poland could operate unhindered, but he separates this issue from the ‘orgy of revenge’ that would be unleashed in Germany by invading Russian troops for crimes committed by German soldiers in the East in 1941–4 (Bartov, 1996, p. 74; Habermas, 1989, p. 217). In other words, it is not the fact and specification of German atrocities that matters here (to the German soldier, and the historian, and reader who empathises with him), but the fear of Soviet revenge. Atrocities are conceded, then, in Hillgruber’s account – ‘carried out … by whichever German agencies that may be … in the years 1941–44 in those parts of the Soviet Union occupied by German troops’ (quoted in Bartov, 1996, p. 73) – but the vagueness concerning which agents were responsible not only fails to locate explicitly the SS in the East (and what they did there), it distracts attention way from the fact that the Wehrmacht were responsible for atrocities and not just other ‘agencies’ whatever they may be.

In an echo of Nolte’s claim that German atrocity was always pre-empted by the Soviets, the behaviour of the westward-marching Red Army cannot be explained just by the fact of the revenge for what the German army did in the East, but by a general Soviet barbarism:

Rapes on a hitherto hardly conceivable scale, thousands upon thousands of murders and mass deportations, which included the systematic implementation of forced displacements of around 500,000 Germans. The cry ‘the Russians are coming’ became the signal alarm throughout the East. Naturally this had to do with revenge, which the soldiers of the Red Army now took for the crimes carried out by the Germans on Soviet land between 1941 and 1944; but this explains only the vast scale of the excesses, not the phenomenon of rape and murder itself. For such incidents occurred also during the Red Army’s march into other countries. The fact that the same outrages occurred not only as early as the entry of the Red Army into Poland, but also in 1944 in Rumania and Hungary, indeed even
during north-eastern Yugoslavia in 1944–45, suggests a wider context: the Soviet conception of war, which had universally adopted such manifest barbarous traits during the Stalinist epoch.

(Hillgruber, quoted in Bartov, 1996, pp. 74–5)

Like Nolte, Hillgruber's sense of victimhood was, at the time of the Historians' Debate and its Cold War context, ongoing: the 'reconstruction of the destroyed Central Europe ... was as open as it was when contemporaries witnessed, as active participants or as victims, the catastrophe of the German East' (Hillgruber, quoted in Habermas, 1989, p. 218).

The isolation of the combatant from his crimes, supposedly leaving him available for empathetic identification, is achieved by the narrative structure of Hillgruber's publication. The first section on the collapse of the East overwhelms the relatively short 22-page section, 'The End of European Jewry'. In this second section, the Jewish victim is, by contrast, not available for empathetic identification. The particularities of the Jewish subject, as opposed to the Wehrmacht soldier described in terms of courageous, sacrificial individualism, are subsumed in cold, explanatory frameworks: 'the “murder of the Jews” was “solely a consequence of the racial doctrine”'; “the acceptance of the bulk of the population of this gruesome event” of which they had at least a vague suspicion ... points beyond the historical uniqueness of the event’ because that same population had already endorsed a euthanasia programme (Hillgruber, quoted in Habermas, 1989, pp. 219–20). Hillgruber's argument has come full circle, both isolating genocide from the war in the East and German society and also making it normative and comparable in the eyes of ordinary Germans.

The preceding has discussed only certain aspects and certain participants in the Historians' Debate, the purpose of which has been to illuminate the political and ethical implications of some attempts to identify with the perpetrator. I would like to conclude this section by looking at Jürgen Habermas’s response to these attempts at normalising the past and German national identity and to suggest that that response doesn’t necessarily succeed in dismantling the kinds of uncritical identification it critiques. As the Historians' Debate shifted from an academic arena to the media and public sphere, Habermas's concern was that a forum was opening up for the un-self-reflexive formation of national identity that instrumentalised the past by promoting a particular kind of public history. Against this ‘conventional’ identity formation, Habermas advocated a ‘postconventional’ identity based on universalist principles that could accommodate pluralist readings of the past and nation and which
must therefore entail thinking through ‘Auschwitz’ where the revisionists had been more circumspect (Habermas, 1989, p. 227). A ‘conventional’ and ‘postconventional’ use of the public history is also a matter of cultural memory and its intergenerational transmission (Habermas, 1989a, p. 237). The second and third generations’ distancing themselves from the respective crimes of their parents and grandparents can easily evade the notion of ‘collective guilt’ for ‘Auschwitz’. Alternatively, ‘collective liability’, a concept that draws on Karl Jaspers’s *The Question of Guilt* (1946), assumes a cultural implication in guilt. As Habermas explains:

Our own life is linked to the life context in which Auschwitz was possible not by contingent circumstances but intrinsically. Our form of life is connected with that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, local, political, and intellectual traditions that is difficult to disentangle – that is through a historical milieu that made us what and who we are today. None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities, both as individuals and Germans, are indissolubly interwoven with it. This holds true from mimicry and physical gestures to language and into the capillary ramifications of one’s intellectual stance.

(1989a, pp. 232)

This inescapable ‘life context’ pre-empts the adoption of generational distance and reveals an already existing immersion in cultural remembrance (or forgetting). The question is whether that remembrance is orientated towards a ‘solidarity’ with the dead, which can only be practised through a ‘repeatedly renewed’ memory – an ‘indebted memory’ – rather than through rituals of “false subordination”’ (1989a, pp. 233–4).

Habermas’s call for an ‘indebted memory’ by which a ‘postconventional’ identity could be formed had to contend with unification, which shortly followed the Historians’ Debate. A new economic nationalism, affording opportunities for East and West, distracted attention from thinking through the meaning of ‘Auschwitz’ in a new, still forming public culture (Habermas, 1991, pp. 90, 94–6, 98; see also Wood, 1999, pp. 52–4). Unification and economic opportunities legitimised national identity without the need for a national self-consciousness, as well as bringing the crimes of the GDR’s totalitarian regime into potential competition with Holocaust in a repetition of the *Historikerstreit* (Habermas, 1991, p. 101).

In warning against the uncritical empathetic identification with the perpetrator, Habermas’s ideal model of cultural memory is very much a
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'voluntaristic' one, and perhaps a little naïve in light of recent trauma studies. His model of memory 'may seem over-reliant on a belief that memory can be decisively shaped by the forces of rationality and consciousness' without taking into consideration the trauma, repression and acting out that are dramatised by discourses of Holocaust memory and history, and which disrupt the conscious control of memory (Wood, 1999, pp. 38–9). Dominick LaCapra sees the Historikerstreit very much as an example of transference, 'of transferential relations to the object of study whereby processes active in it are repeated with more or less significant variations in the account of the historian ... [and] the Holocaust presents the historian with transference in the most conceivable form' (1996, p. 46). The nature of the transference will vary according to the subject-position of the historian and his or her relation and proximity to the events historicised. Transference will then vary depending on whether the historian is a 'survivor, relative of survivors, a former Nazi, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazis or collaborators, a younger Jew or German distanced from more immediate contact with survival, participation, collaboration' and so on (LaCapra, 1996, p. 46). Subject-positions define the range of transferential relationships and also the scope of more conscious identifications with historical agents and therefore of the historian's voice. In other words, there are limits to empathy. For example, it would be inappropriate to effect rhetorically the voice of the victim in a historical account if the victim's and historian's experience were absolutely incommensurate (LaCapra, 1996, p. 46).

LaCapra finds, for example, the following in Nolte's 'The Past that will Not Pass Away'. The use of the word 'Asiatic' reinforces the racist conflation of Russian and Jewish. In Nolte's sentence, 'Was it not a scientific mistake to focus on the latter ['Auschwitz'] and neglect the former ['the Gulag Archipelago'], although a causal nexus is probable', the 'invocation to science is a sheer propaganda ploy in the attempt to lend credibility to an outlandishly speculative and implausible causal imputation; it too is reminiscent of Nazi tactics'. In short, 'his argument ... has the earmark of controlled transference in its uncritical repetition of features of his object of study' (LaCapra, 1996, p. 50). Similar things can be said of Hillgruber's empathetic stance. Both historians are acting out an unsolved identification with the past regime. This is not to say that they can be relieved of ethical responsibility for their intellectual commitments, but rather that affect is unconsidered in Habermas's voluntarism. The next section will examine historiography that empathises with the perpetrator (in the sense of projecting a phenomenology of perpetration). Goldhagen's thesis and historiographical method will be summarised before examples of his
phenomenological approach are scrutinised. Although the subject of much academic debate and criticism, it is still worth revisiting Goldhagen’s phenomenology to show how an empathetic stance collapses in to ventriloquism and over-identification with the Jewish victims.6 In fact, the debate, controversy and popularity – the ‘Goldhagen effect’ – generated by this book, particularly upon its German translation, suggested that the historian had offered a template by which Germans in their cultural remembrance could follow this over-identification in what LaCapra would call his and their unacknowledged transferential relationship.

4.4 Goldhagen’s perpetrators

Much has been written on Goldhagen’s book and its impact. Critical responses have focused, in particular, on the book’s model of anti-Semitism, its monocausal explanation of the Holocaust, the homogenisation of German society under Nazi rule and an implied collective guilt.7 To summarise his argument, Goldhagen wishes to restore the role of the perpetrators both grammatically and ethnographically. In other words, where previous historiography has always described the perpetrators in passive voice (‘five hundred Jews were killed in city X on date Y’), Goldhagen restores the active voice to describing the perpetrators, but not just in terms of their anonymous labelling as ‘Nazis’ or ‘SS men’ but as ‘Germans’, whose actions and lives are given a ‘thick’ description (1996, pp. 6, 7). This thick description reveals, according to Goldhagen, that ordinary Germans were motivated and more than willing to kill Jews because of a pervasive anti-Semitism endemic to German culture that could be traced back to the Middle Ages but which was taking a pronounced secular form from the nineteenth century. Goldhagen traces the ‘development in Germany well before the Nazis came to power of a virulent and violent “eliminationist” variant of anti-Semitism, which called for the elimination of Jewish influence or of Jews themselves from German society. When the Nazis did assume power, they found themselves masters of a society already imbued with notions about Jews that were ready to mobilised for the most extreme form of elimination available’ (1996, p. 23).

This anti-Semitism was, then, not caused by national mindsets that accompanied the decline of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism, and was not caused by what was contemporary to the political shifts in Germany: resentment and scapegoating caused by ‘economic hardship’; ‘the coercive means of a totalitarian state’; ‘social psychological pressure’ (enforced conformity to the ideas of the
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Party); and ‘invariable psychological propensities’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 7). Goldhagen argues that previous historiography has posited either a pre-existing neutrality or condemnatory attitude on the part of the perpetrators. The former assumes that ideology simply acts upon the would-be perpetrator as if he or she were a blank slate, engendering a willingness to kill. The latter assumes that Germans automatically conform to what they already in essence agree with. Lacking in these views of the German people, according to Goldhagen, is any sense of the moral autonomy of those people, and this ascribes a ‘transhistorical and invariant psychological propensity to the German people’, that they react solely to external or internal forces – slavishly following orders or self-interest. The specificity of the Jewish victims becomes irrelevant – any victim could be so victimised – in what Goldhagen sees as this caricature of the German people (1996, p. 13). Goldhagen therefore stresses the humanity of the perpetrators rather than some stereotype or ‘paper-thin’ version of them, which ‘acknowledges the actors’ capacity to know and to judge, namely to understand and to have views about the significance and morality of their actions’ (1996, p. 13). Such a historiography ‘holds the actors’ beliefs and values as central … [in relation to] the autonomous motivating force of Nazi ideology, particularly its central component of anti-Semitism’. What therefore would be recognised is the ‘humanity of the perpetrators, namely their capacity to judge and to choose to act inhumanely’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 14).

This all too human inhumanity could not be mediated by the bureaucracy of killing. Even when working within institutions, prescribed roles and specific tasks, ordinary Germans ‘individually and collectively had latitude to make choices regarding their actions’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 15). Such ‘latitude’ existed even when the perpetrators were ‘acting under orders’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 19). In fact, to blame perpetration solely on the chain of command ‘shear[s] the perpetrators’ actions out of their broader social, political and institutional contexts’: the ideological beliefs that flowed through and sustained social, political and institutional structures and the fact that institutions could not function outside their personnel (Goldhagen, 1996, pp. 15, 19). Goldhagen does not say that the perpetrators were ideologically interpolated, simply acting out a dominant ideology, a ‘particular type of anti-Semitism’, the virulence of which led them to conclude that the ‘Jews ought to die’, for this would have the same logic as ‘obeying orders’ or an ‘invariable psychological propensity’ (1996, p. 14). Ordinary Germans made the choice to kill, and had, under orders and within institutions and prescribed roles, the latitude to make that choice. Latitude was generated
by a mixture of cognitive and value structures the perpetrators brought
to bear on the tasks at hand (their preconceptions and evaluations of
Jewish victims and victimisation) plus the incentives for carrying out
such tasks – ‘the desired course of action in light of what they know
and value’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 21). On a larger scale, this latitude
is enabled by the ‘ideals’, ‘intentions’ and ‘policies’ of German anti-
Semitism. Thus ‘It is possible for someone to have an ideal of a world
free of Jewish influence, to have the fervent intention of bringing about
such changing policies, that does not promise to effect such change
because he judges the achievements of the ideal, the fulfillment of the
intention, as simply not feasible for the moment’ (Goldhagen, 1996,
p. 135). For example, eliminationist anti-Semitism evolved according to
the necessary enabling conditions, such as the state of war and foreign
policy, and organisation of occupied territories, camps and infrastructure

The conditions of latitude reveal the all too human choice to be
inhuman. Goldhagen’s thesis goes on to attend to the experience of
perpetration:

   Explaining the perpetrators’ actions demands, therefore, that the perpe-
trators’ phenomenological reality be taken seriously. We must attempt
the difficult enterprise of imagining ourselves in their places, perform-
ing their deeds, acting as they did, viewing what they beheld. To do
so we must always bear in mind the essential nature of their actions as
perpetrators: they were killing defenceless men, women, and children,
people who were obviously of no martial threat to them, often emaci-
ated and weak, in unmistakable physical and emotional agony, and
sometimes begging for their lives and those of their children.

   (1996, p. 21)

This means quite literally fleshing out the statistics and facts of mass
murder: ‘Each of us should pause and consider that ten thousand deaths
meant that Germans killed [for example] ten thousand individuals –
unarmed men, women, and children, the old, the young, the healthy, and
the sick – that Germans took a life ten thousand times’ (Goldhagen, 1996,
p. 22). With the magnitude of murder in mind, not always conveyed by
the bare facts and statistics, Goldhagen asks us to imagine, if we are to put
ourselves in the place of the perpetrators, the visceral nature of killing:

   Anyone in a killing detail who himself shot or witnessed his com-
rades shoot Jews was immersed in scenes of unspeakable horror.
To present mere clinical descriptions of the killing operations is to misrepresent the phenomenology of killing, to eviscerate the emotional components of the acts, and to skew any understanding of them. The proper description of the events under discussion, the re-creation of the phenomenological reality of the killers, is crucial for any explication. For this reason, I eschew the clinical approach and try to convey the horror, the gruesomeness, of the events for the perpetrators (which, of course, does not always mean that they were horrified). Blood, brain and bones were flying about, often landing on the killers, smirching their faces and staining their clothes. Cries and wails of people awaiting their imminent slaughter or consumed in death throes reverberated in German ears. Such scenes – not the antiseptic descriptions that mere reportage of a killing operation presents – constituted the reality for many perpetrators. For us to comprehend the perpetrators’ phenomenological world, we should describe for ourselves every gruesome image that they beheld, and every cry of pain and anguish that they heard.

(1996, p. 22)

Goldhagen focuses most attention on those who killed in what might be described as the least technological ways. Most of his book concentrates on the Order Police, which had a variety of police duties in German-occupied territories, including, but not restricted to, Einsatzgruppen-like activities, for example the ‘men of Police Battalion 9 [and later 3] filled out the ranks of three of the four Einsatzgruppen, the German killing squads serving as the main agents of genocide in the Soviet Union’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 187). Goldhagen focuses on the Order Police because it was comprised of ordinary Germans. Many members of the Police Battalions were deemed unfit (ideologically and physically) or too old for military service. In terms of ideological aptitude, battalion members received little or no ideological screening prior to their placement, and, once in the battalion, received little more than perfunctory ideological training and indoctrination (Goldhagen, 1996, pp. 182, 184, 185). As Goldhagen points out, the Battalions were not really ‘Nazi’ institutions, and their men were not Nazified beyond the norms of Nazi German society, particularly their officers, and perhaps even received less than the rest of German society. In other words, their ideological beliefs were typical or less than typical of ordinary Germans and ‘their current cultural notions’. Any ideological training received was unlikely to convert the converted or to intensify already held beliefs. Goldhagen implies that their anti-Semitism, soon to be
put into murderous practice, was not dependent on Nazi ideological indoctrination or training but on pre-existing, deep-seated and normative beliefs (1996, p. 185).

Goldhagen’s discussion of Battalion 101’s action in Jozefow, 13 July 1942, the first of its kind for this Battalion, and which killed at least 1200 Jews, has been the focus of critiques of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. Jozefow is 20 miles away from Bilgoraj, a city to the south of Lublin. According to post-war testimony, Major Trapp of Battalion 101 had prepared his men for the killing of the inhabitants of this Jewish community by drawing their attention to the aerial bombardments of German cities endured by German women and children (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 212). Retaliation for something for which these Jewish inhabitants were supposedly responsible spurred on the killing, but, as will be discussed later, Trapp himself felt equivocal about his orders. “My God, why must I do this?” he was heard exclaiming to the Battalion’s doctor (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 213). In fact, Trapp asked whether any of the older men under his command wanted to be reassigned from the appointed task of killing. About 10–12 stepped down and were reassigned, despite being berated by Captain Hoffman (a career Nazi), whom Trapp silenced (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 214). Other men, not just the older members of the Battalion, managed to excuse themselves from killing duty that day (Goldhagen, 1996, pp. 214–5). Goldhagen’s point is that, given the option not to kill, most did (see also Goldhagen, 1996, p. 278). In fact, as Goldhagen later points out, the willingness to kill was the subject of Trapp’s complaint before his assembled men, of their licentiousness in carrying out the task at hand (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 259). It is this licentiousness, argues Goldhagen, that proves that genocidal activity was not facilitated by the progressive brutalisation of the Order Police, even though this action in Jozefow was a baptism of fire, but by the readiness and willingness of most of its battalions’ members to carry out this task and many subsequent actions like it.

Most of the killing done that day was by execution in the woods, on the outskirts of the town to which the victims were trucked from the market square, where they had been rounded-up.

The men of First Company, who were initially assigned to shoot Jews, were joined around noon by members of the Second Company because Major Trapp anticipated that they would not otherwise finish the slaughter before nightfall. The actual killing duties ended up being shared by more of the battalion than Trapp had originally planned. The exact manner of transport and procedure of execution
differed a bit from unit to unit and also evolved during the course of the day. The platoons of First Company, to focus on it, had broken down into killing squads of about eight. The initial procedure was some variation on the following. A squad would approach the group of Jews who had just arrived, from which each member would choose his victim – a man, a woman or a child. The Jews and Germans would then walk in parallel single file so that each killer moved in step with his victim, until they reached a clearing for the killing where they would position themselves and await the firing order from their squad leader.

The walk into the woods afforded each perpetrator an opportunity for reflection. Walking side by side with his victim, he was able to imbue the human form beside him with the projections of his mind. Some of the Germans, of course, had children walking beside them. It is highly likely that, back in Germany, these men had previously walked through woods with their own children by their sides, marching gaily and inquisitively along. With what thoughts and emotions did each of these men march, gazing sidelong at the form of, say, an eight- or twelve-year-old girl? In these moments, each killer had a personalised, face-to-face relationship with his victim, to his little girl. Did he see a little girl, and ask himself why he was about to kill this little, delicate being, who if seen as a little girl by him, would normally have received his compassion, protection and nurturance? Or did he see a Jew, a young one, but a Jew nonetheless? Did he wonder incredulously what could possibly justify his blowing a vulnerable little girl’s brains out? Or did he understand the reasonableness of the order, the necessity of nipping the believed-in Jewish blight in the bud? The ‘Jew-child’, after all, was mother to the Jew.

The killing itself was a gruesome affair. After the walk through the woods, each of the Germans had to raise his gun to the back of the head, now face down on the ground, that had bobbed along beside him, pull the trigger, and watch the person, sometimes a little girl, twitch and then move no more. The Germans had to remain hardened to the crying of the victims, to the crying of women, to the whimpering of children. At such close range, the Germans often became splattered with human gore .... All this is obviously viscerally unsettling, capable of disturbing even the most hardened of executioners, these German initiates returned to fetch new victims, new little girls, and to begin the journey back into the woods.

(Goldhagen, 1996, pp. 217–18)
The problem with this passage stems from its ventriloquence. As LaCapra (2001, pp. 118-19) puts it, the mobile focalisation ranges from indirect and free indirect discourse presenting the killer’s thoughts (‘the “Jew child”, after all, was mother to the Jew’) and rhetorical questions (‘Didn’t he see a little girl, and ask himself why he was about to kill the little, delicate being ….?’) that attempt to probe the killer’s mind, but which collapses into speculation at and projection of what he is thinking. The object of his consternation, a little girl, suggests a stereotypical focus on one group among the victims (which reminds us of Hirsch’s warnings about repeating Nazi idioms) and heightens the emotionally manipulative nature of the scene. Her vulnerability (not unlike that of someone who could be his own daughter) focuses a moral quandary that both humanises the perpetrator and suggests empathy for him and strips him of that humanity and empathetic potential. The moral questioning of the deed simply anticipates that which the narrative momentum makes inevitable. The result is that we, the reader, flirt with the possibility of his humanity but have no choice but in confirming his monstrosity. Ultimately, then, ‘Germans are monstrous …. How could we possibly recognise ourselves in any sense in these Germans’ (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 118–19).

The unintentional irony of Goldhagen’s rhetoric is compounded by the following admission, which, in Hitler’s Willing Executioners, comes after his treatment of the Jozefow action:

It cannot be doubted that a variety of attitudes towards the genocidal slaughter existed within Police Battalion 101. Even if a general principle reigned, the men approached their destructive tasks with a range of emotions and stances [as Goldhagen has demonstrated through quotation from post-war testimony]. Some ‘types’ are the revelling, sadistic slayers of Jews, … the zealous but faint-of-heart killers, … the dedicated but non-celebratory killers, … and the approving but uneasy and conflicted killers, like Trapp. These types differed in the amount of pleasure they took in the killing, without differing on the justice of the enterprise. Given the existing data, it is hard to know what the distribution of the various types was within the battalion. The information that exists about most of the individual men is insufficient for conclusions of this sort to be drawn. For this same reason, it is impossible to say how many men perpetrated and with what kind of frequency. It is even harder to know how many men perpetrated what kinds of gratuitous cruelties and how often they did so. And it is impossible to know the exact emotions with which they gazed upon their labour’s product,
whether it was a pit filled or a street strewn with Jewish corpses, including those of the old and the young. It would have been surprising had any of the killers in the 1960s reported to the legal authorities, or to the world at large, feelings of joy and triumph that might have moved them while beholding these scenes. It is equally difficult to believe that these men looked upon the Jews whom they were slaughtering with fond or even neutral feelings, with sympathy for fellow human beings.

(1996, p. 261)

Having said it is impossible to ‘know the exact emotions’ of the perpetrators as they gazed upon their results of their work, Goldhagen goes on to imagine what they might have felt at Jozefow and elsewhere – his imagination supported by his own refusal to believe in any vestiges of sympathy they might have had. His speculation is supported by a lack of evidence to the contrary. Unchecked, such ventriloquism leads to other sensationalising portrayals. Understanding the phenomenology of the perpetrators, and in this case the Police Battalions, requires that ‘we investigate the fullness of their lives and avoid viewing them wrested from their social relations, a view which tends to caricature them’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 187). So, Goldhagen notes their social and cultural lives while off-duty and the things he thinks they said and thought (see, 1996, pp. 263, 264–7). For example, of the mixed contingent of guards of the Helmbrechts Camp, a satellite camp of the Flossenbürg Camp (Upper Franconia), the following ‘thick’ description is given of their fully fleshed out social world:

The Germans made love in barracks next to enormous privation and incessant cruelty. What did they talk about when their heads rested quietly on their pillows, when they were smoking their cigarettes in those relaxing moments after their physical needs had been met? Did one relate to another accounts of a particularly amusing beating that she or he had administered or observed, of the rush of power that engulfed her when the righteous adrenaline of Jew-beating caused her body to pulse with energy? It appears unlikely that these Germans lamented their vicious assaults on the Jews, that they spoke in pity-filled tones of the squalor, pain, and sickness into which they had plunged the Jews, only to awaken the next day and voluntarily mete out a dose of misery. They certainly gave no evidence of such a stance either at the time or afterwards. This community of Germans, many of whom had paired off in intimate relationships, flourished side by
Goldhagen presents us with a perverse world of intimacy, where perpetrators walk with little girls in woods, not like they would with their daughters but in order to execute, and where sexual relations are intermingled with acts and thoughts of sadism – and where, if I read Goldhagen’s intimations correctly, anti-Semitic violence is at least sexualised and at most orgasmic: ‘the rush of power that engulfed her when the righteous adrenaline of Jew-beating caused her body to pulse with energy’. This might even be read as encouraging a voyeuristic and vicarious pleasure in the perpetrator’s perspective that extends to the sphere of killing and which is both legitimised (and disavowed or naturalised) by the details of the mise-en-scène of private and public spheres of action. In terms of a crisis of identity that Rose would like to see scripted, Goldhagen inadvertently renders the humanisation of the perpetrator more difficult and the possibility of the reader’s identification with him or her remote.

LaCapra argues that, ultimately, it is not the perpetrators that Goldhagen attempts to identify with – strategically so that we might understand their reality – but the victims. He ‘reconstructs [the perpetrators’] experiences in good part through his own identification with certain victims as he imagines them and their perception of perpetrators. Perpetrator history in Goldhagen becomes the putative history of perpetrators as seen through the eyes of victims – especially certain victims – with whom Goldhagen identifies and whose experience of events he imaginatively or phantasmatically recounts’ (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 120–1). This is not so much the fleshing out of statistics initially promised by way of delivering a phenomenology of perpetration, but rather a colonisation of those victims that circumnavigates the perpetrators: ‘an excessive, unchecked identification with certain victims as Goldhagen understands them or imagines them to be’ (LaCapra, 2001, p. 121). Nancy Wood argues that Goldhagen’s identification with the about-to-be-murdered little girl in particular is reminiscent of the Spielberg’s symbolic girl in the red coat in Schindler’s List whose colourisation breaks the documentary 1930s and 1940s realist code of the film with its black and white film stock. She is a decontextualising symbol of pathos that detracts from the scale of the killing during the Holocaust generally and the clearance of the Krakow Ghetto more specifically, and ‘establishing a hierarchy of victims’ (Wood, 1999, p. 91). Both texts deploy figures of children as the embodiment of pathos and therefore the focus of the reader’s and viewer’s sympathy.
She functions as a means of containing violence (and its scale) and consequently as a form of narrative resolution. The moment of death is not fully shown in either text. In Spielberg's film, she is seen wondering through scenes of chaos apparently unnoticed, eventually finding a hiding place and then, later, among a pile of bodies; in Goldhagen's text the murder scene is a generalised representation, the gruesome details of which are applicable to all victims, including ‘sometimes a little girl’ (1996, p. 218). If Goldhagen promises to flesh out his victims, this reconstruction of murder is a narrative resolution – perhaps a welcome but misplaced relief from the violence – by means of a literary and filmic figure that displaces, in part, the act of murder.

If that is the case, Nancy Wood may be asking the wrong questions: Is Goldhagen's transgression the fact that he offers a full-blown mise-en-scène of ‘face-to-face’ slaughter that endows with both visual and auditory dimensions? In the case of the walk in the woods at Jozefow, he invites the reader to hear the lighthearted gait of a father and daughter on a forest romp, and to compare it with the unison marching of the perpetrator and his victim toward the killing sites, to visualise the compassionate glance of a father at his little girl and compare it to the hate-filled gaze of an anti-Semite at a ‘Jew-child’. Finally he confronts us with the most disturbing ‘sensurround’ image of all: the exploding skull of a young female victim … . Goldhagen’s rhetorical strategy in this passage ... begins by invoking a generalised image of the Jozefow victim but ends with the specific image of a prostrate little Jewish girl etched on our minds.

(1999, 90–1)

I would argue that the scene begins with the specific and ends with the general. Wood is rehearsing a critique – not her own – that charges Goldhagen with showing too much, with transgressing the boundaries of representation. Spielberg tempts us with such a transgression in his infamous shower scene, when his camera follows Schindler’s female Jews across the threshold of what might be a gas chamber. Goldhagen threatens the putative prohibition of representing the unrepresentable, of explaining the unknowable, but only in ways that have been deemed voyeuristic or simplistic.10

The book’s identification with Jewish victims could not have been so strong had the book widened its focus to discuss racism in relation to other categories (ethnic, political, religious, sexual) of victims. In fact, it may be his identification with Jewish victims (and the demonisation of the perpetrators upon which that is predicated) that
accounts for the popularity of the book, particularly in Germany, at least among non-academic audiences. His identification with Jews over perpetrators is a process of focalisation that allows his readership to follow a similar identificatory path. Therefore, ‘If one shares Goldhagen’s view, the intricate process of confronting both the past and one’s relation to one’s forebears as well as attempting to disengage oneself from questionable traditions (such as anti-Semitism and victimisation) may become much more easily accomplished and self-celebratory in nature than they would otherwise be’ (LaCapra, 2001, p. 122). Put another way, the identificatory logic of Goldhagen’s narrative offers a template by which Germans might relate to the Holocaust’s perpetrators and victims.

Goldhagen’s afterthoughts concerning the democratic nature of post-war Germany published in the foreword to the German edition make more explicit what might have been only implied within the book to a German audience. The German edition was published after the American edition, and the former’s foreword presumably sought to pre-empt many of the criticisms levelled in the US that might have reappeared in Germany. In the foreword, Goldhagen rejects the notion of ‘collective guilt’ as guilt is determined by deed not ‘membership in a collectivity, in this case ... the German populace’, and, if it wasn’t determined as such, then the mistaken notion of an ‘immutable’ and essentialised national character, responsible for mass murder, is still present today. In terms of national responsibility, he accepts the innocence of those born after the war or of those too young during the war but holds them responsible for non-Jewish and Jewish relations of the present and future (Goldhagen, 1996, pp. 481–2, 478). All of this could not have happened without the democratisation of Germany:

The loss of war and the installation of a democratic political system in Germany meant that new democratic beliefs and values replace the old antidemocratic and anti-Semitic beliefs and values in the public sphere. Instead of the political and social institutions of society putting forward and supporting antidemocratic and anti-Semitic views as they did before 1945, the institutions of the Federal Republic have nurtured a view of politics and humanity that rejected and deligitimised the anti-Semitism of the Nazi period and before. German society gradually underwent change. The young of the Federal Republic have been taught a universalistic creed that all people are created equal instead of one that holds humanity to be composed of a hierarchy of races that are differently abled, owed different moral obligations,
and are inexorably in conflict with one another. Since people’s fundamental views are, to a great extent, imparted to their culture, the creation of a new political culture in Germany and generational replacement has produced what one would have expected: a decline and a fundamental change in the character of anti-Semitism.

(Goldhagen, 1996, pp. 482–3)

This sketch of post-war change seems at odds with the processes of post-war German memory work that are an integral part of identity formation after the war, and which in the trajectory traced by this chapter has a tendency to assume an identification with (reconfigured) victims over perpetrators.

Although he actually approved of it – presumably because of the very public debate it provoked – *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* and its version of the smooth evolution of post-war German national identity actually goes against the grain of Habermas’s ‘postconventional’ identification. Indeed, as Nancy Wood puts it:

If the demonic forces that he attributes to pre-war Germany were so pervasively and deeply inscribed in the political unconscious, it is hard to imagine them being conjured away by conscious processes and political will alone. It is far more likely that the huge number of young Germans who counted themselves amongst his fans were attracted in part by a conviction that Goldhagen had touched upon an obscure and resilient ideological chord in *their* *habitus* that they could now explain as the intangible legacy of eliminationist anti-Semitism.

(1999, pp. 81–2)

Put simply, ‘How could eliminationist anti-Semitism, inherent as it was to the German national psyche, itself be largely eliminated in such a short space of time’ (Niven, 2002, p. 130). In other words, Goldhagen had given the younger generation, or third generation or grandchildren of the perpetrators, a ‘special responsibility’ to assume, defined by ‘ongoing vigilance’, just as their parents had remained vigilant against ‘anti-Semitic recidivism’ (Wood, 1999, p. 82). Young Germans of the third generation, sufficiently distanced from the crimes of their grandparents’ generation, found themselves responsible for keeping watch over a new Germany without responsibility for Germany’s past (Bartov, 2003, p. 153). It is the role Goldhagen promises to his young German readers that might, according to many critics, account for his book’s popularity among them.
Although Goldhagen’s book does not provide the ‘thick’ description of killing it promises (a phenomenology of killing), its attempt to do so marks an important intervention in evolution of German historiography, facilitating a move away from traditional and established abstractness of ‘functionalist’ and ‘intentionalist’ theories. The view that either genocide was the result of certain mechanisms of society – functioning interactively at the necessary level – or of the intentions of an elite – either a criminal clique that had taken over Germany or the culmination of a militaristic tradition – seemed to leave out the role of ideology or human agency or motivation (Bartov, 2003, pp. 151, 154–5). Consequently both the perpetrator (along with his or her motivation and psychology) and the victim were represented in abstract terms. As well as methodologically innovative, the debates provoked by the publication have contributed to keeping Nazism an active cultural memory, its populist, graphic depictions (borrowed from Hollywood) reaching a wider audience than traditional modes of history (Niven, 2002, pp. 136–7). Having said that, it has failed to realise the strategic identification with the perpetrator advocated by Rose.

Over-identifications with the victim ultimately place the perpetrator’s perspective beyond scrutiny and available for unconscious inhabitation. In order that we confront our own potential fascism of perspective, Rose calls for

a film in which the representation of Fascism would engage with the fascism of representation. A film, shall we say, which follows the life story of a member of the SS in all its pathos, so that we empathise with him, identify with his hopes and fears, disappointments and rage, so that when it comes to killing, we put our hands on the trigger with him, wanting him to get what he wants. We do this in all innocent enthusiasm in films where the vicarious enjoyment of violence may presuppose that the border between fantasy and reality is secure. Put starkly like this, this fantasy of a Nazi Bildungsfilm seems all too resistible, for the identity of the protagonist has been revealed in advance. If his future allegiances were not known, why should it not be possible to produce a dialectical lyric about such a character?

(1996, p. 50)

With political and ethical implications of the case studies examined in this chapter in mind, the next chapter asks whether the fiction of Bernhard Schlink realises the possibility proposed by Rose.
Bernhard Schlink’s novel of 1995, Der Vorleser (published as The Reader in 1996) has attracted a critical consensus that deems it to have reconfigured the perpetrator generation as victims of Nazism and second generation Germans as victims of Nazism’s legacy. Such an appropriation of victim status is part of a wider discourse of German suffering, prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s, which has often sought to elide the memory of suffering caused by Germans. This chapter argues that Schlink’s novel actually attempts to intervene critically in these proclivities of German cultural memory. Such an intervention needs to be understood in relation to the binary thinking that governs the remembrance and construction of Germany’s victims and perpetrators.

5.1 Discourses of German victimhood

In 2006 Aleida Assmann perceived the persistence of a binary opposition in German cultural memory, in which Germans were remembered as either ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’, but never both (2006a, p. 190). Memories of German suffering, according to Assmann, have been the stuff of private, familial, communicative memory and have not been recognised at an official commemorative level, which is the preserve of a hegemonic Holocaust memory. Attempts after the immediate post-war period to elevate German suffering from the private and familial to the level of national and official commemoration, via, say, the Bund der Vetriebenen (League of Expellees), were deemed by second-generation Germans as revisionist attempts to subsume Holocaust memory by recourse to competing claims of victimisation (Assmann, 2006a, p. 192). Denunciations by the so-called ‘68ers left no room in the public sphere for empathy for the victims of Allied bombings, expulsions of ethnic Germans from the
East and of the Soviet army as it entered German territory. As Assmann notes, it was not until the 1990s that the second generation were able, along with the third generation, to look back not in anger at what their parents and grandparents might have done during the war, but in empathy for what they might have suffered (2006a, p. 192). The passing away of the first generation has intensified the memory work of the second and third generations as they anxiously reconstruct the experiences of the first. This turn to empathy is not unproblematic (Assmann, 2006a, p. 192). Although the guilt of the first generation is recognised along with its suffering, the inheritance of memory acts as a vicariously confessional experience in which the burden of responsibility lies not so much with those who perpetrated crimes against humanity but with those who confess by proxy (Assmann, 2006a, p. 193). Assmann sees the subsequent proliferation of private, family memories of suffering as part of an inevitable expression of the perspectival, heterogeneous nature of memory itself. Despite their large-scale distribution by Germany’s mass media, Assmann believes that these memories will be regulated. Although entering the public sphere, such memories will remain, in essence, ‘private’. At the level of national or state commemoration, a ‘normative framework of memory’ is ‘essential’ in safeguarding Holocaust memory, while ‘on the lower levels a conscious imposition of norms is not required’ (Assmann, 2006a, p. 197). The heterogeneous nature of familial, communicative memory, including memories of German suffering, can proliferate in private, but in public must be integrated into that normative framework. ‘The norm of German national memory, as established in the 1960s and reconfirmed in the 1980s, is the Holocaust, the recognition and working through of German guilt, involving the assumption of historical responsibility for the atrocities of the Nazi-regime. This is the normative framework into which all other memories have to be integrated’ (Assmann, 2006a, p. 197). Integrated as such, memories of German suffering and memories of suffering caused by Germans can exist ‘side by side’ without ‘necessarily cancelling each other out’ (Assmann, 2006a, p. 198).

Assmann cites the campaign of Erika Steinbach, president of the Bund der Vetriebenen, as proof of how this regulatory framework works. Steinbach’s personal or family memories of flight – she was born in 1940 – are essentially held in check by a hierarchy of memory. Her family memory will not become nationalised, Assmann predicted in 2006, by her proposed Centre Against Expulsions. In its design (based on the USHMM), exhibitionary contents and structure, and location in Berlin, the centre would vie with the German Memorial to the Murdered Jews
of Europe not just to constitute another national memorial, but to constitute *the* German national memorial (Schmitz, 2006, pp. 103–4). *Spiegel Online* reported on 19 March 2008 that the German government approved plans for the museum for which Steinbach had been campaigning. The hierarchy of memory is under threat of its inversion. As Helmut Schmitz argues, ‘this apparent unevenness between guilt/responsibility and suffering is exactly the issue around which the entire representational discourse of German victim experience circles’ (2007, p. 15). Assmann’s hierarchy of memory into which the remembrance of German suffering must be integrated effectively reinscribes the binary or dichotomy that this integrative model sought to overcome, and worse, the binary or dichotomy that competitive or revisionist remembrance of German suffering used in the first place as a mechanism to displace Holocaust memory.

A revisionary public–private binary was certainly evident in the 1990s culture of memory, as in, for example, the controversy surrounding Martin Walser’s acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade Fair in Frankfurt (October, 1998) and in his literary work itself. Walser complained about the persistence of a left-liberal instrumentalisation in Germany of the memory of the Nazi past, forming a culture of contrition rather than national pride (Fuchs, 2008, p. 3; Taberner, 2006, p. 167). Such politically correct memories, argued Walser, could be traced back to the 1960s and the continuing influence of the second generation (the ‘68ers). ‘This generation stands accused of having institutionalised a doctrine of politically correct memory which led to the marginalisation and indeed exclusion of all memory of German suffering, thus making it impossible for the Germans to mourn their losses. Walser’s speech undoubtedly triggered in many Germans the feeling that they were victims. Victimisation in the present obstructed empathy with victimhood in the past’ (Niven, 2006, p. 11). As Bill Niven argues, the accusation uncannily resonated with Nazi conspiracies that placed Jews (figured as perpetrators) at the centre of plots against the nation (2006, p. 11). Indeed, Schmitz argues that in the consequent debate carried out in the media between Ignatz Bubis, then Head of the Central Council of German Jews and Walser, the position of conspiratorial ‘other’ was allocated to a representative Bubis. Synecdochically Bubis stood for a victim’s perspective that was inauthentic and outside of the German collective, which now appeared rather Volkish (Schmitz, 2006, p. 102).

In his speech and in the debate that followed, one of Walser’s points was that the instrumentalisation of Holocaust memory actually serves
as the means by which Germans can unburden themselves of historical responsibility and the routinised mention of Auschwitz the means by which Germans can align themselves with the victims and distance themselves from the perpetrators (Schmitz, 2006, p. 101). Although there is some truth in this, such an accusation rests on faith in the notion of the ‘privacy of conscience’, an autonomous realm of authentic memory ‘constantly under siege from inauthentic public forms of address’ (Schmitz, 2006, pp. 101–2). As Schmitz interprets it, Walser’s argument is that the privileged ‘individual conscience because it is not representable … [is] not in danger of being instrumentalised’ (2006, p. 101). This spurious isolation of private or individual and historical conscience and consciousness separates memory into the authentic (‘German’) and inauthentic (‘Jewish’). This separation of memories is typical of Walser’s literature. For example, his semi-autobiographical novel set between 1932 and 1945, Ein springender Brunnen (A Springing Fountain, 1998) is conspicuous because it does not mention Auschwitz and is underpinned by an insistence that childhood memory cannot be deformed retrospectively by the political correctness of Holocaust remembrance (Taberner, 2006, p. 167). However, as Anne Fuchs puts it, ‘Insofar as it is inevitable that our memories are socially and linguistically constituted, they are never totally authored by the remembering self’ (2008, p. 4).

The idea of a private, bracketed, enclave of memory can be found more widely in German culture, although its construction is not necessarily as revisionist as Walser’s psychic topography of remembrance. Fuchs, like Assmann, notes the family as a site of remembrance and of the intergenerational transmission of memory (2008, p. 4). Like Assmann, she also notes that the family narrative can be exculpatory, romantic and fantastic. Grandchildren indulge in fantasy about the lives of their grandparents, imagining a noble family background and a German tradition unimpaired by the Nazi era (Fuchs, 2008, p. 6). The family romance as a particularly emotional form of memory tends to blur the boundaries between victims and perpetrators, with perpetrators playing the role of the war’s victims (Fuchs, 2008, p. 6). Fuchs has in mind Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall’s findings in Opa war kein Nazi (2002), in which the interviews of three generations of 40 contemporary families showed that while the third generation demonstrated no sympathies for National Socialism and much horror over the Holocaust, its members certainly were not inclined to believe that their own grandparents played an integral role in genocidal Nazism.4

That anti-Semites and perpetrators are not recalled leads Niven to argue that ‘the memory of German perpetration, guilt, and the suffering
of Nazi victims’ cultivated in the public sphere in the 1980s and 1990s has still not ‘percolated down to the level of family memory’ (2006, p. 20). That family memory is thereby cleared for memories of suffering, which will go unchecked because of the current tendency towards ‘emotion over enlightenment’ and ‘uncritical empathy over pedagogy’, leads Niven to conclude that private memory has now invaded the public realm (2006, p. 20), particularly via the proliferation of literary, documentary and historical narratives based on private memories and given exposure and distributed by the mass media. (Writing from 2006, which is before the current German government’s expression of support for the Centre Against Expulsions, Niven was optimistic that the invasion had not contaminated German politics (2006, p. 20).)

Perhaps, the public and the private are too neatly divided here. Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove draw attention to the fact that studies such as Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall’s, which are the cause of so much academic concern, pay more attention to what is said, neglecting the significance of what remains unsaid: ‘The unsaid … can function as a powerful transmitter of the unmastered inheritance that is silently passed down the generational line’ (2006, p. 7). As Fuchs adds, the ‘emphatic assertion that “Grandpa wasn’t a Nazi” may mean exactly the opposite’ (2008, p. 7). Similarly, the repeated assertions on the international stage that Germany is a normal democracy – spectacularly expressed by a national Holocaust memorial – may be ghosted by an ‘anxiety of influence’ (Fuchs, 2008, p. 7).5

The separation of public and private in the practice of memory allows the isolation of the act of perpetration and the uncritical reconfiguration of perpetrators and their generation as victims of the war and regime. A similar isolation of perpetrators accompanied the institutionalisation of Holocaust memory in the 1990s (the normative framework advocated by Assmann). After Niven, Schmitz argues that events of the 1990s marked the increasing national ownership of the memory of the Nazi past (2006, p. 93). Markers of ownership included the public development of plans for the National Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, the debates surrounding the touring Crimes of the Wehrmacht exhibition (1995–9 and 2001) and the publication in German of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996). The Wehrmacht exhibition dispelled notions that the regular army had fought a clean war that had nothing to do with genocidal activities in the East. The exhibition made the externalisation of responsibility for the Holocaust difficult. The perpetrators were ordinary Germans (in this case ordinary soldiers), not an elite, inner circle of Nazi militarists, politicians, bureaucrats and industrialists.
However, the Wehrmacht exhibition staged a cathartic reconciliation with the perpetrator generation (Niven, 2002, pp. 143–74). In a similar vein, Goldhagen’s thesis claimed that anti-Semitism has been endogenous to German society for centuries and that Nazi ideology and policy was simply a catalyst for ordinary Germans to commit genocidal acts. Although the exhibition and Goldhagen’s book blamed ordinary German for the Holocaust, the effect was more cathartic than ethical. As I have previously argued, the clumsy ventriloquism of Goldhagen’s book that attempted to represent the perpetrator’s perspective – a phenomenology of murder – allowed young Germans to note the fact that the perpetrators were supposed to be ordinary but also enabled them to distance themselves from these caricatured monsters.

Schmitz comments on the ownership of memory thus: ‘The turning point here is the issue of guilt’ (2006, p. 106). This guilt was compounded by the statement, read on behalf of Chancellor Helmut Kohl at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, during commemorations marking the fiftieth anniversary of the camp’s liberation, admitting that the darkest chapter in German history had been written there (Marcuse, 2008, p. 379). The institutionalisation of memory marked by these events, coupled with the shift from the second to the third generation of Germans since the war – the latter’s assumption of responsibility for the Nazi past and its vicarious confession of past acts not so much troubled by the guilt and repression experienced by their parents and grandparents – ‘opens up the potential for empathising with the “German experience”’ (Schmitz, 2006, p. 106). In fact, ‘What is remarkable is that the shift from a memory centred on the victims of Nazism to a perpetrator-centred memory occurs, almost antithetically, subsequently to the institutionalisation of the memory of the Holocaust at the heart of contemporary German historical identity’ (Schmitz, 2007, p. 4). Of course not all of the texts that remember German suffering are, by definition, revisionary, but the institutionalisation of Holocaust memory creates cultural conditions that facilitate revisionism. Institutionally unburdened of a collective historical responsibility for the Nazi past, there are fewer impediments to Germans identifying with victims rather than perpetrators – and this means empathizing with the victims of the Holocaust and with those subsuming their place (the perpetrators and their generation reconfigured as victims). Schmitz wonders if the practices of public Holocaust memorialisation are too rigid (2007, p. 4), generating a series of oppositions – authentic/inauthentic, private/public, victim/perpetrator – that are all too invertible. Schlink’s novel of 1995, contrary to the critical consensus, stages an attempted identification with the perpetrator generation that seeks to overcome the binarism of German cultural memory.
In the last chapter we saw how the work of Gillian Rose suggested a strategic identification with the perpetrator, and how in historiographical and filmic practice many attempts to identify have been ethically and politically problematic. With those problems in mind, this chapter returns to the work of Rose to frame a reading of Schlink’s fiction that goes against the critical consensus. To reiterate, Rose’s critique of postmodern, post-Holocaust philosophy centres on postmodernism’s delegitimisation of Holocaust narrative, as if all representation is contaminated by the violent logic of the master narratives that rationalised Auschwitz. For Rose, the argument for the overcoming of representation, in its aesthetic, philosophical and political versions, ‘converges with the inner tendency of Fascism itself’ (1996, p. 41). Only through an ‘always contestable and fallible representation’ can we know where the representation of fascism converges with the fascism of representation (1996, p. 41). Otherwise in our Holocaust piety, we render the event ineffable, which is ‘to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear it may it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human’ (Rose, 1996, p. 43). In effect, Rose imagines something akin to Primo Levi’s concept of the ‘grey zone’.8

A strategic identification with a perpetrator, made possible by admitting such a common ground of humanity, would allow us to see where the representation of fascism and the fascism of representation might converge. Only by inhabiting, rather than lapsing into, the perpetrator’s perspective could we see where the limits and boundaries of that perspective lie. However, how could one identify and empathise with a perpetrator? Surely such an identity would be repellent. Rose imagines the possibility of something like Nazi bildungsroman in which the future allegiances of the protagonist are unknown to the reader, and by the time they are known, the reader has already empathised (1996, p. 50). The ensuing crisis of identification in the reader would signify that empathetic bond. Contrary to the critical consensus, The Reader attempts to operate in a similar way, in which the narrator-protagonist suffers a crisis of identity for having desired a perpetrator before he knew her true identity, vicariously establishing for the reader potential bonds of empathy.9

5.2 Stereotyping Nazis?

If The Reader is to inhabit the perspective of the perpetrator in order to scrutinise rather than disavow it, as in Rose’s model of the representation of fascism, then the figure of the perpetrator needs to be available
to the narrator (and by this proxy to the reader). Hanna's age (indicating she was not too young to have played an active part in the war), and the way her 1950s body is associated with oblivion (Schlink, 1997, p. 14) raise suspicions about her. If the teenage Michael was not suspicious of her past, Schlink makes sure that we are when Michael narrates retrospectively from his present-day position. The suspicion concerning Hanna's past grows with descriptions of her scrupulous hygiene (Schlink, 1997, p. 30), and her fondness for uniforms, which attracted her to her current job as a tram conductor (Schlink, 1997, p. 37). These hints of (stereotypical) Nazi leanings are compounded by the suspicious lack of detail about her past or her unwillingness to reveal very much about it (Schlink, 1997, p. 37). Michael informs us that he had, by the time the affair was in full swing, caught up with his studies since falling ill, including the history of the Third Reich (Schlink, 1997, p. 39). Given the context, the casual mention of this subject of study is just too conspicuous not to draw the reader's attention. Hints of a stereotyped sadism come with the power games Hanna plays with Michael (Schlink, 1997, pp. 46–7) and her proclivity for violence – she strikes him when she thought she had been abandoned on a holiday they take together (Schlink, 1997, pp. 52–3). The stereotypical hints of Nazism (sadism, hygiene) do not seem to fit Rose's model. How can Michael desire such a stereotype, and hints of what is to be revealed surely preclude our vicarious identification with her? However, the stereotypical and the proleptic do suggest the revisionary workings of memory. The narrator is self-conscious and explicit about the revision of the past: 'Why does it make me sad when I think back to that time? Is it a yearning for past happiness – for I was happy in the weeks that followed, in which I really did work like a lunatic and passed the class, and we made love as if nothing else in the world mattered. Is it the knowledge of what came later, and that what came out afterwards had been there all along?' (Schlink, 1997, p. 35). Part of the revisionary process is the isolation of certain moments, the mental images that are, as Siegfried Kracauer might put it, 'monogrammatic' (1995, p. 51). This is an unchanging image into which is distilled all that is valued about the subject. A highly subjective image, suspended above the flux of time (or so the perception goes), it manages to screen out historical change and other memories. For Michael, the sight of Hanna in his father's study forms one such memory image: 'It is one of the pictures of Hanna that has stayed with me. I have them stored away, I can project them on a mental screen and watch them, unchanged, unconsumed' (Schlink, 1997, p. 60). Proleptic, stereotypical or suspended above time,
these images do not make Hanna less available. Rather, they suggest that an identification with her has already been made, announcing a consequent crisis of identity on the part of the narrator. The combination of images registers a desire for the Hanna he knew before her trial and the renouncement of that desire through a desperate attempt to other her with cliché and stereotype.11

5.3 Crises of identity

Signs of this crisis of identity are evident in the narration of her trial (in 1965/1966), in which the narrator continues in his attempt to distance himself from her – or at least that’s what he remembers.12 As a law student and observer of the trial, his judgement is clouded: ‘I realised that I had assumed it was both natural and right that Hanna should be in custody. Not because of the charges, the gravity of the allegations, or the force of evidence, of which I had no real knowledge, but because in a cell she was out of my world, out of my life. I wanted her far away from me, so unattainable that she could continue as the mere memory she had become and remained all these years’ (Schlink, 1997, pp. 95–6). From Michael’s narrative perspective, punishment indicates not her guilt but his guilt over desiring her and his need for emotional distance. Although his disavowal cannot be taken at face value, his personal dissociation from her is informed by a wider cultural dissociation. The numbness that Michael feels at court is observable in other participants, as the ‘intrusion of horror into daily life’ – the atrocities detailed and testified to – has an ‘anaesthetic’ effect (Schlink, 1997, pp. 99–101). The narrator adds that all

survivor literature talks about this numbness, in which life’s functions are reduced to a minimum, behaviour becomes completely selfish and indifferent to others, and gassing and burning are everyday occurrences. In the rare accounts by the perpetrators, too, the gas chambers and the ovens become ordinary scenery, the perpetrators reduced to their few functions and exhibiting a mental paralysis and indifference, a dullness that makes them seem drugged or drunk. The defendants seemed to me to be trapped still, and forever, in this drugged state, in a sense petrified in it.

Even then, when I was preoccupied by this general numbness, and by the fact that it had taken hold not only of the perpetrators and victims, but of all of us, judges and lay members of the court, prosecutors and recorders, who had to deal with these events now:
when I likened perpetrators, victims, the dead, the living, survivors, and their descendants to each other, I didn’t feel good about it, and I still don’t.


Michael’s fellow seminar students and Schlink’s critics voice indignation at an assumed relativism. For example, Ernestine Schlant compares The Reader to the attempts at relativising the Holocaust that sparked the Historikerstreit. She argues that the ‘confusion and lack of a moral compass inherent in a comparison of the numbness of the prisoners in the death camp and that of the perpetrators, to say nothing of the courtroom participants, surely needs no comment’. The critique Schlant implies is not that self-evident. ‘How Michael could make such “linkages” and simultaneously insist that there were differences of “the greatest, most critical importance” he does not explain’ (Schlant, 1999, p. 214). Actually, he does explain. In his general reference to the literature of victims and perpetrators, something akin to Levi’s ‘grey zone’ is implied. (In the later scene in which Michael visits Hanna in prison, he sees her collection of Holocaust literature, including writers, Levi and Borowski, who articulated a grey zone.) Schlink’s narrator does not advocate a culture of historical relativism, but is, rather, exceptional in his recognition of how such a culture has already been created. It is the grey zone that accommodates both the continuities and fundamental discontinuities between perpetrator and victim.13 In Levi’s conception, ‘in the camp the perpetrators and victims could not be divided into a “we” inside and the enemy outside, separated by a sharply defined geographic frontier’ (1995, p. 23). In other words, the system of National Socialism caused the victims to emulate their victimisers. ‘It is a gray zone with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge’ (Levi, 1995, p. 25). Under such a system, the ‘deprivation to which they [the victims] were subjected’ meant that ‘the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero’ (Levi, 1995, p. 33). The responsibility for blurring the boundaries between victim and perpetrator lies with the ‘system, the very structure of the totalitarian state’ (Levi, 1995, p. 28). Without a conception of the grey zone, which only the narrator seems to gesture towards and not the culture of Holocaust memory that surrounds him, the Holocaust is reduced to a series of undifferentiated acts of violence and its participants rendered indistinguishable – generating a sense of numbness.14
Hanna had been a guard, along with four other accused women, at a small satellite camp for Auschwitz, near Cracow. They were indicted with charges for their conduct at the camp, but their main crime was their conduct on a ‘death march’ west. Michael did not remember the details of the first set of charges, but surviving witnesses (camp inmates) did, and they implicated the accused in selections for the gas chambers at Auschwitz (Schlink, 1997, pp. 104–5). Hanna’s selections were peculiar in that she had selected ‘favourites’ among the female prisoners, who received special treatment but had to read to her in the evenings (Schlink, 1997, pp. 114–5). These tended to be the ‘younger’, ‘weaker’ and more ‘delicate’ prisoners, who, although saved from work duty, were still sent to the gas chambers (Schlink, 1997, pp. 114–5). The main charge, though, was locking the female prisoners who were being marched west in a village church one night, during which there was an air raid. The women locked in the church burned to death, all except a mother and daughter (Schlink, 1997, pp. 105–6). The daughter wrote a book of their experiences, which started the criminal investigation that led to the courtroom proceedings (Schlink, 1997, pp. 104). The trial fuels a series of fantasies for Michael:

I saw Hanna by the burning church, hard-faced, in a black uniform, with a riding whip. She drew circles in the snow with her whip, and slapped it against her boots. I saw her being read to. She listened carefully, asked no questions and made no comments. When the hour was over, she told the reader she would be going on the transport to Auschwitz the next morning. The reader, a frail creature with a stubble of black hair and shortsighted eyes, began to cry. Hanna hit the wall with her hand, two women, also prisoners in striped clothing, came in and pulled the reader away. I saw Hanna walking the paths in the camp, going into the prisoners’ barracks and overseeing construction work. She did it all with the same hard face, cold eyes, and pursed mouth, and the prisoners ducked, bent over their work, pressed themselves against the wall, into the wall, wanted to disappear into the wall. Sometimes there were many prisoners gathered or running from one place to another or standing in line or marching, and Hanna stood among them and screamed orders, her screaming face a mask of ugliness, and helped things along with her whip. I saw the church steeple crashing into the roof and the sparks flying and the heard the desperation of the women.

Alongside these images, I saw the others. Hanna pulling on her stockings in the kitchen, standing by the bath holding the towel, riding her bicycle with skirts flying, standing in my fathers study,
dancing in front of the mirror … Hanna listening to me, talking to me, laughing at me, loving me. Hanna loving me with cold eyes and pursed mouth, silently listening to me reading, and at the end banging the wall with her hand, talking to me with her face turning into a mask. The worst were the dreams in which a hard, imperious, cruel Hanna aroused me sexually; I woke from them full of longing and shame and rage. And full of fear about who I really was.

(Schlink, 1997, pp. 145–7)

Michael's clichéd fantasies that eroticise suffering and in which he plays the role of sexualised Jewish victim need to be read in the context of the 1960s. The uncertain sense of self that Michael’s fantasies leave him with can be read as an indulgent appropriation of Jewish identity and another symptom of his crisis of identity and attempt to distance himself from the object of his desire.15

Schmitz, among others, has noted the rigidity of the conceptual framework constructed by the second generation in the 1960s in which their parents’ generation was identified wholly in terms of perpetration (2007, p. 11; 2006, p. 105). Michael reports that his university seminar, which followed and analysed Hanna’s trial, was driven by their imputation of collective guilt to the previous generation: ‘The generation that had been served by the guards and enforcers, or had done nothing to stop them, or had not banished them from its midst as it could have done after 1945, was in the dock, and we explored it, subjected it to trial by daylight, and condemned it to shame’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 89). Although the second generation were alarmed by the legacies of Nazism in German life – Michael cites the Federal Republic’s failure to recognise Israel and the fact that old Nazis were still pursuing successful careers in the courts, government and universities – its totalisation of the previous generation was motivated by shame over their ancestors to whom they were emotionally attached rather than by the shouldering of collective responsibility for the past (Donahue, 2001, p. 70). The difficult task of displacing the perpetrator-generation embodied by Hanna and the narrator’s parents – ‘But the finger I pointed at her turned back to me. I had loved her’ – was the ‘German fate’ of his generation (Schlink, 1997, pp. 168–9). This task is played out in Michael's fantasies of victimhood, which were a desperate attempt to gain critical distance on the previous generation using the available cultural rhetoric of philo-Semitism. Distance from the perpetrator is gained by colonising the victim's identity.16

Michael realises ‘that the fantasised images were poor clichés’, which ‘undermined my actual memories of Hanna and merged with the images
of the camps that I had in my mind’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 145). Back then the reservoir of images in cultural circulation was limited in scope and was unable to correct his fantasies of Hanna. However, (West) German cultural memory’s insistence on these few images also created clichés that detracted from the reality of the camps: ‘The few images derived from Allied photographs and the testimony of survivors flashed on the mind again and again, until they froze into clichés’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 147). Michael notes that, in the present moment of narration, the cultural industry of more recent Holocaust representation from the 1970s to the 1990s – for example, *Holocaust*, *Sophie’s Choice* and *Schindler’s List* – has simply made those clichés or icons more familiar, delivering, as we have seen in the case of *Schindler’s List*, a binary representational economy of good and evil.17 Michael visits, shortly after the trial, the site of Struthof Concentration Camp in Alsace with iconoclasm in mind: ‘I wanted reality to drive out the clichés’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 148).

5.4 Topographies of memory

Such an economy of representation actually causes more confusion between the perspectives of perpetrators and victims, a confusion that becomes apparent in Michael’s visit. Given a ride to the site, his driver, who possibly played a part in genocide given his defensiveness, argues that Michael is looking for a reason for mass murder – revenge, hatred, orders – that doesn’t exist. He argues that the perpetrator killed out of ‘indifference’: ‘They’re a matter of such indifference to him that he can kill them as easily as not’. Michael is rendered dumb that ideological indoctrination can cancel out, in his driver’s words, ‘solidarity with everything that has a human face …. Reverence for life’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 150). In other words, ideology is rendered a totalising force, and subjectivity wholly manipulated, explaining nothing about Hanna’s transformation into a perpetrator (see also Donnahue, 2001, p. 67). He returns again years later, just before he wrote the narrative that comprises *The Reader*:

I went back there not long ago. It was winter, a clear cold day. Beyond Schirmeck the woods were snowy, the trees powdered white and the ground white too. The grounds of the concentration camp, an elongated area on a sloping terrace of mountain with a broad view of the Vosges, lay white in bright sunshine. The grey-blue painted wood of the two- and three-storey watchtower and the single-storey barracks made a pleasant contrast with the snow. True, there was the entrance festooned with barbed wire and the
sign CONCENTRATION CAMP STRUTHOF-NATZWEILER and the double barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. But the ground between the remaining barracks, where more barracks had once stood side-by-side, no longer showed any trace of the camp under its glittering cover of snow. It could have been a sledging slope for children, spending their Christmas holidays in the cheerful barracks with the homely many-paned windows, and about to be called indoors for cake and hot chocolate.

The camp was closed. I tramped around it in the snow, getting my feet wet. I could easily see the whole grounds, and remembered how on my first visit I had gone down the steps that led between the foundations of the former barracks. I also remembered the ovens of the crematorium that were on display in another barracks, and that another barracks had contained cells. I remembered my vain attempts, back then, to imagine in concrete detail a camp filled with prisoners and guards and suffering. I really tried; I looked at the barracks and closed my eyes, and imagined row upon row of barracks. I measured a barracks, calculated its occupants from the information booklet, and imagined how crowded it had been. I found out that the steps between the barracks had also been used for roll call, and as I looked from the bottom of the camp up towards the top, I filled them with rows of backs. But it was all in vain, and I had the feeling of the most dreadful, shameful failure.

On the way back, further down the hill, I found a small house opposite a restaurant that had a sign on it indicating that it had been a gas chamber. It was painted white, had doors and windows framed in sandstone, and could have been a barn or a shed or servants’ living quarters.

(Schlink, 1997, pp. 152–5)

Having rejected ideological doctrine – killing ‘out of indifference’ – as a reason for mass murder, Michael’s visits to the camp do not help him further his understanding. On his second visit he cannot differentiate the remains of the camp, its memorial topography, from its beautiful surroundings. In fact, covered with snow and barely discernible, the grounds look like a scene from childhood – the stuff of nostalgia. The gas chamber itself is a pleasant looking rural building. On this second visit, he recalls how, earlier, he had tried to calculate the number of occupants and barracks. Michael’s perspective is aestheticising and statistical and rather like that of the perpetrators. This is a perspective, though, that is focused by the way in which the site is memorialised. Gillian Rose found a similar phenomenon at Auschwitz.
For Rose, the ‘future of Auschwitz’ as a site of memorialisation should entail the memorial provocation of visitor identification with not just the victims of that place but also the perpetrators. The visitor to that place is already unknowingly complicit in the fascism of representation, and therefore the logic of perpetration, by mistaking the aestheticisation of that place for what happened there: ‘For a macabre predicament is ineluctable at Auschwitz as it stands today: former “site” of mass murder, with lawns where there was mud; well-pointed and well-joined barracks where there were living skeletons; exhibition pavilions where there were Blocks’. (G. Rose, 1994, p. 34). Unwittingly (or wittingly) engaging in the aestheticisation of murder, the visitor believes he or she is acting in good faith, for there is no alternative topography on which alternative memory work can take place, and, anyway, the institutionalisation of the existing topography has taken away the possibility of an individual, ethical intervention (G. Rose, 1994, p. 35). This is the logic of the bystander and perpetrator, whose lack of intervention is self-excused by arguing that the institutions, bureaucracy and machinery of the Holocaust have taken moral agency out of the hands of the individual and distanced his or her contributions to genocide from his or her conscience. The consequent division between inner, critical autonomy and outer heteronomy simply lets heteronymous institutions and discourses off the hook, making them transcendent and untouchable. Consequently individual potential agency (analytical, political and ethical) is nullified. As Rose puts it, ‘Simultaneous possession of inner freedom and outer unfreedom means that the border where cognitive activity and normative passivity become cognitive passivity and normative activity is changeable and obscure [which] turns us into strangers to ourselves as moral agents and as social actors’ (1994, pp. 35–6). Put another way, the border between a critical (bad) conscience and acceptance of the state of memorialization, between ‘inner freedom’ and ‘outer unfreedom’, becomes blurred and permeable. External acquiescence or passivity leads, through the habit of mourning at such sites, to internal or cognitive passivity. The visitor's critical (bad) conscience is evacuated by the normalised and ritualised or habitual activity of performing memory work (mourning) there. It is no surprise that Michael ‘felt a great emptiness inside, as if I had been searching for some glimpse, not outside myself but within myself, and had discovered that there was nothing to be found’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 155).

Michael cannot imagine what it was like there (for the victim) because he does not know of the complicitous nature of his navigation of that historical landscape. It is not as though Michael is without critical
agency altogether. He knows that he must hold perspectives the victims and perpetrators in tense co-presence is if he is to know where one begins and the other ends, which means identifying with the perpetrator, if he is to judge Hanna:

I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna’s crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks – understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both.

(Schlink, 1997, p. 156)

Unable to hold both ‘understanding and condemnation’ in sight, the memorial topography of the concentration camp freezes into clichés: ‘The other world of the concentration camps [hadn’t] felt any closer. My impressions of Struthof joined my few already existing images of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, and froze along with them’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 156). Not knowing where the perpetrator’s perspective begins and ends, unable to understand the perpetrator, Michael perceives the village near the former camp as a sinister place. Its actual history aside, and what its inhabitants may or may not have seen, they reek of suspicion (Schlink, 1997, p. 155). Rather like the contagious numbness that seeps from the courtroom proceedings, the resonance of perpetration now seems everywhere.

It seems then that Michael is unable to map out a grey zone of remembrance. The cultural landscape of memory, both in the 1960s and 1990s resists such cartography, and it certainly can’t be found at Struthof: ‘I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna’s crime and to condemn it …. But it was impossible to do both’. His gestures towards a grey zone frustrated, Michael continues in his attempt to lend humanity to Hanna by transfiguring her into a victim of justice. He does this via an interrogation of the judicial system to which she is subject. Observing the trial, Michael points out that a ‘competent defence would have been able, without attacking the substance of the mother’s and daughter’s testimony, to cast reasonable doubt on whether these defendants were the actual ones who had done the selections. Witnesses’ testimony on this point was not precise, nor could it be; there had, after all, been a commandant, uniformed men, other female guards, and a whole hierarchy of responsibilities and order with which the prisoners
had only been partially confronted and which, consequently, they could only partially understand’ (Schlink, 1997, pp. 112–3). The same could be said of the mother and daughter and their limited perspective from within the locked church. How could they have seen what was going on outside and who failed to unlock the burning building? (Schlink, 1997, p. 113). Other witnesses, from the village, ‘had to be careful to avoid the charge that they themselves could have rescued the prisoners’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 113). After pointing out other examples of guilt by inductive reasoning (Schlink, 1997, pp. 124, 145), Michael notes the way that, in their self-exculpating testimony, the other ex-guards round on Hanna, find in her a scapegoat and accuse her of submitting a false report to cover up what she (more than they) had done (Schlink, 1997, p. 125). At this point in the proceedings, Hanna confesses that she and they had acted out of confusion and then falsely confesses to having written the report (Schlink, 1997, p. 128).

5.5 Redeeming Hanna

Most critics would agree that the judgement of Hanna is, as Giorgio Agamben might have it, ‘not directed toward the establishment of justice .... Nor ... toward the verification of truth. Law is solely directed toward judgment, independent of truth and justice. This is shown beyond doubt by the force of judgment that even an unjust sentence carries with it’ (1999, pp. 18–19). Judgement substitutes for justice, and judgement is upheld by the force of law, not its justness, and the purpose of the law is to produce judgement not justice.

If this is true – and the survivors know that it is true – then it is possible that the trials (the twelve trials at Nuremberg, and the others that took place in and outside German borders, including those in Jerusalem in 1961 that ended with the hanging of Eichmann) are responsible for the conceptual confusion that, for decades, has made it impossible to think through Auschwitz.

(Agamben, 1999, p. 19)

For Agamben, this is the ‘ruination of law’ (1999, p. 20). As Bartov notes, Schlink is a judge and fully aware that, in the 1960s, worse perpetrators got lighter sentences than Hanna (2000a, p. 220). Hanna receives life, the other guards shorter terms in jail. While the critique of justice is laudable, it has the effect of making Hanna a victim of circumstance. For Bartov, ‘Hanna’s specific guilt is ... qualified by the claim of universal potential guilt (guilt in the subjunctive mode), and
her helplessness in the camp and in the courtroom shows her as innocent victim of circumstance’ (2000a, p. 221). Nevertheless it is difficult to separate Michael’s attempts at humanising Hanna from the court’s unwillingness to humanise her. Michael notes the judge’s indicative refusal to answer Hanna’s repeated question: ‘What would you have done?’ (Schlink, 1997, pp. 110, 127). Admittedly, as Schmitz points out (2004, p. 73), Hanna’s questions are accompanied by the logistical and administrative concerns she felt at the time, not a revelation of humanity and in a voice that is reported more directly than that of her victims: ‘We couldn’t let them escape! We were responsible for them ... I mean, we had guarded them the whole time, in the camp and on the march, that was the point, that we had to guard them and not let them escape. That’s why we didn’t know what to do. We also had no idea how many of the women would survive the next few days. So many had died, and the ones who were still alive were so weak’ (Schlink, 1997, pp. 126–7). This outburst does not exactly suggest an ethical self-exploration, a consideration of the (in)humanity of her actions; nor does it make her available for identification. However, the failure of the judge to respond does not create any framework for an exploration of the limits of human action.

The question of Hanna’s illiteracy, inside and outside the court, though has caused most critical controversy. As Bartov argues, illiteracy motivates Hanna to join the SS before it is discovered by her previous employer and turns her ‘first into a perpetrator and then into a victim of justice (as Michael ultimately believes)’ (2000a, p. 219). The consideration of her illiteracy is therefore a confusion of ‘social or ideological handicap and victim’ (Bartov, 2000a, p. 219). Schlant finds the illiteracy mystifying: ‘if illiteracy is not the explanation – and excuse – for Hanna’s acts, then what function does it serve in the novel? At the very point where Schlink needs to make a strong case with respect to the Nazi crimes and those who perpetrated them, the novel is weakest’ (1999, p. 214). Without an explanation from Hanna, we are left with Michael’s speculation of the causal relation between illiteracy and her crimes against humanity:

No, Hanna had not decided in favour of crime. She had decided against a promotion at Siemens, and had fallen into a job as a guard. And no, she had not dispatched the delicate and the weak in transports to Auschwitz because they had read to her; she had chosen them to read to her because she wanted to make their last month bearable before their inevitable dispatch to Auschwitz. And no, at the trial Hanna did not weigh exposure as an illiterate against exposure as a criminal. She did not calculate and she did not manoeuvre. She
accepted that she would be called to account, and simply did not wish to endure further exposure. She was not pursuing her own interests, but fighting for her own truth, her own justice. Because she always had to dissimulate somewhat, and could never be completely candid, it was a pitiful truth and a pitiful justice, but it was hers, and the struggle for it was her struggle.

(Schlink, 1997, pp. 131–2)

Following the advice of his father, who sees no ‘justification for setting other people’s views of what is good for them above their own ideas’ (Schlink, 1997, pp. 140–1), Michael does not tell the judge of Hanna’s illiteracy. Michael believes that he has enabled her to take responsibility for her own actions, in terms of her own private version of justice rather than in the terms of the legal proceedings to which she is subjected. Michael’s law professor argues, ‘you won’t find a single one who really believes he had the dispensation to murder back then’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 89). The professor differentiates between a transcendent or absolute conception of law and a historically contingent law. In the camps and on the march Hanna operated under the auspices of the latter, another version of which she also faces in the courtroom. The implication remains that Michael believes he has enabled her to personify the former. This attempt to humanise Hanna is though redemptive. As Dominick LaCapra has argued, illiteracy turns her first into scapegoat, and then it transfigures her into a sacrifice to collective guilt that redeems her past actions (2001, p. 20).

The problem remains that Michael does not reveal the crimes of which she is guilty. We never find out exactly what happened that night on the forced march, nor the extent of her activities in the satellite camp. Taberner and Donahue argue that Michael’s concern over Hanna’s victimisation by the legal system, and his dilemma over whether to inform the judge of her illiteracy, distracts from the specifics of her atrocities (Taberner, 2003, p. 28; Donahue, 2001, p. 79). If illiteracy does make Hanna a victim of circumstance (in joining the SS) rather than a motivated killer, Schlant is right to ask what does then motivate the individual’s participation in mass murder. The stories Michael hears on his way to Struthof for the first time about the Einsatzgruppen, who kill out of ‘indifference’ to humanity, shed no light on Hanna’s motivation and make her more opaque by comparison. Although Michael is ‘guilty’ of loving a perpetrator, he has failed to explain her humanity in light of her actions (Schlink, 1997, p. 133). His attempts to do so become exculpatory and revisionist, ultimately constructing her in the terms
of a redemptive victimhood, which just compounds her mystification. In sum, Hanna remains opaque, but then again, as Schmitz might say, that is part of the ‘intellectual honesty’ of the text: ‘the figure of Hanna necessarily remains psychologically vague because the text has to keep her at arm’s length for the sake of the generation conflict. Schlink thus historicises the silence between the perpetrator generation and their children as a failure of both parties’ (2004, p. 58). For Michael to read her incisively would be to transcend the conditions of memory in the 1960s and also to collapse the binary opposition between victims and perpetrators that still operate in the German cultural memory of the 1990s.

Most critics argue that Michael’s continued practice of reading to her, or rather of sending her tapes of his readings, also functions as a failed form of moral instruction or humanising force via the classics of German literature that Michael chooses for their inscriptions of Enlightenment thinking: ‘a great and fundamental confidence in bourgeois culture’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 183). In tandem, Hanna learns literacy and is able to read the cannon of Holocaust (survivor) literature, including, notably, Levi and Borowski. As Bill Niven points out, though, the last scene (Schlink, 1997, pp. 194–7) in which we (and Michael) see Hanna alive is full of allusions to a childlike innocence on her part rather than a moral maturity (2003, p. 393). Seen in a different light, she has prematurely aged and is devitalised (Schlink, 1997, p. 194), bereft of the corporeality that once so excited Michael in an otherwise repressive culture of the 1950s (Taberner, 205, p. 149). Hanna’s statement that only the ‘dead’ (her victims and those she reads about) can ‘understand’ her (Schlink, 1997, p. 196) suggests that her readings in Holocaust literature and not the literature of the Enlightenment, the cultural precepts of which did nothing to stop Auschwitz, have shed light on her crimes. What she means by that statement remains unclear (although it implies something exculpatory), and her opacity is sealed by her suicide (Schlink, 1997, p. 201).

If Hanna remains a mystery, it is because she has always been constructed and reconstructed under the conditions of the cultural memory in which Michael intervenes. Michael admits to (and naturalises) the selective and subjective nature of his memory that constitutes the narrative: the ‘right one is the written one [not the other versions] .... The written version wanted to be written’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 215). He reads and remembers Hanna poorly, but he does so in cultures of remembrance that are unable to admit the humanity of the perpetrator, to condemn and understand her, in other words, to construct a grey zone of remembrance. Even though he still suffers from a crisis of identity after the trial – ‘the numbness was gone. All the questions and fears, accusations
and self-accusations, all the horror and pain that had erupted during the trial and been immediately deadened were back, and back for good’ (Schlink, 1997, p. 166) – he cannot transcend the conditions of German memory. We should not, though, conflate Michael and Schlink, and as Bartov has it, Michael’s failure to judge Hanna ‘leads us to assume that the author’s views are more complex than his protagonist’s, or more ready to compromise, come to terms, relent’ (2000a, p. 222). Where Donahue (2001, p. 77) reads Michael’s interpretive failures and the indeterminacy of Hanna as part of Schlink’s staging of a general and unethical postmodernist ambiguity, this chapter argues that, via his narrator, Schlink draws attention to the binaries that govern Holocaust memory both in the 1960s and in the 1990s. Michael’s ultimate failure to humanise the perpetrator in non-redemptive terms demonstrates the cultural conditions of memory from the 1960s to the 1990s that facilitated a slippage between the category of victim and perpetrator.

5.6 Heimat

Whatever the cultural constraints of Michael’s memory work, that work, the novel’s preface suggests, is not done. The exploration of self and thereby national identity is not concluded. As Schmitz argues, The Reader ends with a sense of homelessness (2004, p. 77). As Michael puts it, ‘I knew my desire had fixed in her [Hanna] without her being its object. It was a desire to come home’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 209). Hanna figured the homely, Heimat, and that he is still not at home in Germany is suggested by the recurrent dreams Michael shares with the reader, prefacing his narrative. In those dreams, Michael encounters Hanna’s apartment (the scene of his adolescent trysts) in strange cities, in other words, the would-be-familiar remains unfamiliar (Schlink, 1997, pp. 5–7). Put another way, German identity is still not at home. This may sound as if Michael is operating under a set of terms that were exploited by National Socialism in the quest for the restoration of an ideal Germany that never was. However, Michael’s chosen career as a historian of the law suggests otherwise:

Doing history means building bridges between the past and the present, observing both banks of the river, taking an active part on both sides. One of my areas of research was law in the Third Reich, and here it is particularly obvious how the past and present come together in a single reality. Here, escape is not a preoccupation with
the past, but a determined focus on the present and the future that is blind to the legacy of the past which brands us and with which we must live.

In saying this, I do not mean to conceal how gratifying it was to plunge into different stretches of the past that were not so urgently connected to the present. I felt it for the first time when I was working on legal codes and drafts of the Enlightenment. They were based on the belief that a good order is intrinsic to the world, and that therefore the world can be brought into good order. To see how legal provisions were created paragraph by paragraph out of this belief as solemn guardians of this good order, and worked into laws that strove for beauty and by their very beauty for truth, made me happy. For a long time I believed that there was progress in the history of law, a development towards greater beauty and truth, rationality and humanity, despite terrible setbacks and retreats. Once it became clear to me that this belief was a chimera, I began playing with a different image of the course of legal history. In this one it still has a purpose, but the goal it finally attains, after countless disruptions, confusions and delusions, is the beginning, its own original starting point, which once reached must be set off from again.


Enlightened legal discourse turns out to be chimerical, not only in its legislation of German society under National Socialism and the rationalisation of genocide, but also in the failure of adequately confronting that period (in Hanna’s trial). Interestingly, though, The Reader suggests that the law can be recovered from its ‘ruination’ (as Agamben would have it). Let us return to the comments of Michael’s law professor, who, returned from exile, presides over the study of Hanna’s trial:

Was it sufficient that the ordinances under which the camp guards and enforcers were convicted were already on the statute books at the time they committed their crimes? Or was it a question of how the laws were actually interpreted and enforced at the time they committed their crimes, and that they were not applied to them? What is law? Is it what is on the books, or what is actually enacted and obeyed in a society? Or is law what must be enacted and obeyed, whether or not it is on the books, if things are to go right? ‘Look at the defendants – you won’t find a single one who really believes he had dispensation to murder back then’.

(Schlink, 1997, p. 89)
The questions that frame Michael’s law seminar culminate with the professor’s more personal statement and belief. For the professor, the law didn’t give the perpetrators dispensation to murder. It was in the interpretation and rewriting of law as it was enacted that dispensation was found. Ruination can be measured against the ideal of law.

Michael comes to share that ideal with his professor. (The ideas enshrined in the Enlightenment may not save Hanna but they may be a measure of her ruination.) For Michael, the law is more Odyssean than heimatlichkeit:

I reread *The Odyssey* at that time, which I had first read in school and remembered as the story of a homecoming. But it is not the story of a homecoming. How could the Greeks, who knew that one never enters the same river twice, believe in homecoming? Odysseus does not return home to stay, but to set off again. *The Odyssey* is the story of motion both purposeful and purposeless, successful and futile. What else is the history of law?


If the law finds its way back home, it finds itself in ruins, which prompts its departure for ideal terrain. If Michael were to have abandoned the law because of its failure to deliver the promises of the Enlightenment to modernity, the abandonment of law would be a postmodern move.

5.7 *Mourning becomes the law*

For Gillian Rose the transition from modernity to postmodernity and the inauguration of the cultural response to this shift, postmodernism, is figured as a pilgrimage from Athens to the New Jerusalem. Athens is organised by rational politics and anticipates the Enlightenment, and in its very architecture, spatial arrangement and polis can be found the seeds of modernity. The New Jerusalem, on the other hand, is projected as an ideal community, whose architecture and spatial arrangement is the embodiment of the principles of toleration of difference and otherness. The pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem is supposedly an overcoming of the fusion of knowledge and power in Athens, where political utilisation of knowledge will eventually lead to an exclusive society. Given the figure of Athens deployed in this argument, the reality of Auschwitz is little more than the reification of Athenian ideas. Auschwitz, as a kind of Athenian city, is the logical development of Athens (G. Rose, 1996, pp. 27–8, 31–3; 1994, pp. 225, 240).
Rose argues postmodernism has posited a ‘tight fit’ between the Holocaust and a general feature of modernity – ‘its legal-rationality, its architectural history, the logic of meaning itself’ – that has lead to a general conflation. According to postmodernism, argues Rose, the Holocaust is wholly aligned with the project of modernity: ‘The Holocaust is now seen as the new immanent telos’ of the procedures of ‘critical rationality’. The Holocaust ‘becomes the measure, the limit, the criterion, of the invalidity of those modes of organised thinking …. Reason is revealed by the Holocaust to be contaminated and the great contaminator’. According to Rose, all the discourses and disciplines of modernity have been found guilty, by postmodernism, of their implication in the Holocaust, on the grounds that features of modernity responsible for the Holocaust are felt to share a common denominator with the rest of modernity (G. Rose, 1996, p. 27). Enlightened and modern thought will a priori anticipate Auschwitz.

Postmodernism’s divorce from the discourses of modernity is not that easy. The pilgrims carry something of the old city within them, which they do not see because of their willed autonomy vis a vis the Athenian regulation of the body politic – their willed transcendence of that system. In effect they occupy not a New Jerusalem but a fantasy in which they ‘unbeknownst to themselves, carry along in their souls the third city’ – a ghostly version of the Athens they have disavowed. The ersatz New Jerusalem is the place from which a postmodern ethics is launched, supposedly free from the taint of rationality that actually still haunts it, and, because of that disavowal, a place unable to engage with the political reality of Athens (G. Rose, 1996, pp. 22, 26). As Jacqueline Rose comments, the willed authority of a new identity, an inversion of a lack of authority held under the Athenian regime, becomes self-legitimating, assumes an innocence and otherness freed from its own ethical implications and political realities. As Jacqueline Rose puts it, ‘We are always implicated in power, and we are never pure’ (2007, pp. 227–8).

For Gillian Rose, acts of extreme injustice, such as the Holocaust reveal not the metaphysics of the Enlightenment and modernity’s ideals but the contingencies and aporetics of modernity’s discourses. The Holocaust was an aberration of the project of modernity. Rose argues that the rule of Auschwitz was not conducted along lines of law and total rationality, but a mix of unpredictable terror and law that engaged prisoners and guards. More generally speaking, the discourses of modernity are shot-through with uncertainty. Reason and rationality only guarantee genocide if they are launched with foregone conclusions in mind. The Holocaust marked where the project of modernity became a teleology. This is where the
limits of an ideal and unattainable knowledge met with metaphysical contrivances. Only by re-inhabiting the discourses of modernity can we see where the total project of modernity went aberrant, where the desire to totally know the world led to lethally exclusive versions of it, and where the project of modernity was in fact limited and unleashed its own transgressions.

Rose argues that it is only through the frameworks provided by the modern ideas of reason and rationality and the laws that govern them that the injustice of the Holocaust can be measured: to ‘acknowledge and experience justice and injustice … is to accept the law … not to transgress it’. The acknowledgement and experience of (in)justice through an interrogation of the law is an act of historical representation or remembrance of those the law has unjustly excluded. ‘[M]ourning becomes the law’ (G. Rose, 1996, p. 36). Acts of remembrance that take place outside the parameters of the law cannot work-through the idea of the law, cannot understand why an injustice has taken place, but might to seek to remember the injustice in an unjust way: the exclusion is reinscribed in the act of remembrance. Postmodernism’s very mourning of those lost to the Holocaust might unleash this same logic (G. Rose, 1996, pp. 36, 41, 49, 54–5, 59, 62). By bearing in mind the law, historical memory can interrogate and be interrogated by the law, which in turn sustains what is for Rose the precarious ideality of Athens:

Mourning draws on transcendent but representable justice, which makes the suffering of immediate experience visible and speakable. When completed mourning returns the soul to the city, renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city. The mourner returns to negotiate and challenge the changing inner and outer boundaries of the soul and of the city, she returns to their perennial anxiety.

(G. Rose, 1996, p. 36)

The framework of the law holds historical representation and mourning in a critical forcefield that renders their methods fallible. ‘Only the persistence of the always fallible and contestable representation opens the possibility for our acknowledgement of mutual implication in the fascism of our cultural rites and rituals’ (Rose, 1996, p. 41). Michael holds on to this ‘precarious ideality’ with his Odyssean vision of the law – a process of continued return and departure in search of the ideal by which the naturalisation (domestication) of law in the service of the nation can be scrutinised.
3.8 Homecoming

The theme of law and its contingent nature is announced early in Schlink’s *Die Heimkehr* (*Homecoming*). Its protagonist and narrator, Peter Debauer, reminisces fondly about his childhood summers at his Swiss-German grandparents’ house and the debates he had with his grandfather about the verdicts proceeding from historic law cases. Peter is especially interested in the ‘moral implications’ of the ‘tales’ of ‘mistaken verdicts…. For though mistaken verdicts are unjust by definition, the more famous of them often have a historical significance that goes far beyond injustice and can transform injustice into justice’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 15). This interest eventually fuels a doctoral dissertation which Peter gives up, because his hypothesis proves untenable: ‘I intended to demonstrate that justice is of use only insofar as its claims are formulated and put into practice without concern for social utility. *Fiat iustitia, pereat mundis*: Justice be done though the world perish. Such was the proper motto for justice in my view, and if the world held that obedience to the claims of justice would lead to doom and destruction, it was free to refuse obedience and take responsibility for the result, but justice was under no obligation to mitigate its claims’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 38). Ultimately, though, Peter cannot reconcile his ideal of a transcendent legal justice with the purposes justice has historically served in his various case studies: ‘the good of the king or the Church, racial purity, class struggle, peace’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 38).

The instrumentalisation of law is given an Odyssean resonance when it is associated with one of the novels that Peter’s grandparents have edited and published as part of a series, *Novels for Your Reading Pleasure and Entertainment*, which the young Peter is forbidden to read. Peter comes across the last pages of a novel in his grandparents’ series at the age of 13, in which a German POW, escaped from the Soviet Union finds his way home only to find his wife, horrified at his appearance and now with a child not his own, presumably a new husband and a daughter who perhaps no longer recognises him (Schlink, 2008, p. 29). After fleeing his studies, Peter returns from a subsequent sojourn in California, and, settling into his apartment, unwrapping his belongings from childhood, he finds the wrapping paper to consist of more pages of the forbidden novel he first discovered as a child (Schlink, 2008, pp. 43–8, 51–4, 56–60). Recognising something like the street and the building in which the wife of the novel’s protagonist, Karl, lives along with her new family, Peter wonders whether the author of the novel was known to his mother and whether the narrative is based on reality. Before pondering
this, Peter associates his own homecoming to (West) Germany in 1980 with that of Karl's during the war.

The homecoming novel is, like law, patterned and was a popular genre in the 1950s (subscribing to notions of German victimhood discussed in relation to Sebald). The model for this novel, if not the genre, derives, Peter realises, from *The Odyssey*: for example, ‘perhaps the encounter with Polyphemus had been transformed into Karl's having to sneak his comrades out a cave past Russian rescue teams; perhaps Circe had been transformed into a Siberian shamaness or the sirens into a KGB choir’. The ending, though, of Karl's narrative, differs: ‘Karl's Penelope had not stood up to the suitors; she had chosen one and had had a child – if not two – by him. Striking him dead was not as indicated as in Odysseus’ frenzy in the presence of the brazen band that pressed, plagued and plundered Penelope. No, neither Kleinmullerstrasse or Kleinmeyerstrasse had been the scene of the massacre’ (Schlink, 2008, pp. 65–7). Seeking more information, Peter, in an implicit re-tracing of Karl's last steps home, calls at number 38 Kleinmeyerstrasse, where he meets Barbara Bindinger, the women who will become his lover and eventual fiancé. Before their engagement, Peter has to play a part in another version of the Odyssean homecoming, watching her play Penelope to the return of her first husband from overseas (Schlink, 2008, p. 92).

Following the Odyssean model, Karl's journey home is punctuated by the seductive shelter of women; Kalinka is his Calypso. So too Peter plays out an Odyssean itinerary, finding his ‘Ciconian woman’, ‘Lotus Eater’ and ‘Nausicaa’ after the temporary end to his relationship with ‘Penelope’ (Barbara Bindinger) (Schlink, 2008, pp. 60, 97–9). Meanwhile the research on Karl's author continues. Peter learns that a former inhabitant of the building was friends with Karl Hanke. Hanke was appointed to replace Himmler and was the ‘man in charge of turning the city of Breslau’, where Peter was conceived, into a ‘fortress, of defending it and destroying it’ before fleeing on May 2, 1945 (Schlink, 2008, pp. 107–8). Hanke sponsors Volker Vonlanden’s participation in the war as a war correspondent. From Barbara's sister, Peter learns that Barbara's mother, Beate Lampe, while living in the building had had a romantic correspondence with Vonlanden, whose letters to her included a theory on Nazi law titled ‘The Iron Rule’ (later published by Vonlanden as propaganda): ‘*the law rests ... on an iron rule: whatever you are willing to take upon yourself you have the right to inflict upon others .... If I am prepared to be killed, I have the right to kill. I am prepared to be killed when I enter into a life and death struggle, be it declared or not and no matter who declares
... Neither Jews nor Slavs will be saved thereby. Germany has entered into a life-and-death struggle with them’ (Schlink, 2008, pp. 116–17). In another article, Vonlanden applies this theory to the justification of the siege of Leningrad (and the starvation of its population). In this justification the ‘weak’ (the civilian, the besieged) are to be regarded with ‘chivalry’, which means regarding them as ‘equals’, capable of killing, and therefore killable (Schlink, 2008, pp. 123–4). Later research reveals the possibility that Hanke’s own war propaganda, particularly concerning his costly defence of Breslau, was ghostwritten by Vonlanden, as their rhetoric is similar (Schlink, 2008, p. 127).

Following his escape from Breslau, Hanke is captured by the Czechs and killed trying to escape. Although Hanke and Vonlanden are associated, Peter assumes the later survived the war to return to 38 Kleinmeyerstrasse to visit Beate once more and to write the novel. Peter declares that what he found ‘repellent’ in the articles, he finds ‘attractive’ in the novel he deduces Vonlanden to have written: ‘with the same levity he had employed to make Hades a dream, the sea a desert, the glossy-plaited Calypso the full-breasted Kalinka, he had made ruthlessness an ethical principle, the siege of Stalingrad an act of chivalry, and the seduction of Beate a tribute to justice’. That a narrative of German homecoming is authored by the same hand as a legal narrative of Germany’s violent identity suggests that both narratives are versions of the same story. All of this leaves Peter yearning for knowledge of the end of the novel – what happens after Karl’s return and his discovery of his wife’s remarriage – and by implication what happens to Vonlanden and his ‘iron rule’: ‘It might be a homecoming that had never before been told, never before been imagined. It might be the archetypal homecoming’ (Schlink, 2008, pp. 125–6).

Continuing his own re-enactment of a German version of The Odyssey, attempting to find his and Germany’s identity, Peter feels the need to participate in the historical moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In Berlin he finds the most dramatic signs of history-in-the-making in the fervent consumerism of East Germans in West Berlin. However, he does find himself integral to historical change in stumbling into an interview at Humbolt University, where he is mistaken as an applicant for an academic position in the Law department. Playing along, he exaggerates his qualifications and is offered a job lecturing in the constitutional law of the Federal Republic. His lectures are well attended by law students wanting to adapt to the new Germany. Inadvertently he finds himself part of the historical transition. His own deceit over his qualification associates the theme of law with insincerity, which is echoed
by the Party propaganda – a ‘theatre of the absurd’ – that he hears in his department, as well as a new colleague’s interpretation of the practice of law and justice in the Third Reich and the GDR, contingent on the political needs of each regime. In other words, we are reminded of the untenability of Peter's original and idealist research on this subject (Schlink, 2008, pp. 142–9).

Further research in East Berlin uncovers the fact that Volker Vonlanden was known after the war as Walter Scholler, who worked as a writer on the Nacht-Express, a Soviet-influenced newspaper, and who was a Viennese Jew who faced death at Auschwitz and later found favour with the Soviets because he could identify the names and faces of Communists murdered by the Nazis (Schlink, 2008, pp. 150–1). Reconciliation with Barbara and a decision to marry reveal that the necessary documentation, on Peter’s part, is not available. There is a record of a Peter Graf, not Debauer, having been born in Breslau in April 1945 and a record of a couple marrying the previous year under the name of Graf (Peter’s mother's maiden name), not Debauer (Schlink, 2008, pp. 167–8). It is only when a copy of The Odyssey of the Law, written by John de Baur, turns up on Peter’s desk at the publishing house where he runs a legal series that Peter suspects that John de Baur is, or was, Vonlanden, and Peter’s father: ‘I think he’s my father. He changed his name from Debauer to de Baur when he got to America. Or somehow got a passport with that name before he left. He was good at that kind of thing: he got my mother a Swiss passport in Breslau from the gauleiter [Hanke] or the Reich security officials or for money. He called himself Vonlanden for a while and Scholler for a while. Before the war he wrote for the Nazis, after the war for the Communists. He’s also the one who wrote the novel that brought us [Peter and Barbara] together’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 184). Peter’s mother confirms that Debauer had asked her to testify to his death, allowing him to escape Breslau and his past, and in return he would leave everything for them as his wife and son, including the acquisition of Swiss grandparents (Schlink, 2008, p. 190).

In searching for the ending of Karl’s novel, for the fate of Vonlanden, for the identity of a new Germany – in excavating these narratives of German history – Peter has found himself. In Odyssean fashion, he has been able to find himself through a departure from himself. Yet what version of post-Holocaust Germany emerges from this act of self-discovery? Is this trajectory of return free from the logic of Heimat? Put another way, in the representation of a fascist past, is a fascism of representation installed? As Michael reminded us in The Reader, The Odyssey is a narrative of return
and departure; its return is predicated on a departure; its return stages a departure; the homecoming is constantly undone. As a narrative that prefigures the Enlightenment, as Adorno and Horkheimer would have it, it is non-identical with itself and must strive to overcome or redeem its own aporia. Its rationalisation or representation is, recalling Rose, contestable.

Adorno and Horkheimer explain the duplicitous nature of the narrative and identity that issues from Homer. Although ‘the poem as a whole bears witness to the dialectic of the enlightenment’, it demonstrates that dialectic cannot free itself from myth, the irrational, deceit and duplicity: ‘the venerable cosmos of the meaningful Homeric world is shown to be the achievement of regulative reason, which destroys myth by virtue of the same rational order in which it reflects it’. Or, as we shall see, myth is dispelled by methods that do not seem entirely rational. Odysseus’s progress is deceitful in that he cheats ‘natural deities’ who would bar his way with the offer of a gift, which ‘like a sacrifice is intended to pay for forfeited blood’ and stands for the actual or symbolic ‘equivalence’ of his effort. The sacrificial act is the means of self-preservation, or, the escape from sacrifice can only be achieved by sacrifice: ‘the dismissal of sacrifice by the rationality of self-preservation is exchange no less than sacrifice was’. Put another way, Odysseus loses himself to find himself. The gift, like the sacrifice, is still a gifting of the self (or at least the offer of self). This sacrificial logic is a form of mimesis of or adaptation to and empowerment over the nature that would dissolve the self: ‘The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can muster a despiritualised nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualising itself in turn’. Sacrifice is therefore a form of cunning: ‘The formula for the cunning of Odysseus is that the redeemed and instrumentalised spirit, by resigning itself to yield to nature, renders to nature what is nature’s, and yet betrays it in the very process’. The sacrificial logic, which ungrounds and grounds identity, is played out in relation to fate, mapped out in myth, or, put differently, in the legal conditions that constrict identity: ‘He satisfies the sentence of the law so that it loses power over him, by conceding it this very power. It is impossible to hear the Sirens and not succumb to them; therefore he does not try to defy their power’. That concession is ‘cunning’ ‘defiance’ in ‘rational’ form. ‘Cunning’, though, introduces duplicity to which the world of myth gives way. Cunning exploits the distinction between word and thing, so that history is no longer decreed by fate, where history is written in advance so that word and thing absolutely correspond. ‘With cunning the word is empathised in order to change the actuality’, and the world becomes ‘nominal’, known in name only, which in Odysseus’s case can lead to the reinvention of
the self and world, and the propagation of discourse to sustain those inventions. However, with the distinction between word and object, and the release of the world from its mythic destiny, history (‘disaster’) emerges as history, as a matter of narrative, rather than as fate, and open to interpretation. The journey home, for Odysseus, is an escape from the prehistoric world, from myth which defines the homeland. The Odyssean journey home does not prescribe the homeland in mythical terms, but in terms of a constant departure from such a prehistorical definition. The journey home is a ‘state of having escaped’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1999, pp. 43–4, 49, 54–6, 57, 58–9, 60, 68, 70, 78).

As this brief excursion through Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of Homer has tried to indicate, the dispelling of myth from the Homeric world by that world’s rationalisation has revealed a version of that world no less contrived or constructed. In particular, identity must be lost in order to be found, sacrificed in order to be gained. This is not, then, the simple transcendence of identity but rather its splitting. In yielding to nature, law and fate, identity is at the same time able to overcome those impediments. This sacrificial logic introduces a form of cunning in which the self that is sacrificed (or at least offered as a sacrifice) is not equivalent to (does not symbolise) the self that prevails. In this sense, Odysseus is not confined to the law of fate but can, through, cunning overcome the prescription of identity. Cunning therefore introduces a world in which the self is not identical to itself, in which the cunning words of Odysseus are not identical to the world, and therefore in which fate is open to interpretation. In the division of word and world, history emerges in place of myth, that is, Odysseus’s actions exceed the mythical framework imposed upon them. In short, the rationalisation of the world is achieved not by utter objectivity but by duplicity, yet it is this incomplete form representation that allows history to emerge as a matter of interpretation.

John de Baur’s (Vonlanden’s) reading of The Odyssey finds in its inconsistencies reason enough for a postmodern interpretation of law that, recalling Rose, is ghosted by an undeconstructed violent rationality. In his lectures at Columbia, reports Peter, de Baur sets about deconstructing Odysseus’s homecoming trajectory: Odysseus procrastinates on his way home; Odysseus came home only to set off again; Odysseus was a liar as all we know about his experience is from what he tells the Phaeacians, and he had to ingratiate himself with them by lying; his lying was necessary to overcome the magic of Polyphemus, Circe and the Sirens, but to Athena, his wife, son and father, lying was irresistible because the lies he spun about himself were too engaging. The significance of the end
is not clear and is open to a number interpretive contexts. In sum, the meaning of *The Odyssey* is in flux, constituted by ‘truth and lies, loyalty and betrayal’. If this pretext of Enlightenment thinking can be so dismantled, if the idea of a homecoming is revealed to be so contrived, it follows, argues de Baur, that the very tenets of reason and rationality, especially as they apply to law, can be ungrounded. ‘Justice’ and ‘unjustice’, de Baur lectures, are ‘abstract’ concepts, defined by the contingencies of interpretation and legal decision (Schlink, 2008, pp. 202–3). As Rose might have it, de Baur’s is a postmodern position that finds fractures in Enlightenment and modern discourse that render any concept of truth untenable. (As Rose, Adorno and Horkheimer might argue, that discourse was always already fractured.) Only by inhabiting rather than eschewing that discourse can the moment be identified where the claim to know the world slips into a teleological contrivance in order to overcome the inherent incompleteness of representation. It is no surprise that de Baur’s postmodernism reintroduces the teleologies it supposedly overcame.

If Odysseus’s apprehension of the world is a contrivance, and the same applies to Enlightenment rationality and reason, and the project of modernity they anticipate, the referent (the world) is divorced from historical representation. The logical implications for this can be found in the disputation, found in de Baur’s monograph, on the immorality of murder. Murder is punishable, argues de Baur, because of the negative value attached to the act. The murdered do not suffer after their deaths, and they do not suffer from what they suffered when alive. Murder is deemed punishable because suffering is added to this act: the pain caused to the victim and those who know him or her. These ‘ancillary’ issues are brought to what is in essence a pure act, and they are brought by the victimised or those who would relate to or identify with them. It follows, for de Baur, that the victims are those who bear moral responsibility for murder, or rather for the immorality they add to murder. On these grounds genocide can be rationalised. The destruction of a people would leave no trace of suffering, no grounds for moralising on the act, as long as those people are sufficiently isolated from the world. Therefore the murderers are not responsible, as they commit a pure act, to which immorality can only be added (Schlink, 2008, pp. 181–3). Peter’s research illuminates a deconstructionist theoretical framework for de Baur’s argument:

As far as I could make out, if texts are not about what the author meant to say but what the reader makes of them, the reader not the author is responsible for the text; if reality is not the world out there
but the text we write and read about it, then the responsibility for murder falls on neither the real murderers nor their victims – they having lost their existence – but on their contemporaries who lodge the complaint and prosecute the plaintiffs.

(Schlink, 2008, p. 186)

Just as ‘justice’ and ‘injustice’ are a matter of interpretation – legal constructs whose reference to events in the world is mitigated by the fact that those events are themselves a matter of interpretation, unable to exist outside of their own representations – so they are, if we decide, interchangeable. Evil can be deployed for the sake of good, ‘if the decision maker is willing to bear the brunt of evil’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 180). The ‘validity of our decisions makes itself felt in the commitment we make to carrying them out and the responsibility we take for carrying them out, responsibility in the sense of the iron rule, which de Baur did not mention by name’ (Schlink, 208, p. 218). As Rose might have predicted, a postmodern ethics that disavows referentiality and reason, as if the former were contaminated by the latter, reproduces them in bastardised form in the reemergence of the ‘iron rule’. The fault-lines in The Odyssey and Enlightened thought, argued by Adorno and Horkheimer, make postmodernism’s divorce from reason, rationality and referentiality, as if they were inherently totalising, an ethically blind move. The recurrence of Odyssean structures in Schlink’s work suggests continual scrutiny of where the representation of fascism is coterminal with the fascism of representation – a scrutiny only possible by engaging with reason, rationality and referentiality.

5.9 Defending de Man

De Baur is a thinly disguised version of Paul de Man, his wartime correspondence a reference to de Man’s contributions to the collaborationist Belgian newspaper Le Soir, and his postwar silence concerning his fascist activities redeemed (deconstructed) by his scholarly theories, described by one critic in Homecoming as intellectual fascism (Schlink, 2008, p. 258), which is how some of de Man’s detractors have explained the Yale scholar’s evasion of the past. Schlink has of course simplified de Manian theory for the purposes of his novel (just as Gillian Rose has perhaps homogenised postmodernism, her critique of Holocaust sublimity and all that entails notwithstanding). As Jacqueline Rose (2008) argues, Schlink, through his rendition of de Manian theory, has drawn an implicit equation between fascism (if not the Holocaust) and deconstruction. Schlink
may have made such a conflation but in it can be found a valid critique of piety before the Holocaust based on a disavowal of referentiality and reason. Where Schlink, in *The Reader*, attempts to inhabit the perpetrator’s perspective to see where representation becomes totalising and fascistic, in *Homecoming* the perpetrator’s perspective is made less rather than more visible by the concept of the grey zone. The grey zone in this novel is produced by the historical indeterminacy of de Baur’s theory, in which categories of victim and perpetrator (and justice and injustice) are just a matter of interpretation. This abstraction of the grey zone is confirmed when de Baur organises a retreat for his students, Peter included, that turns into a generalised version of the experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram, with only vague reference to the structural conditions of life under the Nazi regime. The participants are incrementally brutalised by actors playing presumably right-wing, uncivilised hunters who claim the retreat as their hunting lodge and hold them captive: ‘The retreat was supposed to teach us to look evil in the eye, the evil in others and ourselves. Each of us had our turn during the week; each of us was meant to experience denying and betraying the principles we professed as good, to experience selling out, doing evil with determination’ (Schlink, 2008, p. 247).

The universalisation of the grey zone might not be attributable to the theories of de Man but perhaps to some of the strategies by which de Man has been defended on the basis of his deconstructive principles, such as Shoshana Felman’s reading of de Man’s silence. Felman raises the important point that the condemnation of de Man was a ‘Manichean allegory of good and evil’. In other words, condemnation was a form of distancing de Man’s complicity, and the Holocaust, as foreign, as past and all too readable as such. Made from such a safe distance, critiques do not consider the all too human nature of collaboration: ‘To talk about the Holocaust from a position of self-righteousness and rightness is to deny the very essence of the Holocaust, which was to render this position unavailable (Felman, 1992a, p. 122–3). In other words, Felman draws on Levi’s grey zone to critique the general tenor of the critiques of de Man’s silence.

However, Felman goes on to explain de Man’s silence in terms of the ‘ideological coercion surreptitiously built into language’. In other words, de Man retrospectively realised that he had been writing in a language (of Nazi rhetoric and ideology) not his own, making witnessing impossible other than in terms of silence – his language having been co-opted and corrupted. More problematically, though, Felman deploys Levi, whom she declares is writing from a ‘different position’ but who nevertheless
suggests, to Felman, a model (of the ‘drowned’) by which to understand de Man’s silence: ‘we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses .... Those who have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, ... they are ... the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance’ (Levi quoted in Felman, 1992a, p. 139). As Felman puts it: ‘Incorporating the silence of the witness who has returned mute into his very writing, de Man’s entire work and his later theories bear implicit witness to the Holocaust, not as (its impossible and failed) narrator (a narrator-journalist whom the war had dispossessed of his own voice) but as a witness to the very blindness of his own, and others’, witness, a firsthand witness to the Holocaust’s historical disintegration of the witness’ (1992a, p. 139). Felman universalises the category of the witness or rather victim to rationalise de Man’s silence. In this argument, de Man articulates the silence of the ‘true’ witness.20

That universalisation is in turn based on the universalisation of de Man’s theory. In Felman’s scheme, de Man’s theory inscribes the necessary distance on the event, a distancing from the event measured in terms of the muteness or the submersion of the witness (the witness’s ‘radical departure’). Theory, then, does not inscribe proximity to that submersion (the experience of suffering), but rather allows ‘second-degree testimony’ to emerge in place of that submersion. To explain a different way, Felman focuses in particular on de Man’s essay on Rousseau’s *Confessions* to explain ‘theory’, but a brief explication of another essay, ‘Resistance to Theory’ would be of equal use in this discussion. In ‘Resistance to Theory’, De Man defends ‘Theory’ against charges that it denies the referential function of language, that it divorces language from history. De Man argues theory does not deny language’s referential capabilities but its ‘authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition’ (1986, p. 11). ‘Literature [then] is a fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge “reality”, but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world’ (de Man, 1986, p. 11). Not a model for ‘natural’ (unmediated) perception, literature is not a priori certain about anything but its own language and its language’s re-presentation (reconstruction and mediation) of reality. To perceive language as a modeling of some kind of natural perception would be the ‘confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism’ (de Man, 1986, p. 11), which, in other words, would be to fail to unmask ideological renderings of the real. In other words, theory illuminates the disarticulation of history from language: ‘history ... is what designates the fact that language is ... not present to itself [even though] linguistic utterances have real effects
(make history), without any relation to their meaning, their intention, their content’ (Felman, 1992a, p. 148). However, Felman interprets the theoretical, reflexive divide between language and history (the fact that language can only really know itself) as providing for an ‘ongoing, active transformation of the very act of bearing witness’ (1992a, p. 140). In other words, de Man’s silence is true to his theory on referentiality, which in turn is true to the conditions of witnessing and testimony, so long as, that is, the failures of language are universalised as testimony. As Kali Tal pithily puts it, ‘If speaking is speaking, and silence is speaking, then what possible way is there not to testify?’ (1996, p. 59). More problematically, the failures of language universalise, for Felman, not de Man, the category of victim: ‘de Man’s entire writing effort is a silent trace of the reality of the event whose very historicity, borne out by the author’s catastrophic experience, has occurred precisely as the event of the preclusion – the event of the impossibility – of its own witnessing … an event … that de Man will constantly refer to as the ever-threatening impossibility of reading’ (1992a, p. 140).

Put simply, Felman has universalised de Man’s theory on the relationship of language (or literature) to history. The limits of linguistic reference mean that language cannot really know history. The linguistic apprehension of the past will always be a fiction, and all that fiction, or literature, knows are the limits of its own language. (Any other claim is merely ideological rhetoric, as in de Man’s compromised journalistic voice.) If this is the universal condition of language, Holocaust testimony (and its interrupted, disrupted and incomplete representation of the past) is exemplary of a universal condition of language, and, paradoxically, the Holocaust, universalised, is positioned as the root of such a general linguistic condition.21 So, all literature is by nature, testimonial, and if the ‘true’ witnesses of the Holocaust are the mute and the drowned, then their silent testimony coincides with, or is, this general literary condition (of the failure of reference). That means that de Man’s silence is true to his theory of non-referentiality (it enacts that theory) and theory is a response to the impossibility of testifying to the Holocaust, which is also the general impossibility of linguistic reference. It is the theory of language that allows, according to Felman, proximity to the ‘drowned’ witness and allows a silent (secondary) testimony to emerge in his or her place. De Man’s silence about his past, as the enactment of his theory, is testimony to the Holocaust. Following the logic of Felman’s argument, de Man’s silence is evidence of his victimisation by Nazism and his position as witness.

In place of an impossibility of reading history in general and the Holocaust in particular, Schlink works towards reading the Nazi past.
(The literariness of past injustice is signaled early in *Homecoming* in Peter’s grandmother’s preference for the poetic renderings of such events (2008, p. 18), and of course in Schlink’s entwining of literature and history by way of *The Odyssey*.) It is the reading of the Holocaust, as in *The Reader*, rather than its sacralisation, by way of an engagement with the perpetrator’s perspective and with the rationalising discourses of the Enlightenment and modernity where they converge with a fascism of representation, that has, this chapter has argued, differentiated rather than confused the categories of perpetrator and victim. It is notions of unrepresentability and unreadability, as in the defence of de Man with which this chapter has concluded, that lend themselves to the universalisation of the victim category. Although Schlink’s handling of de Man’s theory is clumsy, it provides a useful opportunity to consider the ways in which Holocaust memory (of a kind) lives on in the structural traumas of language (its failures of reference). The ethical consequences of this structural trauma and its universalisation of victim status (the witnesses and victims of language) are certainly pronounced in the contexts of Holocaust-related German identity formation mapped out in Schlink’s fiction. De Baur’s protean identity is testament to his ability to evade and confuse his perpetrator status – an evasion and confusion serviced later by theories of non-referentiality, by which the representation of fascism becomes a fascism of representation.
6
Countermonumental Memory

The last chapter investigated the ways that Schlink's fiction could be positioned at a certain moment in the evolution of German cultural memory – a cultural moment that threatened to disarticulate the relation between perpetrator and victim. Schlink's fiction explores the ethics of strategically knowing and identifying with the perpetrator versus notions of the Holocaust's unrepresentability, whereas, in what follows, I argue that much theorisation of German countermonumental architecture in effect reassumes Holocaust remembrance from the victim's position regardless of the historical context of perpetration. Put differently, the work of memory done in and around the spaces of countermonumental architecture is often at the cost of the history of the monument and to what it refers.

Most of the examples of museal, memorial and monumental architecture discussed in this chapter can be found in Berlin. However, in discussing these forms, I am fully aware of the importance of the recent centrifugal movement in the scholarship of German urban memory (see Jaskot and Rosenfeld, 2008a). Indeed, questions have been raised about just how representative Berlin's memorative topography is of Germany's engagement with the Nazi past through the built environment, in turn illuminating the need for an analytical move from the centre to the periphery (Jaskot and Rosenfeld, 2008b, p. 2; Jaskot and Rosenfeld, 2008a). Since the epochal changes of 1989–90 and unification, Berlin has become something of a national showcase for urban attempts to come to terms with the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung) – indeed, some of the architectural forms that this chapter will examine find themselves in Berlin's marketed memory district – but questions remain as to whether the memorative dynamics of Germany's other cities are concordant or discordant with Berlin's attempts to come to terms
with the past (Jaskot and Rosenfeld, 2008b, p. 11; see also Ladd, 2008, pp. 295–301). The following discussion is perhaps centripetal in nature in its return, for the most part, to Berlin, but it does not focus on the built environment and the place of museal, memorial and monumental forms in the urban fabric. From the point of view of recent scholarship, the consideration of such forms in relative isolation might well be considered a problematic aspect of the recent surge in memory studies in which memory can be found everywhere and anywhere, seemingly freed from its specific contexts that determine and delimit its operations (Jaskot and Rosenfeld, 2008b, p. 4). Paul Jaskot and Gavriel Rosenfeld have identified the pervasive influence of Pierre Nora’s concept of the ‘lieu de mémoire’ as partly the source of this problem. Nora’s expansive definition of ‘lieu’ has displaced the spatial meaning of ‘site’ and supplemented it with a wide array of media, texts and forms that have become the focus and props, or ‘sites’, of cultural memory. Memory studies has followed suit, so that site no longer necessarily has the connotations of the built environment, and built environments, as opposed to the individuated forms that contour them, receive less attention as complex arenas for the operations of cultural memory (Jaskot and Rosenfeld, 2008b, p. 4). With these important concerns in mind, this chapter will attend to consonant tendencies in memory studies. This chapter does not promise to examine the architectural forms in the context of their built environment, weaving them back into their urban fabric, but rather looks critically at the theoretical discourses that such forms attract – discourses that themselves isolate these forms from wider historical contexts (including the built environment).

Such discourses are representative of proclivities found in recent trends in memory studies. Susannah Radstone’s critique of such trends is worth repeating here. Radstone has argued that memory studies has been informed by postmodern approaches to historical representation that sought to deconstruct the hierarchies that governed historical thinking in which social and the public experience is validated over the individual and private (2005, p. 140). The turn to memory is part of a broader, postmodern movement that saw the problematisation of the idea of the grand narrative, of ‘H’istory and its claims to universality, totality and objectivity, and its substitution by lived experience – the local, subjective and partial – embodied by memory (Radstone, 2000, p. 84). The turn to memory, though, has not only reinscribed a binary opposition in which memory is validated over history, but in which memory has eclipsed history altogether. The ‘inner world and its very processes has become predominant, and has been taken as “the” world’
Afterlife of Holocaust Memory (Radstone, 2005, p. 140). Under this academic regime, the memory in memory studies can become over-personalised at the expense of a wider historical context, and without historical specificity any object, discourse or practice can be taken as memory (Radstone, 2005, p. 140). Given its newfound authority, and indeed autonomy, memory seems to have a life, or agency, of its own, freed from historical context and specificity (see also Klein, 2000, p. 136).

Having noted that putatively postmodern approach to history and memory, this chapter questions certain tendencies within the theorisation of German Holocaust monumental, memorial and museal architecture. It seems that as much as such architecture is historicised in terms of its conception, inception and reception, the emphasis on how this architecture gives form to the dynamics of memory may actually undo that historical work. Put another way, the theorisation of such architecture tends to isolate the architecture itself from a wider historical context. As much as the conception, inception and reception of the form are historicised, the architecture itself, according to some theoretical regimes, is considered a reflection or materialisation of the dynamics of memory. The matter of memory enters into a curious isomorphic relation with the history and historical context from which in fact it is inextricable. Conversely, the most comprehensive explorations of memorial landscapes tend to focus on historical context over textual form. Take, for example, the innovative work of Jennifer Jordan. Jordan states that ‘New memorials are generated in part by public discussion, and often by arduous bureaucratic processes. But they tend to hide their origins in the smooth surface of the finished memorial. There is rarely any sign in the bronze, stone, or glass of the political wrangling or budgetary back-and-forth that ultimately gave rise to these memorial sites’ (2006, p. 132). Jordan’s investigation of the post-1989 topography of Berlin’s memorial terrain seeks to unearth that discursive history, but, in doing so, such an excavation buries the very forms in which memory materialises. Her innovation involves looking at ‘intersections of land use, land ownership, the resonance of the site’s meaning with a broader (often international) public, and the presence or absence of a “memorial entrepreneur”, which is to say someone willing to lobby on behalf of memorialisation. Memory thus shapes the landscapes through the day-to-day practices of memorial construction, which range from international debates about art and history to the bureaucracies of local parks departments, historic preservation offices or property registries’ (Jordan, 2006, pp. 1–2). Although Jordan makes sites of memory speak their various intersecting histories that converge on the use of the land for
memorial purposes, memorial form or aesthetics are, on the whole, not considered an integral part of this articulation. In Jordan’s study, memorial forms, otherwise mute, may be made to speak of their histories, but Jordan’s histories are mute when it comes the aestheticisation of memory. There are a few exceptions that prove the rule. The analysis of the Koppenplatz memorial to the persecution of Berlin’s Jews (its evolution from 1988 to 1996) attends briefly to its form – comprising an oversized table and two chairs, one of which is overturned – which creates a tone of the ‘haste of violence’ and is a departure from the socialist realism that prevailed before 1989 (Jordan, 2006, pp. 106–11).

Arguably, though, theoretical discourse is often anxious at the possibility that monumental, memorial and museal architecture may engage in history rather than memory, as if history contains the seeds of ‘H’istory. From ‘H’istory it is, putatively, a short step away from the totalising, authoritarian logic of the master narratives that might have rationalised or redeemed Auschwitz in the first place. In terms of architecture, ‘H’istory is equivalent to monumentality, whereas memory finds form in countermonumentality. By conceptualising countermonuments purely in terms of memory, theory seeks to avoid the taint of history: the possibility that the historicisation of the countermonument’s context (conception, inception, reception and actuality in a particular environment), and, of equal importance, of the past to which it refers, may lead to the over-determination of the countermonument’s meaning and transfiguration back into a monument and all that that would connote.

Since the 1980s countermonumental – or, to use James Young’s phrase, ‘anti-redemptive’(2000) – architecture has been considered, at least within academic theory, as the only appropriate form by which to remember the Holocaust. Over that period, German architectural memorialisation of the Holocaust has taken a countermonumental turn. Countermonuments are designed to avoid the perceived fascistic connotations of monumentalism (the imposition on the public of a monolithic version of the past). Consequently, they do not remember the victims in the final and redemptive terms of the perpetrators. Necessarily open-ended, the countermonument does not turn the absence of the Holocaust victims into a presence through their complete memorial (monumental) representation. It is not just the absence of the Holocaust victims that is conveyed by a monumental form that cannot substitute for that absence, but the rupture or wound as they were torn from the social and cultural fabric. This idea of a rupture or wound, then, describes the society without those who became its victims and the trauma of those who suffered a radical decontextualisation.
The consequent incompleteness of these monuments – their architectural articulation of the wound and their refusal to complete the representation of those they remember – creates space for the visitor's continuation of the memory work that cannot be concluded by the monument. In fact it is the traumatic structure of the architecture that is designed to provoke remembrance or at least the attempt to remember. Architecture ruptured by loss – or designed around a series of ‘voids’, in Daniel Libeskind’s terms – suggests the belated intrusion of the past (and its affectiveness) upon the present. It is the present generation, the monument’s visitors, then, who act as vicarious witnesses to what was beyond witnessing when it occurred. As such, the concept of the countermonument is correspondent with or has at least attracted the attention of academic theories of secondary or vicarious witnessing and memory, or ‘postmemory’ – the remembrance of things not witnessed. Representing the event from the perspective of those who did not witness it, the countermonument not only foregrounds the highly mediated nature of such cultural memory work, it also encourages in the visitor a highly self-reflexive relationship to the past and to the remembrance of the past.

There are problems with this conception of a countermonument in that it constructs a binary opposition between the monument and the countermonument. The binary opposition of monument versus countermonument is generated by fears of what Brett Ashley Kaplan has, with Berlin’s post-war development in mind, described as ‘aesthetic pollution’. Kaplan rightly complains that potential and actual charges of monumentality are too easily levied against Holocaust memorials, conceived or built – they too easily inform the practice of memorialisation – and that such charges of aesthetic pollution are underpinned by a universalising equation of fascism and monumentality (2007, p. 151). ‘If one succumbs to the facile argument that monumentalism is a priori fascistic, then one would have to review the monumental forms that inhabit our cityscapes; clearly not all monumental forms are specific to fascism’ (Kaplan, 2007, p. 153). Although Kaplan finds in countermonumentality much merit in terms of its ethical impulse, ‘the assumed relationship between fascist architecture and monumentality that underlies the counter-monumental movement is complicated by the [varied] history of fascist architecture’ (2007, p. 153). It cannot be denied that the Nazi regime constantly stressed the ideological significance of Nazi architecture, and architecture achieved unprecedented political significance under the regime (Kaplan, 2007, p. 154). The aestheticisation of politics, as Walter Benjamin would have it, certainly took architectural form. However, the fear of aesthetic pollution – a fear of re-inscribing the same aestheticisation
of fascist politics – has led to a universalising equation of fascism and monumentality. This universalisation effaces the specific political and historical discourses and contexts that are materialised in each post-fascist memorial form. Rather ironically, then, the fear of aesthetic pollution actually brings about something like an aestheticisation of politics, as architectural aesthetics are found to be inherently political when such a conflation of form and politics actually subsumes political and historical specificity (Kaplan, 2007, p. 156). As this chapter will argue, the theoretical insistence on architectural aesthetics’ memorative dynamic is at the very expense of its historical context and historical referent.

6.1 Peter Eisenman’s memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe

This chapter begins with a recent example of countermonumental architecture in the form of the national memorial in Berlin, the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, designed by Peter Eisenman. The memorial, which opened on 10 May 2005, is located east of the Tiergarten and on the western edge of the historic district, and between the federal district and the Potsdamer Platz business district. It consists of 2700 concrete stelae of different heights, from 1 and 1.5 to ten feet tall, contouring an undulating field. An 800 square-metre underground information centre is located in the southeast corner of the field. This underground information centre consists a series of chambers, including: the Room of Families (in which the histories, illustrated by photographs and personal documents, of 15 Jewish families, representing different social, national, cultural and religious milieus, are traced from the pre-Holocaust, through the Holocaust and to the post-Holocaust); the Room of Dimensions (representing the number of Jewish victims under Nazi occupied territory – the geographical dimensions of mass murder – accompanied by quotation from victims’ memoirs); the Room of Names (in which is projected the short biographical details known of all those murdered, and where access to fuller details is available via connection to Yad Vashem’s data base); the Room of Sites (documenting 200 locations of persecution across Europe); and the Portal (containing information about access to memorial sites in and beyond Berlin). The information centre was not part of the original design but was added because of an insistence that the site be anchored pedagogically.

As Karen Till has argued, the experience of the field changes in relation to the body that navigates it and is unable to impose memory work
(dictate a pathway) in monumental fashion (2005, p. 167). In this way, Eisenman’s architecture constitutes a Denkmal, which allows time for reflection, as opposed to a more traditional Mahnmal. In other words, Eisenman’s architecture seems, at least ostensibly, to be countermonumental in the sense discussed so far. The countermonumentality was heightened by the original design (which was co-designed by Richard Serra, who left the project in 1998). The original design featured 4000 tilted and jagged stone pillars, some up to 20-metres high, giving the impression that they might topple. The effect was supposed to be labyrinthine, which, for Eisenman, figures the ‘non-narrative, non-linear, non-anthropocentric’ (Eisenman quoted in Kaplan, 2007, p. 158): narrative without continuity, conclusion and uninhabitable.

The effect still remains with the revised and built design. The experience of the memorial has been described as disorientating, the ‘inherent instability’ of which allows ‘the visitor to take part in a dialogue’ with the past rather than experience its monumental imposition (Niven, 2002, p. 232). The site, then, is conceptually accessible and inaccessible; it cannot emplace memory and those who remember with any permanency, or so the theory goes, and its impermanence allows a dynamic and dialogic process of remembrance – in true countermonumental fashion. That the Eisenman memorial is consonant with countermonumental architecture and the theoretical discourses with which such architecture is conversant is exemplified by Mark Godfrey’s reading. Godfrey works with the idea of pollution in his attention to the actual topography of the memorial. The computer-designed, undulating surface of the memorial, in which the stelae have their foundations, is a composite of two topographies that have been layered one on top of the other. This artificial ground is, for Godfrey, ‘invented’ ground. In other words, the National Socialist ideological insistence on blood and soil has literally contaminated the ground, necessitating a topographical break with the past to prevent the memorial’s pollution. Furthermore, the grid-like pattern of the memorial’s stelae – the consistency of material, spacing and horizontal if not vertical dimensions – may suggest the instrumental rationality of the National Socialist regime, but the labyrinthine nature of the memorial, activated by walking through it, suggests the irrational effects of that regime (Godfrey, 2007, p. 247). In other words, for Godfrey, if there is something monumental and over-determined about the design that threatens to organise the visitor’s experience, it gives way to the irrational; it reveals an inner irrationality.

Yet, for Kaplan, this materialisation of place and placelessness – an aspect prominent in theoretical accounts, I would add – is not a memorial form
specific to the Holocaust but a more generally postmodernist form. As she argues, some critics have even charged it with Speerism (and therefore a putative fascist monumentalism) or, in its theoretical abstraction, with a kind of fascism of representation. This latter charge rests on the equation of postmodernism and fascism and the dehistoricising tendencies that they might share. Here then the post-Holocaust illuminates the postmodern condition, and the design was intended to evoke in the visitor the fear of placelessness (and an inability to escape the condition). That this design is not specific to the Holocaust can be seen, as Kaplan points out, in Eisenman’s previous buildings: The Nunotani Office Building (Tokyo, 1992) and Alteka Office Building (proposed for Tokyo, 1991) (Kaplan, 2007, pp. 156–9). While some critics (Kaplan) attend to the transcendence of form over content in design concept, some theorisations of this Berlin memorial demonstrate a tendency by which content gives way to form. If countermonumental architecture is conceptualised to evoke self-reflexive remembrance, then some theoretical discourses fail altogether to consider the historical context of remembrance and what is remembered. Irit Dekel sees the memorial as, idealistically, a forum for a transformative engagement (‘Auseinandersetzung’) that has individual as well as civic significance and which implodes existing systems of memorialisation (2009, p. 73). Dekel argues that it is the memorial’s inherent ambiguity – what it is not; what it does not direct or instruct the visitor to do; its refrain from imposing memorial etiquette (2009, p. 82) – that informs this transformative experience, raising, for example, questions as to whose perspective is evoked by the memorial’s form. Dekel does not prescribe the nature of the transformative experience, but engagement, whatever its nature, and from whatever perspective, validated by the democratic openness of the memorial is all that matters in this theory (2009, p. 77). (As we will see below with the Gerzes countermonument, even neo-Nazi graffiti confirms, for Dekel, the democratic nature ascribed to the form.) Visitors are engaged scopically, as the memorial terrain facilitates, in fact orientates, acts of mutual observation; the gaps between the stelae create sight lines by which visitors watch (and photograph) each other watching (and photographing) each other in their putative memorative activities. Rather than a Foucauldian, disciplinary scopic regime in which mutual observation is corrective in that visitors watch each other becoming extensions of the memorial and so internalise the memorial’s regime of memory, Dekel sees bodily immersion into an abstract terrain as opening up ‘greater set of possible encounters and simultaneities’ (2009, p. 76). The transformative potential of the site is enhanced by the fact that it is inauthentic: it is not a former site of
atrocity or Nazi persecution. The openness of the memorial is endorsed at the expense of its Jewish referent and dimensions, which for Dekel remains an open question or simply a memorial possibility (2009, p. 77). In fact, the underground information centre’s specification of that referent – as in Dekel’s chosen example of the six photos of Jews soon to be caught up in the Holocaust, representing a typology of gender, class, origin and age, and therefore the variety of Jewish life in Europe before lethal homogenisation under the category of victim – merely serves to illustrate not the past but the present moment of remembrance, and those who remember over those who ought to be remembered. The decontextualisation of the subjects of these photographs (cropped from their prior quotidian existence) mirrors, in Dekel’s argument, the decontextualising nature of the photographic activities taking place above ground on the memorial terrain. The trajectory of the tourist is one of departure from the normative and quotidian, whose removal from the everyday and recontextualisation on memorial grounds is framed by the photographic act; that removal is visually compounded by the way the image crops the subject in the photographic remains of this latter-day recontextualisation. So, the photographic exhibit of Jews does more than just image the Jewish victims in terms other than death, it provides, more importantly, an indexical trace of Jewish life that serves to illuminate and mirror the indexical trace of those who remember that life.

In fact those exhibits refer not so much to the life that was and will be lost but to the preservation and preservers of these visual artefacts (Dekel, 2009, p. 81). If the concept of the countermonument is to evoke self-reflexive acts of memory, it seems that that memorialisation is, in Dekel’s argument, auto-telic, in that the historical referent serves to refer to those who remember and the memorial culture that makes remembrance possible. The scopic activities of visitors makes memorialisation visible or legible in what I infer is the creation of new memorial topography that supersedes Eisenman’s terrain (Dekel, 2009, p. 82). As Dekel rather unknowingly puts it, ‘The Holocaust Memorial commemorates the rememberers themselves’ (2009, p. 83). Under the concept of the countermonument, then, the materiality of the monument, its historical context and what it is supposed to refer to, recedes behind the memory work performed there, creating a new, virtual topography.

As memory work carries on referring to nothing but itself, the historical implications of the monument become shrouded. Memory has subsumed history. As some critics attest, belying the memorial’s countermonumentality is its monumental implications. Caroline Wiedmer,
writing in 1999, was sceptical about the translation of the monumentality of Germany’s crime into (counter)monumental form (1999, p. 151). Till argues that the memorial overcomes its ostensible Denkmal nature to be more ‘Mahnmal, working within a monumental memorial culture of admonishment located in a highly visible public space. Its mandate that Germans show guilt and mourning reflects the culture of dismay and consternation (Betroffenheit), which are in turn defined by universal Western metaphysical categories of good and evil’ (Till, 2005, p. 187). That a national memorial explicitly refers to a wider European context signals Germany’s place in a new post-Cold War moral order (Till, 2005, pp. 21–2).10 (Indeed, as Jordan points out, debate over the memorial’s evolution in local and national political forums, public meetings and symposia, international design competitions, and newspaper articles, received both national and international attention and commentary (2006, pp. 124–5). This moral internationalism is constructed via simple binaries of good and evil, by which past ‘evils’ can be circumscribed or made good by the ‘hypervisible’ display of shame and guilt (Till, 2005, p. 202). The memorial thereby contributes to national identity by distancing the past.11 The problem, then, with ‘Hypervisible spaces’ is that they are ‘temporally flat’, which ‘renders the hauntings that accompany any representation of difference [embodied by the victims] and social injustice, and in this case of a violent national past, spatially invisible’ (Till, 2005, p. 204).12

Critical concern over the hypervisibility of this memorial tends to get locked into a binary opposition between national and the local and between the national and global. Till registers a concern that the memorial is symptomatic of the globalisation of Holocaust memory, or that its national centrality is associated with trends of a global Holocaust memory industry with its easy to consume and popular representations of the Holocaust – detracting attention away from a decentralised network of ‘authentic’ sites such as Sachsenhausen (2005, p. 22). By ‘authentic’, Till means memorial sites located where the events memorialised took place – sites of persecution and atrocity. However, despite Till’s best intentions, the logic of this argument suggests that sites of persecution and atrocity are somehow less mediated (if no less important) in their representations than the hypervisible but inauthentic site. Wiedmer’s centrifugalism implies the same logic, where she prefers Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock’s ‘Bus Stop’ proposal for the national memorial site in Berlin. It would have comprised a bus terminal built on the memorial site – where the names of victims would be inscribed and information could be found about the network of National Socialist power and
persecution – from which buses would leave regularly for sites of atrocity across of Europe. This educative plan would literally move away from the ‘self-conscious’ memorial that has ‘little to do with the actual victims’, which acts as a ‘secure container of memory’ sited in the ‘global village’ that corporate, twenty-first century Berlin has become, in which the national memorial competes with other forms of consumption, towards a more active and uncomfortable engagement with past (Wiedmer, 1999, pp. 162–4).

The idea of the hypervisible also extends to the memorial’s specific reference to Jewish victims, separates them from German perpetrators and makes it difficult to lump together all victims of World War II, National Socialism and the Holocaust, which had been a tendency of West German memory in particular. This disaggregation is at the expense of the exclusion of other victims of genocide, particularly the Roma and Sinti (Niven, 2002, p. 218). Caroline Wiedmer argues that the exclusion of reference to 500,000 Roma and Sinti, 3.2 million Soviet Prisoners of War, and countless other victims persecuted because of their political, religious and sexual identity makes sense in Israel but not in Germany (1999, p. 143; see also 1999, pp. 123–4).13 By creating a ‘meta-Holocaust victim category, Germany will continue to define Jews as Other in the nation’s contemporary society through the memorial and the culture of dismay and mourning’ (Till, 2005, p. 188). Although the memorial may appear to present an inspirational narrative of Jews overcoming their persecutors, albeit in death and through the memorialisation of them (Till, 2005, p. 188), remembering Jews becomes the very means of their re-exclusion from German society and culture – and this othering is instrumental in a series of other exclusions. The countermonumental or anti-redemptive form of the memorial may well resist the imposition of a monumental history or ‘H’istory on the visitor, because it corresponds with the vagaries of memory, but the historical context of conception, inception and reception registers a historical master narrative of exclusion. In sum, then, the self-reflexive, countermonumental form, feeding off its own anxieties about historical reference and the over-determination of the past, has given rise to a monumentally exclusive history.

6.2 Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish extension to the Berlin Museum14

Perhaps what is needed is a conception of the countermonument that does not oppose memory to history. However, theorizations of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish extension to the Berlin museum tend to reinscribe
this binary. For Young, by definition a Jewish museum in a capital city of a nation that voided itself of Jews is *unheimlich* (uncanny) (2000, p. 150). The presence of Jewish history cannot be made to feel at home (*heimlich*) given the history of the way in which it has been made absent. The Freudian idea of the *unheimlich* is a particularly pertinent way of describing Jewish-German relations because of the way in which the familiar and integrated was defamiliarised and alienated, the uncanny memory of which has returned in spite of attempts to repress it. Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish extension to the Berlin Museum, officially known as the ‘Extension to the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department’, is designed to perpetuate this sense of the *unheimlich*, without which Jewish history would be falsely naturalised (made at home) (Huyssen, 2003, p. 69). As the location of a dislocated historical presence, a revenant, Libeskind’s architecture must also seek to prevent the museum from naturalising Jewish history in another, related, way: by the ‘stabilizing function of architecture, by which the familiar is made to appear part of a naturally ordered landscape’ (Young, 2000, p. 154). Libeskind’s architecture must also house a memory that is not ‘necessarily housable at all’, that challenges its own representation. How, then, does Libeskind architecturally articulate the uncanny? ‘How to give voice to an absent Jewish culture without presuming to speak for it? How to bridge an open wound without mending it? …. [H]ow to give a void a form without filling it in?’ (Young, 2000, p. 164). How to represent the consequent ‘unmeaning and the search for meaning?’ (Young, 2000, p. 163). In other words, what does Libeskind’s extension actually look like?

The zinc-plated façade of the Jewish Museum contradicts the ochre hue of its traditional, baroque neighbour, the Berlin Museum, to which it is connected by an underground passage. The subterranean connection symbolises the way in which memories of Jews have been repressed and the way in which the relation between Jewish and Berlin history awaits its memorial excavation. The ground floor of the Jewish museum is actually below the ground level of the outside world. Turret-like windows are cut at 35 degrees across the ground-line, giving the impression that the floor slopes towards some central (symbolic) void (Young, 2000, p. 164). Upper floor windows are similarly angled making it difficult for the visitor to orientate him/herself by the geographical and historical markers of the outside world.

The extension is structured by a series of voids – most of which are inaccessible to the museum visitor but which can be viewed from the 30 bridges running across them or through the occasional window that
void opens onto them. One void is an (outside) space enclosed by a concrete tower, connected by an underground passageway but having no outside doors and only lit by one high, slanted window. However, there is one fundamental void that is disrupted by and disrupts these voids. In fact it ‘violates every space through which it passes, turning otherwise uniform rooms and halls into misshapen anomalies, some too small to hold anything, others so oblique as to estrange anything housed within them’ (Young, 2000, p. 164). This 27-metre-high, 150-metre-long void organises the building through disorganising it.

All the constituent voids that structure this building not only remember the absence of Jews but also disrupt and interrupt the exhibition of Jewish history. As Andrew Benjamin argues, while the ‘material memory’ of artefactual display is essential in its evidentiary function, the sole reliance on the artefact in the memorial process engenders a way of seeing that conflates remnants of the past and the events for which they stand, confusing evidence of a past event that happened with evidence of a particular interpretation. Moreover, that way of seeing might substitute artefactual remains for the loss for which they stand, imposing a narrative coherence on events not available to those victimised. So, such material ‘causes the process of remembering to fall apart once the detail comes to be given centrality’ (Benjamin, 1997, p. 113). The voids articulate what Libeskind describes as ‘built time’, which Benjamin describes as ‘present in the structuration of the building’ and different from the ‘historical time’ of exhibitionary chronology (Libeskind, quoted in Benjamin, 1997, p. 114): ‘Built time is the temporality proper to the building’s self-realization: i.e., its work as a building’ (Libeskind quoted in Benjamin, 1997, p. 114).

Either unusable or resisting use, voids cannot be incorporated and contained in an exhibitionary narrative as punctuation marks but rather serve as visible caesurae in what would otherwise be linear, chronological and therefore rationalising exhibitions of Jewish history. In fact, in the museum such linearity is impossible. The intention is that, when disrupted, exhibitions reveal their seams and the rhetorical way in which they re-present the past, as well as their inability to pass for the seamless presentation of the past. This deconstruction, coupled with the way in which the narratives of the exhibitions are disrupted and irrupted by the voids, would prevent exhibitionary narratives from reaching their conclusions, and the redemption of genocide through its totalising representation (Benjamin, 1997, pp. 105–6, 109–10; Huyssen, 2003, p. 69).

After Wiedmer – who draws on Dominick LaCapra’s caution that the subject-positions of those who relate to, remember and represent the
Holocaust belie the formally identical means of representation that they may use and share (LaCapra, 1996, p. 46) – we have to ask the question, for whom is the building working in its anti-redemptive mission (Wiedmer, 1999, p. 138)? As Wiedmer argues, ‘the broken line that runs down the middle of the extension, creating a corridor of open space along the length of its angular exhibit halls, symbolises the internalisation of historical disaster within a society that has exorcised from its midst an integral part of its being .... It is not then primarily the destroyed people who are referred to by the voids, but rather the loss their annihilation has left behind in the cultural and moral landscape of Germany’ (1999, pp. 128–9). Different conceptions of loss and absence meet at an architectural crux. Upon entry into Libeskind’s extension, the visitor is confronted with two intersecting corridors or axes (below ground level) from which the visitor can depart for the E.T.A. Hoffman garden, the tilting stelae of which, on slanting ground, provoke feelings of disorientation similar to Eisenman’s memorial (although more claustrophobically so). Or the visitor can depart for the Holocaust tower memorial void, or the main exhibition halls, themselves structured by voids. The departure, then, to partake in the ‘work’ of the building is anchored by a dialectic of preservation and destruction: ‘Instead of the metaphorically obstructed corridor formed by the voids that run the length of the exhibit floors above, themselves symbolizing the loss left by the destruction of the Jewish world, one finds in the basement only the metonymy of things left behind when Berlin had been declared “purified of Jews” (judenrein). The very presence of these objects, personal letters, for instance, and menorahs, recalls the destruction of Jewish life in Berlin. Without the persecution and annihilation of Jews in Germany, after all, these artefacts would still be fulfilling their normal functions in everyday life and would not have been transformed into objects suitable for display’ (Wiedmer, 1999, p. 129).

That the building might be wrapped around a ‘self-inflicted trauma’ – the architectural articulation of Germany’s wounded self rather than wounded other – suggests for Wiedmer something akin to Santner’s conception of ‘narrative fetishism’ – narrativisation of trauma in order to expunge its origins (1999, p. 131). How, though, to account for the difference between architect’s intention and cultural reception (or even appropriation)? Perhaps the answer can be found in the conception of the voids. Huyssen wonders whether ‘Libeskind’s building may ultimately not avoid the reproach of aestheticizing or monumentalizing the void architecturally’ (2003, p. 69). Similarly, Jacques Derrida voices concern that the voids might be subsumed by the very structures that
Concerns that the voids might collapse, conceptually speaking, once again point to the binary relation between the monumental and countermonumental, history and memory. For now, though, Young and Huysen buttress the voids’ resistance to institutionalisation— a resistance predicated on an eternal, interruptive displacement of the museum’s powers of reference. As Young puts it, the memory work Libeskind intends within his building is shaped by and dependent on a cultural, ‘deep memory’ that cannot be truly remembered therein (Young, 2000, p. 178). The voids’ disruption of historical reference keeps the historical referent forever at bay, which might leave the building available as an arena for historical relativism or indeterminacy. Even Libeskind argues that his design intends to ‘double everything in the museum. Everything has double meaning in Berlin’ (quoted in Young, 2000, p.179). The open-ended historical narratives structured by the museum’s spaces ‘will always contain their opposite’ meaning (Young, 2000, p. 179). Memory work evoked by this building might lead to a historicisation of its contents that negates itself or which is paralysed by relativism.

The problems lie with Libeskind’s equation of the void and trauma itself, of architectural metaphor and historical experience:

I believe that when one actually enters the space of trauma, the space of the city, the trauma cannot simply be interpreted [from the psychoanalytical perspective]. That is the difference between talking about the problem and being in it. In a literary context one can interpret trauma, one can give it a connotation, one can cope with it in different linguistic settings. Yet by walking, by looking, by touching, by feeling where one is, an interpretation cannot rid that experience of its own materiality, opacity, and thickness .... The trauma … is not understood in a psychoanalytical sense, but rather in a material sense.

(2001, p. 205)

As we have seen throughout this study, such an equation is often found in memory and trauma studies in general, and now, in particular, in readings of countermonumental architecture. For Elke Heckner, ‘Libeskind aims to capture a physical and spatial, even bodily experience of trauma instead of offering representations intended to appeal solely to the intellect …. a bodily experience intended to disrupt the visitor’s sense of well-being. It demands, in other words, that viewers partake in a traumatic affect …. [and] a distinctly material experience of trauma’
Libeskind’s voids give ‘physical form to historical trauma … [and are] the paradigmatic location of memory through which absence and historical trauma can be experienced in architecture’ (Heckner, 2008, p. 71). As Heckner points out, Libeskind’s resistance to psychoanalysis is a resistance to the interpretation and narrativisation of trauma (2008, pp. 71, 75). As Libeskind suggests, the void and artefactual display share a paradoxical, tense co-presence in that the void allows access to what cannot be displayed artefactually:

The need in architecture to respond to questions of culture, of public space, of the void, is very palpable since in architecture the void is a space. It is a place of being and nonbeing. It is a place where one can hardly find traces of a relationship. And yet, it is something which has been recorded and presented in light, matter, and documents. One can have access to it through names, addresses, through a kind of haunting quality of spaces through which the passage of absence took place.

(2001, p. 204)

As Heckner adds, ‘His architectural language … moves between rendering visible traces of a historical trauma and moving beyond the visible by retaining a notion of the unrepresentable, signified through the spaces of the void’ (2008, p. 74).

There are significant problems with both the architect’s and the critic’s conception of the void. Heckner takes care to avoid a conception of the void that installs an over-identification of secondary witness with primary witness of trauma. The spatialisation of trauma in Libeskind’s architecture allows Heckner to conceive of an externalisation rather than internalisation of traumatic experience – a dynamic that is abstract, non-prescriptive and future-orientated (2008, pp. 75, 77). This makes better sense in relation to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. For Hirsch, postmemorial empathy focuses on an encounter with an individual witness or series or community of witnesses via the textual traces of that life or those lives. The individuation of memory work in this manner opens up the possibility for the internalisation of the other – the colonisation of identities by those who would remember them – even though postmemory in theory offers critical distance in terms of a ‘conscious’ working through as opposed to an ‘unconscious’ acting out of the belated and inherited trauma of the witness. In Libeskind’s building, ‘the victim is no longer graspable as an individual … individual identities disappear, leaving traces of
their former identities at best’. In Libeskind’s ‘spaces of annihilation’, the ‘question of identification is oddly suspended’. Although trauma in the void can be experienced individually, it ‘does not arise as that of an individual trauma (Heckner, 2008, pp. 70, 77). The suspension of identification is indeed odd, as those who occupy Libeskind’s voids will of course fill it with their identities, which Heckner assumes will be left at the door along with any notions of postmemory, which she believes is distinct from the kind of trauma that resonates in the void. Not only are the identities of those who remember suspended from this theory – no theory can prescribe or predict them, but the question of identity must be factored in – the German-Jewish context of memorialisation that frames Heckner’s discussion is suspended once her theories fill Libeskind’s spaces. In short, traumatised memory work in these spaces seems oddly unmediated. This lack of mediation is not helped by Libeskind’s equation of void and trauma, of the void as a kind of holding tank for a trauma both unrepresentable and unsullied by representation. The evacuation of Libeskind’s voids of their powers of historical reference, as this chapter has argued above, has led to a realm of ambiguous and relativised memory in which the historical referent of Jewish suffering is all too replaceable by a sense of the sublime, the German suffering of Jewish loss, or individual appropriations of Jewish memory and identity (the very thing attributed to Hirsch’s but not Libeskind’s concepts of memory).

Wiedmer argues that Libeskind’s suspension of historical representation and reference can be explained by his desire to create a kind of negative and parallel historicism that delivers a ‘silent master narrative of loss, which tinges very aspect of Jewish-German relations with its teleology of destruction, dissolution, and disintegration, even as the history being narrated around the voids [via exhibitionary display] speaks of situations in which a successful integration might still have been possible’ (1999, p. 131). So, a history of Jewish- and non-Jewish-German integration, and the potential of Jewish life not lived, is foreshadowed by the disintegration to come, but this alternative sense of history that produces a master narrative, in that it totalises absence, in that it totally disrupts the narrative of Jewish-German history, also pre-empts the proclivities of other totalising modes of German historiography. As Wiedmer points out, Libeskind’s building was designed two years after the Historians’ Debate (see Chapter Four) in which the history of the Holocaust was either relativised by reference to Soviet totalitarianism, rationalised from the soldier’s perspective of fighting on the Eastern Front or circumnavigated by attention paid to local, German wartime
experience of everyday life (a normative Germany that excluded Jewish experience). Future redemptive histories of the Holocaust and war-time Germany are pre-empted by Libeskind’s generation of a parallel, historiographical plane of non-reference, the voiding of history and utter negation of Jewish-German history to avoid its appropriation (Wiedmer, 1999, p. 132). What is at stake in the concept of the void is still Germany’s wound (or loss of victims) and the self-reflexive attempt to hold that wound open.

Where Wiedmer’s scrutiny of Libeskind’s intentions and design concludes with something of an impasse, with his architecture still in the hands of a wounded Germany mourning itself (1999, p. 139), this chapter argues that Libeskind’s design might be rethought another way so as to stabilise, indeed to introduce, the historical referent – a rethinking that might apply to the anti-redemptive arts of memory in general in terms of the inextricability of the redemptive and the anti-redemptive. In fact, Andrew Benjamin argues that the museum’s voids are held in place by the possibility (but not certainty) of a redemptive history. According to Benjamin’s reading, the void could not take shape if its meanings were relative. What is more, it is only through a continuous sense of history (a kind of strategic master narrative), as opposed to absolute discontinuity, that the void can be made visible and tangible. The void’s interruption of this continuity ‘will become that act by which the nature of the dislocated will come to be revealed and the necessity of continuity to hold the present open will have emerged .... As open, as held open the present endures as inherently incomplete’ (A. Benjamin, 1997). This is the disruption and deferral of redemption, not its impossibility, which is different from Young’s sense of anti-redemptive architecture representing the ‘breach itself, the ongoing need for tikkun ha’olam (mending the world) and its impossibility’ (2000, p. 182). Therefore, the ‘essential homelessness’ of Holocaust memory – a homelessness, for example, maintained by Libeskind’s uncanny architecture – points to a ‘futural being-at-home’, and the redemptive within the antiredemptive (A. Benjamin, 1997, p. 95).

Under the auspices of this revised concept of countermonumental architecture, Libeskind admits the monumental within the counter-monumental, the redemptive within the anti-redemptive, history within memory, and that history does not necessarily lead to ‘H’istory. As Kaplan would put it, ‘There are no inherently guilty aesthetic forms’ (2007, p. 163). ‘Therefore commemorative sites should maintain their pedagogical aims over and above fears of aesthetic pollution’ (Kaplan, 2007, p. 164).
6.3 Jochen and Esther Shalev Gerz, ‘Monument against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights’

Jochen and Esther Shalev Gerz’s ‘Monument against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights’ is often regarded in academic discourse as the seminal countermonument. In a shopping centre of Harburg (a working class and guest-worker suburb of Hamburg), the Gerzes built a self-effacing monument. It was unveiled on 10 October 1986 as a 12-metre high, one-metre square, pillar, covered with a layer of soft lead. An inscription near its base reads in German, French, English, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish:

We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-meter tall lead column, it will be gradually lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.

(quoted in Young, 2000, p. 130)

Using steel-pointed styli attached to the monument, visitors made their own inscriptions. One-and-half metres at a time, the monument was lowered into a chamber beneath it (as deep as the monument was high). On 10 November 1993, lowered for the eighth time, the monument disappeared (except for its top surface now at ground level), and the burden of memory was, hopefully, fully divested to those who visited and will visit the site. As Jochen Gerz puts it, ‘we will one day reach the point of where anti-Fascist memorials will no longer be necessary, when vigilance will be kept alive by the invisible pictures of resemblance’ (quoted in Young, 2000, p. 134). As Young adds, “Invisible pictures”, in this case, would correspond to our internalised images of the memorial itself, now locked into the mind’s eye as a source of perpetual memory. All that remains, then, is the memory of the monument, an after-image projected onto the landscape by the rememberer. The best monument, in Gerz’s view, may be no monument at all, but only the memory of an absent monument’ (Young, 2000, p. 134).

The monument was conceived in opposition to a perceived association of monumentality and fascism, or rather fascism’s exploitation of monumentality. In other words, the fascistic counterpart imposes a version of
the past on its visitors: it is the materialisation of a master narrative
(‘H’istory). The invited interaction between spectator and the Gerzes’
monument encourages memory work that would have been discour-
gaged under its projected fascistic counterpart. As Jochen Gerz put it:
‘The point is finding the form in which to publicise something, a form
that isn’t denunciative, that exerts only the slightest pressure, that doesn’t
point any fingers at anyone, but instead – by removing and withdraw-
ing all the means of pressure you have – brings what has been repressed
to light in the midst of the square’ (quoted in Lupu, 2003, p. 137).
Visitors to the monument literally author its meaning, and this meaning
changed over time with each new inscription and lowering, reflecting
the impermanent and ever-changing nature of memory itself. ‘In its
conceptual self-destruction, the counter-monument refers not only to
its physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning
and memory – especially that embodied in a form that insists on its
eternal fixity’ (Young, 2000, p. 48).
In a critique of the Gerzes’ own conception of their monument and
of academic theorizations of the countermonument correspondent with
that conception – namely Young’s – Noam Lupu has argued that the
monument’s conceptualisation pays too much attention the monu-
ment’s intended concept and not enough to the political and social
history of its inception and reception that ultimately determines its
meaning. This history is drawn from local opinion recorded in the
local media and from the discourse of local politics. Lupu concludes
from this local history that the Gerzes’ monument was received as a
monumental imposition, particularly as it attracted graffiti and other
inscriptions from across the political spectrum, including neo-Nazism
(2003, pp. 132, 136). The local constituency regarded it as an object
of disgrace (Schandsäule) and felt themselves to be the victims of an
officially imposed Holocaust memory (Lupu, 2003, p. 141) or, given
the appearance of neo-Nazi graffiti, victims of (the legacy of) National
Socialism itself.
Lupu also argues that the concept of countermonumentality is
predicated upon a ‘dialectic of presence/absence’ (Lupu, 2003, p. 143),
which means that the countermonument becomes ‘no more than an
attenuation of the monument’.17 Even though the countermonument is
designed to divest its authority, its collection of memories reverses that
flow of authority. Individual memories contributed to a collective form
are subsumed by the concept of the countermonument, which in turn
becomes a ‘metanarrative’ that makes collected memories ‘malleable’. The disappearance of the monument does not mark the disappearance
of its authority but rather a moment of ‘finality’ by which the process of memorialisation reaches its conclusion, its constituent memories archived and contained, and this master narrative of the past cloaked by an act of disappearance. Ultimately, then, the Gerzes’ monument fails to deconstruct its own presence – a presence upon which absence was always dependent (Lupu, 2003, pp. 143, 142, 140, 150). In fact, what is supposed to be absent is still partially visible. Below the base, which is raised above ground level, a small window looks onto the underground shaft. Adjacent to the window is a series of photographs of the column’s sinking and a descriptive tablet. Put differently, the concept of the countermonument subsumes its historical presence – its historical context – and the subsumption is reinforced by various theorisations of such architecture. This subsumption is typical of tendencies in memory studies about which Radstone has complained. The emphasis on absence is an engagement with an over-personalised sense of memory in which the countermonument is deemed to be a reflection of the individual’s remembrance of the totalitarian past. In this theoretical tendency, memory is perceived as the only mediating force that reconstructs the past, and the monument is a direct reflection of that sole mediation. What is missing, Radstone would argue, is attention to ‘the processes of articulation through which past happenings and their meanings are discursively produced, transmitted and mediated’. Theories of memory must attend to the ‘mediation of the already-mediated memory discourses, images, texts and representations by the institutions and discourses of the wider public sphere – institutions and discourses that may not be specifically “memorial” themselves, but through which memory may be articulated’ (Radstone, 2005, p. 137). The phenomenological approach to the conception of the countermonument has conflated the monument with the very processes of personal memory, without reference to a wider, German public sphere.

With Radstone’s critique in mind, how should the concept of the countermonument accommodate neo-Nazi graffiti in relationship to the wider public sphere of German memorialisation? Young suggests that, in the first instance, such inscriptions remind the monument’s constituency of a collective liability: ‘How better to remember what happened than by the Nazi’s own sign? … As a social mirror, it became doubly troubling in that it reminded the community of what happened then and, even worse, how they responded now to the memory of this past’ (2000, pp. 138, 139). More important from Young’s perspective (and that of the Gerzes) is the fact that the graffiti, because it is a sign of living cultural memory, actually validates the monument and is in
Despite the monument's intentions, the juxtaposition of neo-Nazi graffiti effectively eradicates memory work at the monument's site (2007, pp. 161–2). If the monument reflects identifications with both perpetrators and victims, how should memorialisation position the two sets of memories in relation to each other?

Something akin to Gillian Rose's theories of Holocaust representation is needed to firmly anchor the victim-referent. If we recall, Rose's critique of postmodern, post-Holocaust philosophy centres on postmodernism's delegitimisation of Holocaust narrative, as if all representation is contaminated by the violent logic of the master narratives of modernity that rationalised Auschwitz. For Rose, the argument for the 'overcoming of representation, in its aesthetic, philosophical and political versions, converges with the inner tendency of Fascism itself' (1996, p. 41). For example, placing Jews beyond representation surely echoes Nazism's abstraction of Jewish identity. For Rose, a strategic identification with the perpetrator's perspective – engendering knowledge of where that perspective begins and ends – affords the necessary self-reflexiveness to prevent an unwitting slippage from the representation of fascism into a fascism of representation (1996, p. 41). Rose advocates that memorial sites should be reconfigured to provoke in their visitors such identification so that the memorial apparatus and topography does not facilitate and normalise the remembrance of the victims by the very terms of the perpetrators (1994, pp. 34–6). Would it not be possible to re-conceptualise the Gerzes' monument along similar lines? Thought of in this context, neo-Nazi graffiti is not simply a valid expression of living cultural memory in its own right; it is a perspective that must be negotiated in order to remember (and stabilise the monument's referent of) the Holocaust's victims.

6.4 Conclusion: Loss/absence

It seems that under certain theoretical regimes – those that position history in opposition to memory – countermonumental architecture, in its self-disruption, is only capable of pursuing the absences that structure it (its voids, evacuated spaces and labyrinths) rather than the historical losses it is supposed to memorialise. As this chapter has argued, such
theoretical regimes engender the paralysis of historical relativism or indeterminacy, which means that such architecture can only evoke or give shape to endless mourning or melancholy. The logic of this melancholy can be disturbing. As LaCapra argues, when historical representation pursues structural absence rather than historically specific losses – the pursuit of structural trauma rather than historical trauma – the endless melancholy that results can turn the Holocaust into a sublime object before which all those who attempt to remember become victims in the throes of a structural trauma and gripped by melancholy (2001, pp. 46, 48, 59, 64–5, 77).20 This is an over-extension of the victim category, which in a German context can be exculpatory (see also LaCapra, 2001, p. 50).

When absence is mistaken for loss then absence is transformed into (the illusion of) something historically, tangibly lost. For LaCapra, this concretisation of absence parallels the anti-Semitic idea of lost origins that were never there in the first place but which were thought to be recoverable. So, for example, notions of Volksgemeinschaft projected an idealised community in which a lost purity could be restored via the anti-Semitic identification and removal of pollutants (LaCapra, 2001, p. 51). Holocaust remembrance risks paralleling the sacrificial logic of anti-Semitism, turning the victims remembered into a sacrificial object in the restoration of a national identity.21 Critics of Eisenman’s memorial have noted such a sacrificial scenario. The opposition of history to memory, which essentialises both, needs to be deconstructed in order to differentiate loss and absence. As Rose argues, history is not inherently totalising, no matter how hard it tries to be, but aporetic. Similar in nature, memory reveals the discontinuities in history without undermining its referential impulses. It is better, then, to think of memory and history as mutually constitutive. As this chapter has suggested, perhaps countermonumental architecture could be reconceptualised along these lines. Architectural absence must be negotiated in the pursuit of specific historical loss, which means that such architecture does not perpetually feed off its own absences.
Photography and Memory in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The theories of countermonumental architecture critiqued in the last chapter can be related to tendencies of memory and trauma studies that extend well beyond the German monumental landscape. The ascription of agency to architecture in particular and memory texts in general, the implication that such texts are inherently traumatic or that they have the capacity to witness the past has been found elsewhere, by the present study, in the theory and practice of cultural memory. The German national context of countermonumental architecture highlights the ethical implications when texts are said to displace the original witnesses or create new ones in their place to trauma of the texts’ own making. In the process of theorising these possibilities, what such theoretical discourse often fails to do is to dismantle problematic national narratives. In shifting the cultural terrain from Germany to the US, the following finds a similar tendency. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) has attracted criticism for its Americanisation or nationalisation of Holocaust memory, which subsumes the experiences and identities of the Holocaust’s victims in the construction of an American identity in relation to the past. However, museums can be read against the grain, their affective exhibits used to un-ground their intended meanings. Such a reading will be rehearsed in order to explore the ways in which it is, potentially, as appropriative as the nationalist exhibitionary narrative it seeks to counter. This chapter, then, focuses on the theoretical discourses that the USHMM has attracted as much as it does on the museum’s exhibition itself, and seeks to intervene in how the USHMM might be read in particular and how national Holocaust museums might be read in general.
7.1 Introduction: The critical consensus

The USHMM, which opened its doors to the public in April 1993, has drawn academic criticism on the grounds that it effaces the particularity of the Jewish majority who were subject to genocide. Jewish particularity is subsumed by the Americanisation of Holocaust memory. Americanisation is orchestrated by the dynamics of the museum’s exhibition and memorial spaces; and the evolution of Holocaust memory in America has reached nationalist conclusions in the conceptualisation and realisation of the museum itself. As such critiques have it, the permanent exhibition of the USHMM displays an idealised and liberal American national identity that is the antithesis of a past, aberrant German nationalism. The idea of the nation state is redeemed, antithetically, in an American form, by the exhibition’s emphasis on the US's role as liberator of camps in west Germany and as place of refuge for (a limited number of) those who survived the camps. American national identity is exhibited at the expense of the Jewish identity of those who died, survived and found refuge. In its display of an idealised and liberal American identity, the memories and identities of Holocaust survivors are subsumed, appropriated and obfuscated. Jewish identity is, according to this critique, exhibited as a thing of the past, dead or dying. It only emerges from the exhibition in an American guise. In other words, Jews and other victims are exhibited only in death or through a total identification with the nation state that rescued them. Difference (cultural and social), embodied by victims, is a thing of the past and not the present, in what is in effect the exhibitionary projection of a homogenised citizenship (Crysler and Kusno, 1997, pp. 52–64).1

The nationalisation of Holocaust memory that takes place in and through the national museum, as critiqued above, is consonant with a wider process of the Americanisation of Holocaust memory that has contoured the evolving landscape of American cultural memory, up to and after the USHMM opened its doors. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace in a comprehensive way this history of the Americanisation of Holocaust memory.2 It might be more opportune to problematise the very concept itself. As Flanzbaum (1999a) notes, the meanings of Americanisation are actually myriad. Still, as an ‘artefact’ in American cultural memory, but used in many different ways, ‘the Holocaust’ demands non-homogenising interpretation (Flanzbaum, 1999a, p. 8). The problem is that some histories of Americanisation ultimately veer towards homogenisation. Peter Novick (2001) has offered the most complete attempt at tracing the nationalisation of Holocaust memory. While the first part of his history offers a precise and analytical map of the evolution of Jewish American
Holocaust memory in relation to national and international contexts, and its political stakes, when Novick’s history moves across religious, cultural and ethnic lines to consider transcultural Holocaust remembrance, his history risks reduction. Novick’s critique of the ubiquitous use and abuse of ‘the Holocaust’ in competitive claims of victimisation as the basis of identity politics, as a generalised yardstick to measure the (im)morality of the nation and as an analogous means of gaining cultural and political recognition for unrelated issues is well-placed and well-received (2001, pp. 208–63). Nonetheless these are still acts of memory, although qualitatively different from each other and the acts of memory discussed elsewhere in the present study. It seems, though, as if all acts of memory are judged according to the same criteria:

Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes. Historical consciousness, by its nature, focuses on the historicity of events – they took place then and not now, that they grew out of circumstances different from those that now obtain. Memory, by contrast, has no sense of the passage of time, it denies the ‘pastness’ of its objects and insists on their continuing presence. Typically a collective memory, at least a significant collective memory, is understood to express some eternal or essential truth, and, along with it, an eternal identity, for the members of its group.

(Novick, 2001, p. 4)

Despite his invocation of Halbwachs’s social framing of memory, Novick’s hypostatising of memory seems at odds with the very evidence he supplies of the changing meaning of the Holocaust in American culture. His opposition of memory to history suggests that memory plays no role in the constitution of history and vice versa. As emptied out myth, all (non-Jewish) Holocaust memory in America is deemed inconsequential:

collective memory, when it is consequential, when it is worthy of the name, is characteristically an arena of political contestation in which competing narratives about central symbols in the collective past, and the collectivity’s relationship to that past, are disputed and negotiated in the interest of redefining the collective present. In the United States, memory of the Holocaust is so banal, so inconsequential, not memory at all, precisely because it so uncontroversial, so unrelated to real divisions in American society, so apolitical.

In any case, American gentiles have for the most part been consumers, not producers, of talk of the Holocaust. Indeed the entry of the Holocaust
into the American cultural arena has been largely a byproduct, or spill over effect, of its becoming important to how American Jews understand and represent themselves. Short of some repudiation of the Holocaust as an honorary American memory – of which there seems not the slightest prospect – American gentiles aren’t called upon to make choices concerning Holocaust memory, except perhaps to consider whether they have allowed it to displace more disturbing ones, closer to home.


The shifts in Novick’s conclusion are odd in that a politics of memory is both presented and absented in his argument. For American Jews there is a politics of representation, for gentiles there is not – even though Novick admits that reference to the Holocaust may screen out other memories closer to home. Surely such a screening does constitute a politics of representation, albeit implicit rather than explicit? Such a displacement seems to displace the evidence Novick provides as to the social impact of tense relations between African American and Jewish American communities over competitive claims to historical victimisation. What is more, despite a cautious definition of Jewish American identity that resists essentialisation in favour of contingency and cultural location, the dividing lines between Jewish and non-Jewish identity and memory have been strictly redrawn where in fact the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in American culture suggests at least some common ground of memory (Novick, 2001, pp. 7–11). The claim of inconsequence also seems to ignore the very real materialisation of ‘American’ (Jewish and non-Jewish) memory in the form of the USHMM, to which Novick returns again and again to illustrate the trends he discerns in collective memories of the Holocaust. Having problematised conceptions of the Americanisation of Holocaust memory as vacuous, the following argument, mindful of the problems of homogenising that process, will suggest correspondences between the museum and wider patterns of American Holocaust memory.

Under the USHMM’s exhibitionary regime critiqued by Abidin Kusno and Greig Crysler all that survives of Jewishness are the artefacts of a past life, the salvage and exhibition of which are predicated upon the extinction of that life. The nationalist narrative ends of the permanent exhibition, then, display an unfortunate, unwitting and ironic parallel with Nazi museology, as in the Nazi Central Museum in Prague, which was intended to be all that remained of Jewish civilisation. As Andrea Liss puts it:

The Nazis’ Central Jewish Museum in Prague was staged precisely on celebrating the remnants of extermination, on what they willed to be
the past. Their institutionalised acts of genocide were to be knowingly and coyly muted beneath the elegant display of confiscated Jewish ceremonial and domestic artefacts as precious objects – an obscene ethnographic aesthetic based on the dialectic of extermination/preservation, in which one could not exist without the other.

(1998, p. 79)3

The Prague museum was not intended to display the machinery of genocide; the ‘mass death of a people would be covered over by the fatal and silent neutrality of its own artefacts’ (Liss, 1998, p. 79). Not only is this a suppression of the history of genocide but the means by which the Nazis distanced themselves from the act of remembering Jews through a reliance on ‘what they [Nazis] made into precious remnants to do their own indecent historicising’ (Liss, 1998, p. 79).4

So, in its screening effects, the USHMM suggests unfortunate and ironic parallels with its counterpart in Prague, at least according to critics who argue that the Americanisation of Holocaust memory, in the form of the museum itself, positions the Holocaust as a foundational trauma for the US, which displaces foundational, indigenous historical traumas, namely slavery and the genocide committed against Native Americans. Via the Holocaust America can remember its liberalism and tolerance but forget its past intolerance (Patraka, 1996, pp. 89–107; Edkins, 2003, pp. 155, 162). American Holocaust museums such as the USHMM allow for indigenous genocidal practices to be evacuated under the trope of European genocide, sustaining the fictions of American democratic discourses, nationhood and national community (Patraka, 1996, p. 98). In short, genocide is something that happens elsewhere. (Ironically, the USHMM exhibits the racialisation of the Jews under Nazi policy and ideology, the pseudo-science of which recalls America’s own eugenics programme – itself informed by American slavery – and implication in practices that were later pushed to an extreme in Nazi Germany and which were a legacy of the discourses that rationalised slavery.5)

7.2 Reading museums against the grain

While museums such as the USHMM have been charged with the instrumentalisation and degradation of Jewish identity, Holocaust studies has also deployed theories of performance by which Holocaust museums can be read against the grain, the rhetoric of exhibitions deconstructed and interventions made in the cultural memories shaped by the museum.
In other words, museums can be appropriated as spaces for the work of memory that counters the museum’s intentions and exceeds the museum’s role as state apparatus. (Such theories have applications beyond the USHMM and may be used to intervene in other nationalist, Holocaust museums.) The theorisation of such performance, at least in this genre of the museum, owes much to James Young’s seminal study of Holocaust museums, memorials and monuments.6 Young reminds us that

[1]ike other representations of events, the exhibitions at Holocaust museums can be approached as aesthetic, artistic creations. They juxtapose, narrate, and remember events according to the taste of their curators, the political needs and interests of their community, the temper of their time. Even those museums where the artefact is treated as holy object necessarily display collections in ways that suggest meaning and coherence. The order in which we view, for example, a rusty spoon, a political pamphlet, a yellow star emplots these objects in a narrative matrix.

(1993, p. vii)

Artefacts may appear as the very embodiment of the past itself, such is the sacredness with which they are imbued by curator and visitor alike, but museum studies must ‘address the physical and metaphysical qualities of these memorial texts, their tactile and temporal dimensions: ... the texture of memory’ (Young, 1993, p. vii). The meaning of an artefact is determined not only by its placement or emplotment in a narrative matrix, but also conferred by the museum visitor. In other words, the contextual contingencies of curatorial intention and narrativisation and of the visitor inform the meaning of artefacts and the exhibitions they constitute. The museum may display artefacts as the past itself (effacing their textuality) in a rhetorical sleight of hand that conflates evidence of the occurrence of an event with evidence that it happened in a particular way, thus naturalising the museum’s interpretation of the past. It is the visitor’s gaze, however, that might reinterpret artefactual meaning, loosening artefacts from their exhibitionary anchor and metaphysics of presence.

While Young focuses on the emplotment of artefacts and the role of the visitor to complete their meaning, Andreas Huyssen illuminates the visual field in which the visitor re-reads the museum’s narrative. Huyssen sees postmodern culture as inheriting modernism’s paradoxical dependence on the museum. The perceived acceleration of culture
under modernity meant the museum’s role became one of salvage and preservation of the cultural objects that modernisation left behind as obsolete. In the case of the post-Holocaust postmodern, the idea of obsolescence in the face of modernity’s extremes has murderous connotations and the task of salvaging a history and culture in the aftermath of genocide gains more urgency. This salvage operation cannot preserve the past as it was but will inevitably interpret it in light of present-day discourses and their desires. Foregrounded as open to interpretation, the inherent textuality of the remains of the past can be realised and an interpretative space opened up around such objects. No matter how ‘mediated and contaminated in the eye of the beholder’, such objects potentially have ‘a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory’ (Huyssen, 1995, p. 15).

For Huyssen it is the auratic nature of the artefact that makes it a potential prop in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic memory work. Such ‘relics’ can never be presented ‘without mediation, without mise-en-scène’ because they ‘have always been pulled into the present via that gaze that hit them’ (Huyssen, 1995, p. 33). So, ‘the seduction, the secret they may hold is never only on the side of the object in some state of purity, as it were; it is always intensely located on the side of the viewer and the present as well. It is the live gaze that endows the object with its aura’ (Huyssen, 1995, p. 33). The endowment of aura is dependent on ‘the object’s materiality and opaqueness’:

Objects that have lasted through the ages are by that very virtue located outside of the destructive circulation of commodities destined for the garbage heap. The older an object, the more presence it can command, the more distinct it is from current-and-soon-to-be-obsolete as well as recent-and-already-obsolete objects. That alone may be enough to lend them an aura, to reenchant them beyond any instrumental functions they may have had at an earlier time. It may be precisely the isolation of the object from its genealogical context that permits the experience via the museal glance of reenchantment. Clearly, such longing for the authentic is a form of fetishism ... The museum fetish itself transcends exchange value. It seems to carry with it something like an anamnestic dimension, a kind of memory value.

(Huyssen, 1995, p. 33)

On the one hand, the materiality of the artefact, registering its transcendence of time and space and survival to the present moment of
exhibition, acts as a ‘guarantee against simulation’, provoking the viewer to perceive it as the unmediated objectification of the past itself. On the other hand, it can ‘never entirely escape the orbit of simulation and is even enhanced by the simulation of the spectacular mise-en-scène’ (Huyssen, 1995, pp. 33–4). Under the gaze of the museum visitor, the materiality of the artefact resonates with the aura of the past for which the (fetishised) object now stands. Yet that materiality, despite its enchantment, also suggests opacity, illegibility – a hieroglyph. The overall effect on the museum visitor is to provoke and then frustrate his or her historicisation of the artefact. The exhibition provokes memory work that can never fully realise the museum’s intentions and naturalise its version of the past. The museal narrative, rendered incomplete by the exhibition and visual reception of its artefacts, is still enchanting and enchanted, its artefacts provocative enough to evidence an intervention in the cultural memory housed by the museum that potentially allows the remembrance of what the museum forgets. For example, as Huyssen might argue in the case of the USHMM, the flickering aura of the artefact affords a glimpse (or remembrance) of the identities effaced by that museum (1995, p. 34).

7.3 Postmemory

The affectiveness of the auratic artefact, which can never precede or exceed the subjective process of that relic’s reenchantment, has informed a more recent theory of memory work that can be brought to bear on Holocaust museums: postmemory. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’ typically describes ‘the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right’ (2001, p. 9). Having defined the concept of postmemory in terms of ‘familial inheritance’, Hirsch has broadened its application to a more general, cultural inheritance that can transcend ethnic or national boundaries (2001, pp. 9–10). Postmemory therefore is ‘defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by an unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after. […] Postmemory would thus be retrospective witnessing by adoption. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story (Hirsch, 2001, p. 10). It is
the belated nature of traumatic memory that fuels its transmission and adoption. If the traumatic nature of the event defies its own witnessing, cognition and remembrance, then, for Hirsch, it makes sense that the next generation is in a position to work through traumatic experience and its symptoms, narratives and images bequeathed but not fully remembered or known by the previous one (Hirsch, 2001, p. 12). 8

The concept of postmemory usefully theorises the ways that countermemories could be performed in Holocaust museums, the USHMM in particular. Hirsch privileges photographs (in private and public places) as the affective prop by which traumatic memory is transmitted across generations (within and outside of family boundaries) (2001, pp. 5–37; 1997, p. 23). So, it is secondary or vicarious witnessing of trauma in the museum, via photographic artefacts, that might restore the particularities of Jewish memory (and identity) where they had been erased by a forgetful and nationalist narrative. The question remains as to whether vicarious witnessing – ‘seeing through another’s eyes, of remembering through another’s memories’ (2001, p. 10) – might collapse into seeing through one’s own eyes and remembering one’s own memories. Hirsch argues that ‘These lines of relation and identification need to be theorised more closely’ to see how ‘identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the difference between self and other, the otherness of the other’ (2001, p. 11). Before taking up Hirsch’s concern, which is after all the purpose of this chapter, let’s see how the performance of countermemory, around affective artefacts, might be theorised on the grounds laid by Young, Huyssen and Hirsch in particular and with reference to the example of perhaps one of the most disruptive and disrupted spaces in the permanent exhibition of the USHMM, The Tower of Faces.

7.4 The Tower of Faces

The Tower of Faces is a collection of photographs (taken between 1890 and 1941) of the residents of a 900-year-old shtetl, Ejszyszki (Eišiškės in Lithuanian; Eyshyshok in Yiddish), near Vilna, in what is now Lithuania. It is three stories high and consists of 1032 photographic images of the former residents, taken between 1890 and 1941. (The Jewish community in Ejszyszki numbered about 3500 by 1939). This space is 54-foot-high, 16-foot-by-28-foot and sky-lit from above. The images are mounted on a frame on the interior walls of the tower (from the third to the fifth floor) angling slightly inwards. The shtetl was liquidated by Einsatzgruppen
or mobile killing squads, 25–26 September 1941, and the majority of its inhabitants slaughtered. The photographs were collected and the exhibit curated by Yaffa Eliach, a survivor of the massacre.9

Rather than house these images in an easily accessible alcove, which would have been made them easier to peruse, or indeed to exclude from the visitor's pathway through the museum, the exhibition designers made access more complicated (Liss, 1998, p. 27). The visitor walks through the tower each time s/he descends to the next level of a historical narrative of genocide, via translucent glass bridges accessed from the third and fourth floors. Eliach has presented a Jewish community in terms other than death. Her organisation of the photographs suggests an organic community; for example, she deliberately did not put photographs together of families who had a history of feuding.

The tower is actually housed in one of six watchtower-like structures that constitute part of the museum building. The watchtower suggests the fate of the community, particularly as this structure also resembles and might also symbolise a chimney (as Liss (1998, p. 27) also points out). The historical representation of a pre-Holocaust organic community is disrupted by its spatial organisation (watchtower and chimney), which in turn is disrupted by an organic representation, and so on. These interlocking narratives, each with its own time scheme, in effect circulate around their object of representation (Jews in life and death) but fail, because disrupted, to complete themselves in any linear and chronological sense. This matrix of narratives/temporalities circulates around an absence that cannot be filled through the act of representation.

Invoking Michel de Certeau's concept of ‘spaces’ and ‘places’, Vivian Patraka argues the tower to be spatial in contradistinction to ‘place’. A ‘place … excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the “proper” rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines’ (Certeau, 1988, p. 117). This concept of ‘place’ describes those areas in the USHMM exhibition in which artefacts are deemed or presented as transcendent – as direct extensions of past events and not open to interpretation – underpinning exclusive nationalist narratives and memories. A “space” on the other hand is composed of intersections of mobile elements …. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualisation …. In the contradistinction to place, it has none of the univocity or stability of a “proper” …. In short, space is practised place’ (Certeau, 1988, p. 117). As Certeau might have it, the singular and determinate meanings of emplaced artefacts are translated by the
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act of visitor performance into multiple spatial meanings (1988, p. 117). As Patraka adds, ‘in practice even the sites of artefacts whose meaning is intended to be self-evident can become spaces, instead of places, changed by paths visitors themselves create as historical subjects’ (1996, p. 94). For Patraka, the Tower is inherently spatial, and not ‘narrativised in advance [or] soliciting us to perform the script that is organised for and given to us … the place of performance is more likely to be rigid, more about the spectacular or the quest for the Real’ (1996, p. 100).

It is the impossibility of the quest for the Real in the Tower that allows or compels a performative intervention; or rather, it is the failure of that performance that constitutes the spatiality of the Tower:

‘the photographs’ arrangement in the structure of a tower keeps directing us to look up, the top photos are so high they recede into invisibility. So we rehearse with our bodies not only the immeasurability of the loss, but the imperfect structure of memory itself.


Space for an intervention is compelled by both the failure of the museum’s reference to the past and what is recalled in its place, both of which are acted out. As Patraka reminds us, such performances ‘foreground the historicity of the individual subject …. Indeed in de Certeauian space, interpretation itself becomes … a way of experiencing subjectivity’ (1996, p.100).10

7.5 The spark of contingency

What, though, is to stop the visitor’s appropriation of these images so that they reflect the visitor’s memories and identities as opposed to the images’ referents? Even if these images and their referents recede beyond the horizon of the visitor’s performative memory work, does the visitor actually experience a loss of the other or of self?

Photographic theory has always found a particularly subjective relationship between image and memory. For example, Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘A Small History of Photography’ describes the way that ‘photography reveals the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams’ (1997, p. 243).11 The revelation of what lies in this ‘optical unconscious’ is inextricable from another form of latency inscribed within the image: ‘the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here
and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find
the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten
moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may
rediscover it’ (Benjamin, 1997, p. 243). Benjamin relates the optical
unconscious to memory work to come, provoked by the apprehension of
a provocative aspect of the image. This of course is a subjective projec-
tion of a provocation onto the image and onto the past moment of its
making.

The ‘spark of contingency’ that animates these photographic images
suggests something akin to Huyssen’s notion of reenchantment by
which museal objects are endowed with aura. Technically, at least,
according to Walter Benjamin, the reproduced images that constitute
the Tower of Faces could not, by definition, be considered auratic. The
photograph, let alone its copy, is, by its very technology, always already
a reproduction: ‘From a photographic negative, for example, one can
make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no
sense’ (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 218); ‘The whole sphere of authenticity is
outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility’
(Benjamin, 1992b, p. 214). The photographic image not only suffers
from inauthenticity in comparison with the art object, but ‘That which
withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work
of art’ (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 215). In sum, ‘One might generalise by
saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object
from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substi-
tutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence’ (Benjamin, 1992b, p.
215), and ‘the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being
imbedded in the fabric of tradition’ (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 217). So far,
so familiar, but often over-looked in various renditions of this decline
in aura is the way in which, detached from tradition, the photographic
image is still haunted by it – blurring the perceived boundaries between
mechanically reproduced image and artwork. As such, it continues to reso-
nate with something akin to aura, at least for those who use photography
for traditional purposes.

This is different from an aestheticisation of politics in the service of
fascism via camera technology – ‘an apparatus pressed into the produc-
tion of ritual values’ (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 234). (The rituals of fascism
could be said to invent tradition for the masses.) What lingers in the
photographic image is a different kind of ritual or ‘cult value’:

In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all
along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance.
It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It
is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 219).

The exhibition of a work of art anticipates but is not the same as mechanical reproduction, mobilising art for mass consumption without rendering it inauthentic or detaching it from the ‘domain of tradition’ (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 215). Similarly, the exhibition of photography is the stage on which aura (the perception of it) stubbornly remains, a remnant informed by the history of the apprehension of the work of art in terms of its cult value. It was the cult value surrounding the work of art that first integrated the object into tradition via the magical, religious and, then, secular rituals performed around it. In this scheme, the cult of beauty, sponsored by the Renaissance, would be the secular and profane version of the religious, cult value of a work of art (Benjamin, 1992b, p. 217). The ‘cult of remembrance’ surrounding photographic portraiture would be the legacy or remnant of that profanity (secularisation). The aura resides in the photographic image in spite of its mechanical reproduction. Or, rather, such is the cultural tendency of re-enchantment.

7.6 The familial gaze

This is certainly true of the Tower of Faces, particularly in Marianne Hirsch’s reading of that space. When looking at the Tower of Faces, given the familial nature of the photographic images that constitute this exhibit, the visitor might be tempted to deploy what Hirsch has defined as the ‘familial gaze’. One of the hallmarks of the familial gaze is its affiliative look, which means that although familial photographs carry meaning within the family’s own narrative and are emptied of that meaning outside that narrow circle .... [they] are often so similar, so much shaped by similar conventions, that they are readily available for identification across the broadest and most radical divides .... Family photographs trigger in their viewers an inclusive, affiliative look that embraces images of vastly different cultural origins. But familial looking can also function as a screen; the identification it engenders can be too easy .... As it automatically places individuals into familial relation
within a field of vision, familial looking is a powerful, if slippery and often deceptive, instrument of cultural dialogue and cultural memory.

(Hirsch, 1999, p. xiii)

What, then, might the familial gaze screen by its affiliative tendencies? The familial ideologies shared by the subjects captured in the Tower of Faces are obviously beyond our grasp in terms of their individual instantiations but it is possible to speak generally of the familial ideologies projected by the act of family photography. To do this, it is necessary to recall the roots of family photography in terms of class:

The pictorial genre of the portrait, whether painterly or photographic, doubly epitomises the cornerstone of bourgeois Western culture. The uniqueness of the individual and his accomplishments are central in that culture. And in the portrait, originality comes in twice. The portrait is highly esteemed as a genre because, according to the standard view, in a successful portrait the viewer is confronted with not only with the ‘original’, ‘unique’, subjectivity of the portrait, but also that of the portrayed.

(Van Alphen, 1999, p. 34)

The photographic portrait therefore springs from a bourgeois concept of subjectivity or selfhood, distinguished not only by the perception of the transcendent nature of subjectivity itself but by the photographer’s unique art, able to equate image with the essence of such an essentialised self (Van Alphen, 1999, p. 34). Rather than inscribed with the contingency of a subjectivity staged (performed) or captured, the photograph in this bourgeois concept ‘refers to a human being who is (was) present outside the portrait’ in a permanent sense (Van Alphen, 1999, p. 34). Familial/portrait photography is therefore rooted in a practice that denies the very cultural, social and political context that brings such portraiture into being. If photographic portraiture is implicated in bourgeois concept of subjectivity, which it naturalises, its logic extends to the bourgeois subject’s family and does the same naturalising work there. What is more, photographs document family rituals as well as being an object of those rituals. They appear to be a natural trace of those rituals (a transcription of the real), disguising the codes of photographic and familial representation (Hirsch, 1997, p. 7).

What actually happens in the family photograph is that subject, ‘photographer and viewer collaborate on the reproduction of ideology’
and in resistance to it. The photographic image forms a screen upon which a familial ideology is both projected and resisted. The photographed subject is situated in a prescribed relation to other subjects within the frame. Not just situated, he or she is positioned according to his or her preconceived notions of a place within the context of family and looks to others in the frame to find that place. In framing the subjects with preconceived notions of family in mind, the photographer situates his or her subjects accordingly. The viewer corroborates in this staging of ideology by confirming that the image, in its arrangement and situation of subjects, meets the familial norm, the myth of the ideal family. However, those framed by this matrix of familial gazes, and ultimately by the photographic image, look back (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 8–11).

To situate oneself within the frame of familial ideology is to recognise the gazes of others that position oneself, which is to confirm one’s position by looking back:

The familial look, then, is not the look of a subject looking at an object, but a mutual look of a subject looking at an object who is a subject looking (back) at an object. Within the family, as I look I am always looked at, seen, scrutinised, surveyed, monitored. Familial subjectivity is constructed relationally, and in these relations I am always both self and other(ed), both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object: I am subjected and objectified.

(Hirsch, 1997, p. 9)

To recognise this reciprocity is to recognise that looking back, returning the gaze, may exceed the family frame and its ideologies. In turn this is the recognition of the very contingency of family life (in its specific historical, social and economic contexts) and its attempt to live up to specific familial ideologies. The difference between the contingency of family life and familial ideology or myth opens up a space in which such ideologies can be resisted, subject positions renegotiated in relation to the family, and ideology and biology separated (the familial ideology denaturalised) (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 8, 103). This would be a process of unfixing the gaze and the screen onto which it projects (Hirsch, 1997, p. 12), and, in short, realising something like the latter’s ‘optical unconsciousness’. The photographic image is the site or screen therefore where ideologies may be projected but also where the return of the gaze can give rise to a series of highly contingent and thereby potentially resistant and excessive glances (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 12, 90).
How might this scopic regime and resistance play out in the Tower of Faces? In what follows, I deploy strategically a reading, in a postmemorial vein, of the Tower of Faces, which will intersect with Hirsch’s reading, and, like Hirsch’s, it will elaborate on Barthes’s concept of photography. This deployment will allow scrutiny of postmemory and its construction of victim identity and subjectivity and whether the contingencies of Jewish life emerge from the Tower of Faces under the auspices of postmemorial theory.

In her consideration of the Tower of Faces, Hirsch is aware that those who view it may deploy the familial gaze in an attempt to identify, or rather empathise, with its photographed subjects across time and space. The familial gaze is thereby irresistible because it appears as an ethical gesture even if it depends on a universalisation of a family norm (to bridge time and space) and therefore a familial ideology. This affiliative gaze might, though, begin not by recognising sameness but difference. Roland Barthes explains why. A photograph conflates referent and representation, without marking itself as a sign. Through this conflation the referent is effectively doubled: the real referent exists as the ghostly other of what is confused for the referent, the photograph. Consequently, in the photography of people one witnesses a ‘micro-version of death’, as photography transforms its subject into a simulacrum (Barthes, 1982, pp. 5–15, 19). This death is complicated by the actual death of the referent, which photographs of the living cannot help but anticipate. Photographs contain the ‘micro-version’ of the death that is yet to come, but has already happened through simulation and, in the case of the Tower of Faces, has happened since the image was taken. It is this maelstrom of temporality that strains the process of reference, eventually marking the photograph as a sign. When the death prefigured in the photograph is not just personal but historic, part of a massive event such as the Holocaust, the temporal resonance of the photograph is severely compounded, as Susan Sontag notes of Roman Vishniac’s photographs of Polish communities (1978, p. 70). This resonance is particularly apparent in the Tower of Faces.¹⁴

Barthes argues that for its spectator the photograph is ‘animated’ by this temporal ‘adventure’ of death. Animation makes the photograph affective for those who see it. If the strain of reference marks the photograph as a sign, no longer able to replace the referent (or at least be its synonym), the photograph is now marked by the deathly losses of history for which it cannot substitute. Even if the photograph’s observer shares common cultural, social and historical grounds with the referent – the ‘studium’ (Barthes, 1982, p. 28) – this is not enough
to supplement the apparent failure of representation. Yet it is through the *studium* that the failure of reference manifests itself. It is the idiosyncratic yet banal details of photographs, the *punctum* of subjectivities performed before the lens, the contingencies of which have been captured by the camera, which draw attention to the failure of this common ground to bridge representation and referent. Puncturing this common ground, the *punctum* recalls the absolute sense of historical loss that these images evoke but for which they cannot substitute (Barthes, 1982, p. 41). The presence of life conveyed by these details is predicated upon its absence; as soon as life emerges from these photographs it disappears; the moment of recognition of the familiar is also the moment of misrecognition, of the unfamiliar.

Generally speaking, the significance of the *punctum* in photographic images is latent (Barthes, 1982, p. 55). The spectator's initial investment in the realism of the photograph effectively anaesthetises its surface, but the dawning incommensurability of the historic moment of the referent and the historical moment of spectatorship belatedly confers on that image a meaningful sense of loss (Barthes, 1982, p. 57). This does not mean that the referent is doubtful. Something was placed before the lens, no matter how mediated by the referent’s performance, the photographer’s framing and the spectator’s interpretation: ‘There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past …. That-has-been [is] intractable … irrefutably present, and yet already deferred’ (Barthes, 1982, pp. 76, 82). Inextricable from each other, reality and the past are never synchronous. Although, photography still constitutes a form of historical witnessing as well as generating an artefact from that time (or event) of witnessing, the dislocation of the referent for Barthes counters memory.

If, for Barthes, photographs provoke not memory but ‘counter-memory’, then the Tower of Faces, in its affectiveness, recalls for its viewers not life but loss. As Hirsch puts it, ‘Photography’s relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasising, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability’ (1997, p. 20). The sense of loss is, potentially, compounded when the museum visitor compares photographs of atrocity found elsewhere in the museum with the familial photographs of the Tower of Faces. In fact, the loss potentially felt is horrific because of ‘the displacement of the bodies depicted in the pictures of horror from their domestic settings, along with their disfigurement’ (Hirsch, 1997, p. 20). When viewing the domestic and familial settings of the Tower of Faces, the spectator is not only struck by the horror
to come (as depicted in atrocity photographs), but also by an absolute estrangement from these all-too-familiar and conventional settings. The familiar and familial becomes unfamilial and defamiliarised as those settings are destroyed and their inhabitants transported to another world (of death).

7.7 Re-enchantment

Despite her critique of the familial gaze for what it overlooks and her identification of how it might be returned, and despite her Barthesian approach, I would argue that Hirsch’s reading of the Tower of Faces demonstrates affiliative tendencies, focusing a gaze rather than a look. One can understand the temptation to affiliate with the subjects represented in the Tower of Faces. This is temptation facilitated by Barthes’s sense of the general, indexical nature of the photo, or, as Hirsch puts it, ‘its status as relic, or trace, or fetish – its “direct” connection with the material presence of the photographed person – that at once intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time and concomitantly, its capacity to signify life’ (1997, p. 19).

The present absence of the referent captured by the photographic image is indeed a trace but this material connection is complicated by the mechanical reproduction of the image. The resonance of the image is a matter of reference and reproduction. The Tower of Faces is constituted by reproductions not the original images, but they share the artefactual status of their originals, some of which were smuggled out of Lithuania by Yaffa Eliach as the last remnants of a destroyed world.15 Where Benjamin might not see a difference between the original and its copy because the original is always already a reproduction, the affiliative tendency of Hirsch’s theory of postmemory implies that the copy shares its original’s aura as physical trace of the referent.16

For Hirsch, the image does not oscillate between presence and absence but verges towards presence:

If anything throws this contradictory and ultimately unassimilable dimension of photography – perched between life and death – into full relief, it has to be the possibility, the reality, of survival in the face of complete annihilation that is the Holocaust. Holocaust photographs, as much as their subjects, are themselves stubborn survivors of the intended destruction of an entire culture, its people as well as their records, documents, and cultural artefacts.

The aura of these images, at least for those affected by their survival, is intensified by the images’ familial and familiar contents.

As narrated by the USHMM’s exhibition of domestic and atrocity photographs, and the relationship between them, the vulnerability of the family is made particularly acute in the face of the Holocaust, especially with the museum visitors’ knowledge of what is to become of the domestic. The emphasis placed on what has been lost and the survival of its traces provokes an empathetic investment in the institution of the family – a desire to safeguard what remains – no matter the oversights of such empathy (Hirsch, 1997, p. 36). In other words, the bare fact of the survival of traces matters here (see also Hirsch, 1997, p. 251). In the aftermath of Nazi deportations, the familial ideal gains resonance as something worth cherishing and protecting (Hirsch, 1997, p. 69) – in effect justifying a suspension of ideological critique.

The specificities of the familial referent – the subjects framed by the image and their negotiation of the familial ideology, their return of the familial gaze – are overlooked. The myth of the family prevails. The desire to affiliate may be frustrated by the photographic image’s displacement of its referent, as in the nature of photographic reference, and as in defamiliarizing context of what is to happen to the familiar and familial. Frustrated, though, this desire is further provoked (Hirsch, 1997, p. 40).

Affected by the images of survival and vulnerability, Hirsch seemingly slips back into the familial gaze even as she warns against it:

The work of reading isolated images necessarily becomes a work of overreading, determined by the particular familial or extrafamilial relation we hold to them. Recognising an image as familial elicits ... a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative. Akin to Barthes’s move from the studium to the punctum, it is idiosyncratic, untheorizable: it is what moves us because of our memories and our histories, and because of the ways in which we structure our sense of particularity.


Under the auratic regime of affiliative looking, the idiosyncratic detail or punctum becomes resonant only in the eye of the beholder (and is not explainable by theoretic generalisation) and provokes recognition of the self in the other. The subsequent colonisation of the image with one’s
own identity, history and memory, and displacement of the original referent, is as contingent as the subjectivities of those who attempt to remember.

If the auratic nature of the photographic image generated the desire to identify, the act of identification in Benjamin’s terms denudes the image of its aura:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be .... Now, to bring things closer to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in the close-up form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative .... The stripping bare of the object, the destruction of the aura, is the mark of a perception whose sense of the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness – by means of its reproduction.


At the point at which the image should be seen as a potential screen of conflicting glances and gazes, upon which can be projected the historical, political, sexual, economic, gendered, cultural, religious, ethnic and national specificities of the subject-referents, in other words a screen upon which the subject-referents can be historicised as much as they can be mythologised (Hirsch, 1997, p. 103), Hirsch slips into a way of reading that, against her best intentions, universalises and de-specifies the Jewish victim and his or her familial context. Such a gaze seeks to efface the contingencies of family life. The familial gaze therefore knows no bounds because it knows no difference.

Drawing attention to the way in which the USHMM is conducive to the performance of memory work – ‘it enacts the past rather than representing it’ (Hirsch, 1997, p. 249) – Hirsch engenders a way of reading the exhibition as a whole and the Tower of Faces in particular that privileges the performative over the referential. Despite the museum’s specific identification of the origins of all its photographic images, the theory of postmemory cannot abide such a realist approach to photography, and acts of postmemorative identification, rather like the affiliative, familial gaze, are in fact dependent on the photographs’ displacement (or evacuation) of the referent. This is a displacement facilitated by the perceived general logic of photographic representation and compounded by
the specific context of destruction that awaits the subjects of Holocaust photographs.

I quote at length to demonstrate the way that Hirsch holds the Tower of Faces in her familial and affiliative gaze:

The conventionality of the family photo provides a space of identification for any viewer participating in the conventions of familial representation; thus the photos can bridge the gap between the viewers who are personally connected to the event and those who are not. They can expand the postmemorial circle. Photographs of the world lost to genocide and to exile can contain ... the particular mixture of mourning and recreation that characterises the work of postmemory.

(1997, p. 251)

My first reaction, similar to that of many others, was to marvel at how rich and varied a life was destroyed. The pictures gain by their diversity and their multiplicity: after looking at them for a while, it becomes less important to see individual images than to take in a sense of the whole, and of its relation to one's own family albums .... Interestingly in the minutes I spend in the room, I find that this identification easily transcends ethnic identity and family history .... The conventional and familial nature of the images themselves manages to transcend ... distances [of time and space], figured spatially by the bridge that separates use from the pictures, and to foster an affiliative look that binds the photographs to one another and us to them.

(1997, p. 254)

[Names inscribed on the photographs] serve less to individualise [than] to generalise. ... names become anonymous and generic. ... This is a collective and not an individual story, yet the process of affiliative familial looking fosters and shapes the individual viewer's relationship to collective memory: they can adopt these memories as their own postmemories. The Tower provides for visitors a space in which they can become a community: descendents of those killed decades ago in a small shtetl thousands of miles away .... And, as I look up toward the next floor and the distant ceiling light source way above that, as I see the images rush down toward me, so many much too distant to recognise, I realise with a shudder, that this tower is in fact a chimney, that album is also a tomb, that commemoration is also mourning.

(1997, p. 256)
[As] building blocks of postmemory [such images] also remind us of the distance, the absence, the unbridgeable gap that, in postmodernity makes us who we are. In this ‘we’ I do not include only Jews or those whose families were directly affected by the Holocaust either as victims, perpetrators, or as bystanders: I include the much vaster community of postmemory that will, ideally, be forged by the aesthetics of the Tower of Faces ... This aesthetics is based on an identification forged by familial looking.

(1997, p. 267)

So despite noting the variety of Jewish life performed before the lens (Hirsch, 1997, p. 252), the contingencies of which are captured on film, and despite her preceding critique of the familial gaze, Hirsch now strategically motivates the familial gaze and its universalising tendencies to afford an identification across time and space. This move, from memory to postmemory, is only possible under the auspices of postmemory if the original referent is cited but then evacuated to make room for memories and identities it provokes for the ever-expanding circle of postmemory. Photography and the Holocaust (Holocaust photography) evacuate the referent by default. It seems that there is no longer any room in these photographic images for the historicisation of family life, the return of familial gaze (looking or glancing back) and the contestation or negotiation of familial ideology. It is just a matter of the sheer survival of the image-trace (no matter how fleeting) of a previous life and world that necessitates the suspension of ideological critique. In turn, this suspension of ideological critique renders the photographic images historically aspecific and available for appropriation. The despecification of the images under the regime of postmemory effectively folds them back into the nationalist narrative that effaces the particularity of Jewish identity in the first place and from which postmemorial performances initially promised delivery.

To borrow a phrase from Allan Sekula, the referents of the images in the Tower of Faces have been arrested (1992, p. 346), at least under certain theoretical regimes. Postmemory illuminates in restrictive ways not just Jewish life, but the ‘shadow archive’ of photographic portraiture as Sekula understands it (1992, p. 347). Sekula’s is a Foucauldian understanding of this type of photography and its regulation of the social body. On the one hand, the origins of portraiture in the nineteenth century had an honorific function. Photography allowed the ‘ceremonial presentation of the bourgeois self’, demonstrating the requisite possession of taste for that class and thereby the necessary cultural capital.
If photography appeared to be too widely available, those lower down the social hierarchy would use it in aspirational ways to image themselves according to an established and elevated type. It was that type, of which the private sentimental image was a form of self-possession (and bourgeois identity was predicated on the possession of private property), against which deviation, inferiority and otherness could be measured and possessed. As Sekula remarks, the development of honorific portraiture in the nineteenth century was shadowed by the development of its other, police photography; both shared the same possessive logic of focusing the gaze on particular, related types of identity, normative and other (1992, pp. 346–7). While there are obvious historical differences between Sekula’s object of enquiry and that of Hirsch, the images of the Tower of Faces can be looked at in a certain (theoretical) way that renders their referents as type of otherness. As Sekula might put it, the original honorific nature of those photographs gives way to its shadow archive. Even the honorific intentions of portraiture are generally dehistoricising (as Van Alphen, Hirsch and Sekula understand them) in the externalisation and transcendence of the pictured self – and perhaps the museum and postmemorial theories illuminate that fixity rather than shedding light on the specificity of those photographed.

Having critiqued postmemory, some caveats are necessary. Hirsch’s theory of postmemory is informed by her own identity as the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Her reading of the Tower of Faces is in part autobiographical in the way that Susan Suleiman might deploy that term. Suleiman looks to Holocaust memoirs and the possibilities of reanimating their referents. Holocaust memories refer to lost people, places and communities – the world before deportation and the camps, all destroyed by genocide – and for Suleiman, the act of reading makes their names resonate in the void, especially if they are read in the context of exile (a place linguistically, culturally and socially different to the lost world described. If it were not for reanimation, the effect of reading in exile would be that of reading in an archive rather than in a living community). Suleiman advocates an ‘autobiographical’ mode of reading as a means of reanimation, based on a sense of place and time shared by reader and author if not experienced in the same way by both. (By sheer chance Suleiman and her immediate family escaped the round up of Hungarian Jews in 1944 and emigrated two years later.) By reading herself into the narratives of others, she breathes life into the world she once shared with them and into the signifiers of that world otherwise at risk from atrophy. Suleiman’s autobiographical impulse is supported by a shared ethnicity and a fate almost shared – what might
have happened but not what did happen. Autobiographical reading, then, is not based on shared witnessing and experience but on a shared culture, ethnicity, origins and time frame (Suleiman, 1994, pp. 200–14; 1998, pp. 397–417). As a descendent of Holocaust survivors, it goes without saying that Hirsch has a greater claim than most to a postmemorial identity, but it is Hirsch’s later widening of the ‘postmemorical circle’ – ‘this form of remembrance need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be broadly available. ... Thus, although familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be strictly an identity position. Instead, I prefer to see it as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma’ (2001, p. 10) – that paves the way for over-identification.

What, then, has happened to the aura? It is the reenchantment of artefacts with a sense of aura – in this case, photographs rendered as traces of identity – that provokes an over-identification with the subjects photographed. Yet, at the same time, and as Benjamin argues, it is this ‘need to possess the object’ that denudes it of its aura. Given that the object (photographic image) was never auratic in the first place – these are reproductions that hang on the walls of the Tower, and Benjamin makes no distinction between the original and its reproduction in photography – the aura is only apparent in its disappearance. If photographic portraiture is apperceived to contain the last vestiges of aura seen in traditional art, then Eva Geulen’s explanation of fluctuating aura of art is useful at this point.

The aura, as the distinguishing feature of traditional art, becomes visible only to the extent that aura has lost its character. The manifestation of the aura arises out of its loss .... Authenticity is a belated effect. In the beginning it was not the original, but rather the reproduction, which makes the concept of authenticity possible in the first place. Authenticity becomes ‘authentic’ only against the background of reproducibility. That means, however, that authenticity is compromised from the start, inauthentic from the start, for its origin lies not in itself, but rather in its opposite, reproduction. Like authenticity, the aura is essentially determined through its loss. The decline does not happen to, but rather constitutes the aura. The content and contours of the definition of the aura are determined by the fact that it only appears only as it is disappearing.

(2002, p. 135)
Hirsch, though, stabilises the aura, which actually realigns her reading of the museum’s exhibition with its nationalist logic and effacement of difference.

The exhibition relies on the enchantment of its artefacts to naturalise certain versions of the past and in doing so it positions the museum visitor as vicarious witness. Vicarious witnessing, then, is compelled by the apperception of aura. Vicarious witnessing it not just confined to the Tower of Faces but is a central part of the museum experience. The USHMM’s permanent exhibition is displayed over three floors. It begins on the fourth. One arrives at the fourth floor by elevator, the industrial design features of which suggest a cattle truck, or perhaps even a gas chamber. Before stepping into the elevator the visitor is handed a ‘passport’, briefly narrating the life of a Holocaust witness (not necessarily Jewish, and not necessarily a survivor). The visitor, through the passport, and the symbolic transport to the exhibition is given the identity of one who experienced the Holocaust. Whether or not this identity survived that experience, the visitor is urged to become a ‘witness’. The elevator doors open onto life size photographs showing American soldiers contemplating what they found at Ohrdruf and Buchenwald camp: piles of burnt bodies, starved survivors and so on. Positioned as a vicarious witness of one kind or another from the very beginning of the permanent exhibition, the visitor is encouraged to follow the script of such memory work throughout the exhibition, particularly around its more disturbing artefacts. Near the exhibition of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the visitor encounters piles of shoes from Majdanek. These have individualising features. Some have bows and tassels; some still bear the shape of their former owners. As Patraka remarks, ‘each shoe provides an intimate remnant of an individual that, multiplied by thousands conveys the magnitude of human loss without becoming abstracted or aestheticised’ (Patraka, 1996, p. 103). Patraka’s comments are suggestive of the tendency of visitors to collapse the difference between artefact and event, Jewish identity and all that remains of it. This conflation is facilitated by the failure of the ventilation system to expunge the smell of rotting leather. While Patraka theorises the visceral affectiveness of the artefact in terms of the way that it might compel the visitor to perform bodily a sense of loss (1996, p. 103), recognising that these objects are not substitutes for their former owners – it is the exhibition’s intentions to make them more than metonymic.¹⁹ As Jenny Edkins points out, the display of auratic artefacts is central to Holocaust museums, particularly this one, because such objects stand in for the witnesses. As survivors of a kind, the stubborn materiality of these artefacts fleshes
out the identities of which nothing else remains (Edkins, 2003, p. 153). In short, given the mise-en-scène of their exhibition, they are irresistible to the visitor, whose re-enchantment of them and consequent apperception of them as auratic confuses irrefutable evidence that the Holocaust happened with the museum’s particular interpretation of that event, and so naturalises the nationalisation of Holocaust memory.

Just as theories of postmemory that focus on photographic images can find in the auras they project a bridge between past and present, and realise that potential of over-identification and evacuation of the image’s referent that is consonant with the nationalist context of display, so more recent and related theories reanimate objects in the USHMM with similar consequences. For example, Alison Landsberg’s ‘prosthetic memories’ are enabled by the modern technologies of mass cultural communication and by the way that mass culture is commodified; they are remembered in spaces or ‘experiential sites’ produced by commodification and technologisation, such as the museum and cinema (2004, p. 2). The interface with historical narratives made possible at these sites generates in the consumers memories of events not directly experienced and which are ‘not “socially constructed” in that they do not emerge as the result of living or being raised in particular social frameworks’ (Landsberg, 2004, p. 19). In other words, these are memories that do not ‘traditionally’ belong to the consumer’s group or identity – defined in terms of the particularities of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nation, etc. – but which may be acquired in spite of those particularities. Made available by their mass distribution and circulation, memory is freed from the biological or essentialist claims of particular individuals or groups and may be claimed but not owned by others (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 2–3). The itinerant and liminal nature of prosthetic memory, argues Landsberg, means that the alterity of the ‘other’ remains intact, and that ‘other’ is not the subject of over-identification (2004, p. 135). Prosthetic memory builds on Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ (1983) that were enabled by mass cultural technologies of the nineteenth century, as well as on Maurice Halbwachs’ theorisation that social frameworks are the instruments by which collective memory is formed and expressed (1992). Anderson and Halbwachs describe the way that collective memory of events not experienced is used to shore up group or national identity; Landsberg describes a model of memory that is centrifugal in its dispersal of memory beyond group ownership or heritage (2004, pp. 7–8). In other words, prosthetic memory promises delivery from nationalist narratives such as that of the USHMM.
Landsberg’s theory of memory admits transference, but problematically so. Landsberg positions prosthetic memory between the individual and the collective:

memories … ‘speak’ to the individual in a personal way as if they were actually memories of lived events …. Prosthetic memories are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience. They are privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person’s own archive of experience.

(2004, p. 19)

Arguably, the in-between-ness of prosthetic memory frees it from the mediations of the collective, the individual and from the experiential or transferential site. Take, for example, Landsberg’s reading of the USHMM’s exhibit of shoes from the Majdanek death camp that Patraka has commented on above:

A visitor’s ability to have a prosthetic relationship to those objects, I would argue is predicated on the object’s indexicality – on its ‘realness’ and materiality – but it is also predicated on each visitor’s sense of who he or she is. There is a simultaneous negotiation of the object (and the other that it represents) and with a person’s archive of experiences. At the same moment that we experience the shoes as their shoes – which could very well be our shoes – we feel our own shoes on our feet. The disinvestment that the objects represent can be traumatic only if we feel all the while ourselves.

(2004, p. 135)

Transference in such sites is the converse of the clinical scenario, the dynamic of which is externalising (Landsberg, 2004, p. 135). In the museum, ‘we take on prosthetic memories … incorporate these symptoms … simultaneously giving over our bodies to these mute objects. We take on their memories and become their prostheses’ (Landsberg, 2004, p. 136). Given the symptomology, the assumption is one of traumatisation, whatever the archive of ‘personal experience’ to which these objects are related (Landsberg, 2004, pp. 135–6). Questions notwithstanding whether such a display can actually traumatis (or provoke traumatising memories in its viewer), Landsberg’s prescription of transference and its symptoms overrides a consideration of the way the
museum orchestrates the affectiveness of this exhibit (what might be called the exhibitionary mise-en-scène), the way in which the exhibit contributes to and draws from an iconology of Holocaust representation. In short, the meaning of artefacts cannot be severed from their institutional contexts and mediation.

Landsberg does not consider the potential variety of subject positions and how they might speak for such mute objects. Subjectivity here is shorn of its particularities. Prosthetic memory is also unmediated by the institution itself, the transferential site. While the act of recall is site-specific, Landsberg does not consider the discourses that structure the site, beyond, in this case, a general sense of the commodification of memory. What of the Americanisation of Holocaust remembrance, and attendant politics of memory, for which the Washington museum in particular has been indicted? Can prosthetic memory really transcend the politics and commodification of memory that have enabled it in the first place to constitute a counter-hegemonic public sphere? Then again, Landsberg argues that ‘Prosthetic Memory ... is less interested in large-scale social implications and dialectics than in the experiential quality of prosthetic memory and its ramifications of those memories for individual subjectivity and political consciousness’ (2004, p. 20). By ‘large-scale social implications’, I assume Landsberg has in mind the dialectic of remembering and forgetting in contemporary memorial culture, or, put another way, the way that monuments and museums shape the past, producing a politics of memory. Prosthetic memory, then, presumes to transcend the discourses, institutions and ideologies that structure transferential sites and mediate remembrance in them – all in the name of the formation of an abstract, individual, political consciousness and the nebulous collective memory it informs.

The future-orientated nature of prosthetic remembrance – in the name of a political consciousness – is cause enough to move further away from historical specificity. On the grounds that ‘real’ and prosthetic memories are both reconstructions of the past, Landsberg sees the differences between them as unimportant, when the ‘generation of possible courses of action in the present’ is at stake (2004, p. 45). It is not just the historical specificity of the witness’s experience that has been relegated. On the grounds that both history and memory subject the past to interpretation and narrativisation, history has no more privileged access to the real than memory, let alone prosthetic memory, making history replaceable by (prosthetic) memory (Landsberg, 2004, p. 47). Besides, for Landsberg, a ‘cognitive’ apprehension of the Holocaust is ‘inadequate’, necessitating its supplementation by ‘experiential’ or prosthetic memory
Photography and Memory in the USHMM (2004, p. 131). As Andrew Gross and Michael Hoffman have argued, the logic of Landsberg’s theory, representative of a wider tendency in memory and trauma studies that has been discussed in this book, is that the limits of witness testimony in the face of the Holocaust call all historical narrative into doubt. If the witnesses did not fully understand what was happening to them, why should subsequent generations? (2004, p. 40). The past understood in terms of cause and effect, then, has been subsumed by cause and affect (Gross and Hoffman, 2004, p. 38).

The animation of the artefact transcends it and its viewer beyond the confines and mediations of the museum context. The affectiveness of the artefact, be it a shoe or a photograph, turns the viewer into a witness who finds the object’s (lent) aura irresistible and self-evident as the presence of the past itself – eclipsing mediating contexts. As Amy Hungerford would put it, this is the ‘personification’ of a memory text, by which a text, in this case the artefacts on display in the Washington Museum, is understood to have ‘the capacity to embody experience’, imagined as ‘conscious’ or ‘having a body’. Hungerford argues that in academic theory, the personification of texts has been informed by a desire to share the witness’s experience perceived to be directly transmissible via certain types of literary, historiographical, psychoanalytical and philosophical language and textuality. In other words, the text embodies the witness’s experience, which can be accessed by reading (or viewing) and re-embodied by the reader (viewer), which in reality is the memorisation of someone else’s memory (2003, p. 119). Where we have argued that prosthetic memory is actually an abstraction of the identities of those who remember and those who are remembered, Hungerford argues a similar despecification: ‘conflation of texts and persons impoverishes our ideas … of persons, since it renders the fact of embodiment irrelevant, when embodiment is exactly what situates us in history and makes us vulnerable to oppression’ (2003, p. 21). As prostheses to an exhibitionary text, museum visitors are shorn of their own particularity. Whereas Landbserg sees prosthetic memory as transformative in the way it might shape our political consciousness and actions in the future, Hungerford sees personification as overly prescriptive (2003, p. 151). By reducing bodies to texts and cancelling the differences between them, the existence of those remembered (victims) and those remembering vicariously are scripted (2003, p. 155). The insistence on experiential rather than historical knowledge of the Holocaust prescribes no other identity in the present than that of the vicarious victim chained to his or her historical counterpart. (In the case of the USHMM, then, the mediations of the past brought by each subjectivity
to the mediating museum are subsumed by this prescriptive prosthesis. The identities of those remembering have been eclipsed under such theoretical regimes, once those identities have assumed the witnesses’s identity, have become the witness. In addition to Hungerford, I would add then that the museum visitor is prescribed an identity that, having been appropriated, actually emanates from the remembering self.) Hungerford advocates that victims be consigned to history rather than recovered in the present by the act of imagining what they suffered, that loss be conceded as irreversible. Death, then, makes imaginable ‘the absolute otherness one is not’. Otherwise, the future of memory would be an ‘unfreedom’ (2003, p. 151) that leaves the nationalism of Holocaust memory intact.

How might the museum be de-naturalised? Jürgen Link argues that Spielberg’s Schindler’s List achieves a similar naturalisation of a particular interpretation of the Holocaust through the use of ‘auraticised’ objects and scenes. Link uses Benjamin’s critique of Goethe’s process of symbolisation. In Goethe’s symbol theory, the object is narrativised to give it symbolic meaning, or, put another way, the image and meaning of the object are unified in the symbol. The symbolic is akin to the aural. The cloaking of the object with an aura/symbolic meaning is effected by discourse (and its rhetoric of synecdoche and metaphor) – but by a discourse that successfully represses this production process and cloaks itself. So, this ‘cloak constitutes a self-referential symbolic complex (the ‘veil’), which symbolises the process of repressing production as a spontaneous and mysterious presence’ (Link, 2003, p. 104). In other words, the symbolic nature of the object – its supposedly autonomous, self-generating character – evidences the trace of its coming into being and opens itself to a potential unveiling (Link, 2003, p. 104).

The idea of a trace suggests a method of reinstating the ideological critique that familial portraiture in Holocaust museums deserves, thereby eliciting the victims’ differential identities otherwise effaced by a nationalist narrative. The generation of aura around particular objects does not differentiate between types of objects. So, the photographic images, despite the fact of their reproduction, are conflated with their subjects, just as shoes are seen as, in effect, human remains. With this collapse of distance comes an over-identification with the object. (Aura is that which is proximate and distant; it appears in its disappearance; the desire to possess the aural object for what it symbolises only reveals that which wasn’t there in the first place.) A closer look at the photographic image as auratic artefact will allow the tracing of the
trace. Jenny Edkin’s theorisation of the ID cards available to visitors as they enter the permanent exhibition is helpful at this point in the argument:

In a sense, this is similar to the device of soliloquy in theatre or to what happens in film, where the shot/reverse shot enables us to take on the viewpoint of a particular character in the film. In a shot/reverse shot sequence, the second shot shows the point from which the first shot can be assumed to have been taken. Normally the camera is invisible, giving the illusion that what we see has an autonomous existence. However, the viewer demands to know whose gaze they are occupying. When the reverse shot shows them, they are ‘sutured’ or sewn into that particular subject position. The illusion is that there is no camera, nothing controlling the image…. At first the initial shot represents an imaginary fullness or wholeness – an ideal image – but the pleasure in this fullness soon disappears as it becomes clear to the viewer that something is amiss. There are limitations in what is seen: something is missing – the camera is hiding things. The reverse shot functions to again conceal this limit and maintain the fiction, by substituting the fictional character’s viewpoint for the camera. Identification with the character conceals the controlling gaze of the camera. This only works, of course, if the viewing subject is willing to be passive.

(2003, p. 158)

Looking at the photographic ID card, the visitor is able to inhabit the identity pictured therein. The visitor inhabits the perspective of the witness, as he or she enters the exhibition. According to Edkin’s (Lacanian) reading, this is an imaginary position of wholeness in which the visitor is inscribed into an autonomous (or soliloquy-like) position and does not see what could be described as the museum’s gaze that positions the viewer in the first place (and thereby limits his or her vision). If anyone or thing is seen looking at the visitor, it is the photographed subject in the ID card. In effect, the visitor looks at the subject whose perspective he has identified with, and that subject (him- or herself) looks back (at him- or herself). As subject and object of the gaze, the visitor does not see the limits of his or her gaze and the way that he or she is positioned by the museum’s gaze that operates like the controlling gaze of the camera. This is a continual process in which the visitor must be continually sutured into the visual discourse of the museum to enable the repression of the limits of his or her scopic horizon.
It is the difference between the gaze and the look (a return of the gaze) that suggested for Hirsch the possibility of exceeding the ideological frame of the photographic image and the prescribed subject-positions within it. The question remains: how can a reading of the permanent exhibition recognise the return of the gaze of the photographed subjects of the ID cards and the Tower of Faces? Indeed, how can the visitor realise the limits of his own gaze? Put another way, how can the traces of what lies behind of the auratic veil of these photographic objects be revealed?

Terry Eagleton describes the trace thus:

The trace is ... what marks an object’s historicity, the scars it has accumulated at the hands of its users, the visible imprint of its variable functions. The traces inscribed on an object’s body are the web that undoes its self-identity, the mesh of consumitional modes in which it has been variously caught. The erasure, preservation or revival of traces, then, is a political practice that depends on the nature of the traces and contexts in question: the object may need to be treated as palimpsest, its existent traces expunged by an overwriting, or it may secrete blurred traces that can be productively retrieved.

(1981, p. 32)

However, the trace is not just an external inscription: ‘all objects are written in their deepest being, internally constituted by the changing script of their social relations, which never fully adds up to a coherent text’ (Eagleton, 1981, p. 32). The interiority of the trace allows Eagleton to compare the formation of objects with that of subjects:

Just as the psychoanalytic subject is able to designate itself as a homogenous entity over time only by repressing the traces of its unconscious desires, so the auratic object, whether it be cultural artefact or state apparatus, continually rewrites its own history to expel the traces of its ruptured homogenous past. The political task of ‘liberating’ an object, then, takes the form of opening up its unconscious – detecting within it those chips of heterogeneity that is has been unable quite to dissolve.

(1981, p. 33)

If aura is predicated on the repression of internal difference, for both psychoanalytical subjects and artefactual objects, then, in this scheme, aura derives ‘authority’ and ‘authenticity’ from the origins the subject and object now claim to be continuous with but which have in fact substituted
for that constitutive difference. In the terms of museum exhibition, the artefact (photographic image or other object) is continuous with the event and the identity it claims to stand in for and so is auratic, authoritative and authentic. The exhibition is thereby naturalised. By extension, the visitor claims continuity with that object and what it stands for.

Eagleton’s reading of the aura\(^2\) sees in its demise the trace of a history of differences: ‘Mechanical reproduction – which may figure here as a metonym for cultural revolution – destroys the authority of origins, but in doing so, writes large a plurality that was there all along. It signifies the invasion of multiplicity into the object, shattering the illusory self-identity which one might risk calling the object’s ego’ (1981, p. 33). Contrary to Eagleton, Hirsch’s attempt to reinstate a history of differences in the photographs she theorises could be said to rely on the auraticisation of such images in order to provoke their rescue by the viewer from the nationalist narrative of the museum. Eagleton’s approach suggests a way of revealing objects and subjects as discontinuous with themselves, whether they are museum visitors who assume an autonomous perspective that knows no bounds and over-identifies with everything/one in sight, or artefactual images/objects that have been conflated with their referents, compelling such a colonising vision. As Eagleton puts it:

> When Benjamin looks at a photographic portrait, what fascinates him is precisely not the composed aura of stillness and distance in which its subjects bathe, but those stray, tell-tale, irreducible symptoms of ‘reality’ that flicker on its edges – symptoms which, in linking the photograph’s present to a putative ‘real’ future for its subjects, constrain us, viewing that photographed past from the future, into constellating our own present time with its.

(Eagleton, 1981, p. 33)

This is a constellation of viewer and photographed subject, of past and future, and not a colonisation.

### 7.8 Jewish ‘Being’

Without sufficient attention to the generation (and degeneration) of aura in regimes of secondary witnessing, it is tempting to see an un-rigorous theory of postmemory as typical of some postmodernist responses to the Holocaust. The insistence on the sheer survival of a remnant of the past without specificity chimes with postmodernism’s reluctance to ascribe a substantive Being to the Holocaust’s victims. According to Gillian Rose’s version of postmodernism, ‘Being’ in modernity is the
embodiment of totalising discourse, and therefore narcissistic (in that it is the self-projection of the authors of that discourse). That which fell outside modernity’s extreme criteria for Being was the abject Other – at least under the accords of Nazism. Postmodernism fears that the historicisation of Jewish victims of the Holocaust might be totalising and therefore essentialising. Lending a Being to Jewish victims would simply be the invert perpetrators’ lethal perspective on Being and non-Being, leaving that perspective and its totalising grasp intact. Unleashing a totalising grasp on Jewish identity would in effect be an inscription of non-Being. Postmodernism replaces Being with beings, or the unrooted ontologies from which a finite sense of being and knowledge emanates. According to Rose, postmodernism, for fear of reinscribing (non)Being in its representations of them, can only construe Jewish victims as transient ahistorical beings. They, the victims, cannot be historicised for fear of an inherent fascism of representation (Rose, 1996, pp. 54–5).

However the postmodern attempt to think Jewish difference in non-narcissistic terms might actually repeat the same old totalisations. Without any sense of substantive Being to compare it to, and vice versa, difference can only be measured in relation to oneself. A self-relating abstract identity is asserted and projected onto the other. Difference is recognised as a moment of overcoming narcissistic subjectivity, but is then folded back into sameness (Rose, 1996, pp. 54–5). Is it really necessary, asks Rose, to discard the notion of Being – the desire to totally identify the Jews in history – as if all Being is contaminated by the evil of Nazi identification? After all, as Rose points out, ‘The Jews … were destroyed … for their shear existence, their belonging to Being’, their Being in history (1996, p. 57). How, then, Rose asks, can the process of mourning proceed, if Jews, as objects of remembrance (and remembering subjects), are divorced from historical experience and the agency that experience brings (Rose, 1996, p. 57)? ‘As a result, mourning cannot work; it remains melancholia; it remains aberrated not inaugurated …. Instead of producing a work, this self-inhibited mourning produces a play, the Trauerspiel, the interminable mourning play and lament, of post-modernity’ (Rose, 1996, p. 64). I bring Rose’s critique of postmodernism to bear on the concept of postmemory not to end with Rose’s words rather than mine, but to illuminate further the tensions in Hirsch’s work, among others, in a way that might help theorise more robustly the remembrance of memories not our own – and to find a way of buttressing the ethical stance of Hirsch’s project of postmemory. It seems that such an ethical stance is impotent if, as Rose puts it, the work of mourning is superseded by melancholia, if it is forever caught up in remembrance of self rather than other.
Conclusion

In many ways, theories of traumatic Holocaust memory, in their claims to an ethics of otherness, can be characterised as Levinasian. They assume the ethical schema of Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of the ‘infinity’ and ‘face’ of the Other, which can be understood via a brief explication. For Levinas, a relation with alterity, with the Other, is structured into consciousness and language (or expression). The Other has an identity outside of the ‘accomplishments of history’, which does not mean it is ahistorical but that that identity can be expressed in terms other than those which history has dictated, ‘before the fullness of time, while there is still time’ (Levinas, 2005, p. 23). This does not mean that Otherness can be grasped in a totalising manner; rather, Levinas, raises the ‘possibility’ of its ‘signification without a context’, in its excess of context, in its infinitude (2005, p. 26). Infinity therefore cannot be grasped as such, because it cannot be contained by consciousness: ‘Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of itself in me. It is produced in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. Subjectivity realises these impossible exigencies – the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain’ (Levinas, 2005, p. 27). Instituted in consciousness that cannot contain it, the infinitude of the Other is beyond representation, that is, intentional thought acting on language to represent an adequation of the Other as object. The very structure of language cannot represent and is always belied by the Other’s infinitude: ‘The word that bears on the Other as a theme seems to contain the Other. But already it is said to the other, who as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind the said. Words are said, be
it only by the silence kept, whose weight acknowledges this evasion of
the Other’. Language, then, affords ethical opportunities for relating to
alterity: ‘The discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between
the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated
from the theme that seemed to hold him, forthwith contests the meaning
I ascribe to my interlocutor. The formal structure of language thereby
announces the ethical inviolability’ of the Other (Levinas, 2005, p. 195).
This structure of language is illuminated by Levinas’s differentiation of
‘expression’ and ‘representation’. Representation presupposes the truth
claims of language’s referentiality, the sedimentation of meaning through
the history of usage, and is subject to pre-existing thought. Expression,
on the other hand, is a ‘primordial’ discourse that returns to the underly-
ing condition that has supposedly been overcome by the arbitrary
adequations of linguistic representation (Levinas, 2005, pp. 201–2).
Put otherwise, as language pre-exists the self, as we are born into it,
it preempts us, and through it we can never have an original relation
with the world. We are interpolated by language and the address of the
Other. ‘More generally’, argues Judith Butler, ‘discourse makes an ethi-
cal claim on us. In the simple sense and perhaps not quite as Levinas
intended, we are first spoken to, addressed, by an Other, before we
assume language ourselves. And we can conclude further that it is only
on the condition that we are addressed that we are able to make use of
language. It is in this sense that the Other is the condition of language’
(2004, pp. 138–9). In sum, absolute difference can only be established
through language (Levinas, 2005, p. 195).

Given the primordial condition of language, one’s engagement with
the world via language is rather the world’s linguistic engagement of
self: ‘Language conditions thought – not language in its physical mate-
riality, but language as an attitude of the same with regard to the Other
irreducible to the representation of the Other, irreducible to an intention
of thought, irreducible to a consciousness of … since relating to what
no consciousness can contain, relating to the infinity of the Other.
Language is not enacted within a consciousness; it comes to me from
the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question’
(Levinas, 2005, p. 204). The relation with the ‘infinitely transcendent,
infinitely different’ Other (Levinas, 2005, p. 194), is therefore with the
‘face’ of the Other, to which the Other is not reducible, and of which
representations merely ascribe alterity to the faced Other (Levinas,
2005, pp. 200, 215). As Butler puts it, the ““face” of the Other cannot
be read for a secret meaning …. Strictly speaking, then, the face does
not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver
that to which it refers’ (2004, pp. 131, 144). The ethics of recognising alterity or rather of expressing alterity is bound to revealing failure as a representational practice (Butler, 2004, p. 144).

Under the theoretical regime mentioned above, ethics may seem to inhere in language and consciousness, but an ethical relation with the Other requires work – although that might not be apparent from Levinas’s description of the ethical encounter:

The idea of infinity is produced in the opposition of conversation, in sociality. The relation with the face, with the absolutely other which I cannot contain, the other in this sense infinite, is nonetheless my idea, a commerce. But the relation is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The ‘resistance’ of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical. The first revelation of the other, presupposed in all other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and circumnavigating him by ruse. I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his revelation’

(2005, p. 197)

The passivity of the encounter must be understood in contradistinction to the activation of language in the totalizing attempt to apprehend the Other. Alterity, as Levinas remarks, does not just induce linguistic molestation, but also the ‘temptation’ and ‘attempt’ of ‘murder’ aiming at ‘sensible datum’ of the elusive Other – even though the ‘grasp that contests the independence of the thing’ [much like representation] preserves it’ (Levinas, 2005, pp. 194, 198). Butler explains the murderous situation thus: ‘the non-violence that Levinas seems to promote does not come from a peaceful place, but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence’, producing a murderous temptation (to preempt the infinite engulfing of finite consciousness) as well as its prohibition (2004, pp. 134, 137). The ethical struggle cannot transcend the situation it describes (as a ‘consciousness of struggle’) but is always already implicated in that situation as consciousness is always already structured by otherness.

As the foregoing chapters have argued through a reading of various literary, architectural, critical and theoretical texts, memory and trauma studies, particularly in relation to the Holocaust, tend to assume an ethical expression of alterity, when in fact they take up the active position of totalizing representation. The disruptions of representation by otherness produce aporias that are taken as the Other itself (rather than
its face), or as the traumatic experience of the Other. Butler argues that ‘For Levinas, the situation of discourse consists in the fact that language arrives as an address we do not will, and by which we are, in an original sense, captured …. So there is a certain violence already in being addressed, given a name, subject to a set of impositions, compelled to respond to an exacting alterity. No one controls the terms by which one is addressed, at least not in the most fundamental way. To be addressed is from the start, deprived of will, and to have that deprivation exist as the basis of one’s situation in discourse’ (Butler, 2004, p. 139). This original encounter – a foundational trauma or structural trauma – with historical losses is thereby universalised. The ethical stance of much theory and practice of Holocaust traumatic memory does not admit its implication in a murderous struggle with the Other but assumes a removed or transcendent consciousness of that struggle. The infinition of the Other in the finite, remembering self shifts, as we have seen, under certain theoretical regimes, to its converse, the infinition of the self in the finite, remembered Other.

In her compelling argument for the transvaluation of self-mourning in the US after the attacks of 9/11 into a more progressive form of grief by which America’s geopolitical others could be recognised on the grounds of mutual injury, Butler reveals something of the problem faced, I think, by current theories and theoretically informed practices of Holocaust memory and trauma. Butler explores what it is to be ‘beside oneself with grief’, what it is that one becomes in grief, or what is left of the self, what remains. If grief is caused by losing something beyond one’s control, perhaps ‘we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own. If I do not always know what seizes me on such occasions, and if I do not always know what it is in another person that I have lost, it may be that this sphere of dispossession is precisely the one that exposes my unknowingness, the unconscious imprint of my primary sociality’ (Butler, 2004, pp. 29, 28). This is the basis of a politicised mourning of otherness rather than the national self. I would add and empathise that this is not the confusion a foundational, structural trauma (the discontinuity of oneself with oneself) for a confrontation with historical trauma (the discontinuity of self and historical Other). That confusion, as we have seen, renders historical catastrophe exemplary of the pre-existing
foundational trauma. Butler is, I think, arguing something different. Grief illuminates our original, social constitution, and what might be described as potential platform for living with historical otherness – a potential openness to otherness. How might this scheme be transposed onto Holocaust memory? In assuming a Levinasian ethics, Holocaust memory time and time again gives oneself up to the other, but in a double movement also retains the self at the expense of the Other. As I have argued throughout the present study, Holocaust memory needs to hold onto a sense of oneself in order to remember the other – in order to know where self and other become conflated. This is different from Butler's concern, but her model of mourning begins with self-recognition, no matter how interrupted, which is of relevance here. (By 'self' I am not referring to the individuation of memory; recalling Assmann and Halbwachs with which I began, any act of memory is socially and culturally framed or constructed.) The urgency of undoing this conflation has been demonstrated in German cultures of memory contoured by countermonumental architecture and articulated by the work of Schlink and Sebald. However, the remembering self is often eclipsed in theoretical regimes designed to undo the nationalisation of memory found elsewhere, particularly in cultures of American Holocaust memory. It is, then, by historicising the act of recall, those who recollect and the limited transferential relations staged by that act that Holocaust memory can have an afterlife that is differentiated from textual traumas and the survival of textual experiences.

As traumatic memory travels along routes structured by Holocaust-related trauma and memory studies, the identification of those who remember alongside the materials by which they remember and who and what they remember will afford historically specific impediments to trauma's seemingly autonomous progress. Without denying its affectiveness, or the possibility of transferential relations, the notion that trauma might get stuck in historically specific situations makes possible an ethics of Holocaust remembrance that might otherwise be too easily assumed, and reveals a politics of Holocaust remembrance, particularly in national contexts, that might otherwise be obfuscated. Of course, Holocaust remembrance takes place in transnational and transcultural contexts, which have not been the subject of this book, but which need to be noted in this conclusion. The emphasis in this metacriticism of Holocaust studies has been on how traumatic memory travels in cultural, critical and theoretical discourses, but obviously those discourses alone do not explain the transculturalisation and transnationalisation of Holocaust memory. Michael Rothberg's recent *Multidirectional*
Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization deserves mention, although I cannot do justice to his argument here. Rothberg’s conception of memory as multidirectional moves memory beyond competitive claims over the past in the public sphere: the idea that the public sphere is a ‘scarce resource’ capable of accommodating a finite number of cultural – Rothberg, in the fashion of Halbwachs, uses the terms ‘collective’ – memories or, rather, one predominant memory at the expense of others (2009, pp. 2–3). The competitive version of memory is underpinned by a belief in a direct correspondence between memory and identity, as if memories own identities and identities own memories (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). In contrast, the public sphere must be rethought as an infinitely malleable and productive space that can accommodate the proliferation of memories and identities, and which can accommodate the inherent nature of memory itself. Just as ‘memory captures simultaneously the individual, the embodied, and live side and the collective, social and constructed side of our relations to the past’, the formation of memory is never strictly autonomous, impermeable to ostensibly external influences, but fundamentally multidirectional: ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing … productive and not privative’ (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). Just as the boundaries of memory are permeable, so are those of group identities informed by acts of remembrance (Rothberg, 2009, p. 5). With this in mind, the public sphere is more accurately thought of as an arena in which memory and identity, no matter the claims made upon them, are rendered vulnerable to their intrinsic dialogism and thereby open to dialogues with other memories and identities, the constitutive influence of which might have already been felt or borrowed. Given this dialogism, memory and identity may develop in unexpected and unprescribed ways (and even if this dialogue retains a competitive edge, that competition still generates a productive tension in which the attempted suppression of other identities and memories will inevitably rely on a recognition of the other, an inadvertent dialogue with that other, an unavoidable invitation to that other to respond, countervailing responses, and an excess of new memory work needed for the attempted suppression (Rothberg, 2009, p. 11).)

Moving beyond a competitive model of memory, then, Rothberg argues how Holocaust memory emerged in dialogue with other memories of modernity’s extremes, namely colonialism and slavery and their legacies, and how a meeting of memories enabled, rather than displaced, the articulation of different pasts. To name but one example, Rothberg argues the relation between some Holocaust writing in France and
the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), and the way in which a political consciousness of genocide and creative responses to it afforded ways of thinking about the struggle for decolonisation and vice versa (2009, pp. 6–7, 175–226).

Where I have argued the problematic dimensions of shared traumatic memory, Rothberg has tracked, through post-1945 culture, the culturally creative and ethical potential of shared remembrance. (I have argued that when trauma is shared the dynamics of memory are unidirectional in that the experiences of those who appropriate Holocaust trauma are not commensurate with those who have witnessed the Holocaust as its victims.) Rothberg has found a way of thinking past the binary opposition between the universal and the particular that critiques of memory and trauma studies, including my own, have difficulty freeing themselves from. Where this book has argued against the universalisation of trauma and attempted to reinstall the particularities of what is remembered, how it is remembered and who is doing the remembering, what is to stop this from becoming a static model of memory in which the particular is entrenched in (and valorised by) its opposition to its other: the universal? (At various points, this book has argued that it is notions of the Holocaust's uniqueness, its sublimity, that have ironically led to its universalisation.) Rothberg's approach is not to find equation between past events and their remembrance but rather continuities and discontinuities, symmetries and asymmetries – and on this highly contingent and unstable common ground, justice may be envisioned informed by provisional solidarities (2009, pp. 16–21). (Put another way, political recognition and representation of violence, and reparations, need to take place outside of the narrowness of specific national and cultural frameworks that may have enabled violence and victimisation in the first place, or they need to be correspondent with transnational and transcultural processes that have informed victimisation (Rothberg, 2009, p. 20).) It is the multidirectional nature of memory itself – ‘the model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites’ (Rothberg, 2009, p. 11) – that affords the possibility of a common ground between remembrance and justice. Indeed, an ethics can be found in the conceptual ability of mutidirectionality to trace the legacies of specific events as they take the form of memory – otherwise an amnesia reigns in which the complex and unpredictable after-effects, or affects, of modernity's extremes are forgotten under the name of uniqueness and exclusivity.
Multidirectionality therefore allows a way of thinking beyond the binary opposition between the universal and the particular, by rethinking the universal as a capacious, open-ended concept that allows memory to travel through a series of historically particular situations and their demands (Rothberg, 2009, p. 22). While the stakes of my argument have been different from Rothberg’s in that I have critiqued the contagion of trauma, my book has had to recognize the way that a perceived traumatic memory travels through cultures—and it cannot deny that trauma will continue to travel, especially in an era of globalised, transnational and transcultural Holocaust memory. (Indeed, I opened with a consideration of the way in which Eaglestone identified the strategies by which testimonial writing resists identification, suggesting that such strategies are strategically ignored by readers as they lay claims to the text.) While I have focused on unidirectional, appropriative claims on Holocaust memory, multidirectionality would offer a means to historically ground an evolving universalism (an expansive afterlife of Holocaust memory). The fundamental difference remains, though, in that multidirectional memory is predicated on affinous historical experiences; unidirectional memory installs that experience where there is none to begin with. This is not to suggest that the afterlife of Holocaust memory is dependent on its being relived through other traumas, as that would redraw the essentialising line between memory and identity and construct an opposition between authentic and inauthentic memory dependent on singular or group experience (as critiqued by Landsberg and Rothberg). This is not to suggest that in the absence of the Holocaust’s own affectiveness, other traumas and identities simply act as vehicles for Holocaust memory. It is to suggest that we need to hold onto a more nuanced and gradated sense of trauma and historical affect, particularly in the face of a confluence of histories not necessarily our own, being aware of our possible implications in transferential relations but also knowing the limits of our affective and experiential participation in memory after the Holocaust.
Notes

Preface

1. The term ‘Holocaust’ will be used in the present argument because of its cultural currency. The use of the term is not meant to contribute to the homogenisation of the myriad experiences of those subject to the unfolding mass violence between 1933 and 1945 or to the homogenisation of the memories of those experiences in post-1945 cultures. Much of the following is in fact taken up with how experiences witnessed and remembered are homogenised (or universalised), which in turn reduces the complexity of the historical events that constitute the ‘Holocaust’, by the theory and practice of cultural memory. Therefore, my deployment of ‘Holocaust’ is intended to indicate and gain critical distance on those tendencies. Etymologically, the term is dubious given its reference to a burnt sacrificial offering, which suggests a redemptive framework for thinking through particularly genocide (see Agamben, 1999, pp. 28–33). However, as Dominick LaCapra (2004, p. 169) argues, prohibitions, such as Giorgio Agamben’s, on such words simply introduce other fixations, or hypostatisations of the event, in their place.

Chapter 1 Theory after Memory

1. For critiques of Felman along related lines, see Horowitz (1992, pp. 45–68) and Michaels (1996, pp. 1–16).
2. In fact, the perpetrators’ testimony on this matter is inadmissible, as testimony, defined here, is bound up with notions of the inhuman. Incapable of being inhuman, the SS have somehow transcended the universal parameters of biopolitics and presumably contain no potential bare life of their own. The logic of their transcendence suggests they embody a version of the sublime (LaCapra, 2004, pp. 182–3, 96–9).
4. Similarly but without much elaboration, Efraim Sicher states that the concept of postmemory lacks distinction ‘between transgenerational transferral of PTSD and a transposition of the survivor’s story in an imaginary identification with the Holocaust past’ (2000, p. 67). In Marianne Hirsch’s terms, this is a failure to distinguish between culturally affiliative and familial postmemory.
6. For a discussion of the ‘recognition’ and ‘authorisation’ of memory texts and objects, see also Feuchtwang (2006, pp. 78–9).
7. I find in Hungerford’s attempt to liberate us from the chains of memory (memorisation) echoes of Avishai Margalit’s ethics versus morality of memory.
Ethics is the regulation of our thick relations, morality of our thin relations: ‘Because it encompasses all humanity, morality is long on geography and short on memory. Ethics is typically short on geography and long on memory. Memory is the cement that holds thick relations together, and communities of memory are the obvious habitat for thick relations and thus for ethics. By playing such a crucial role in cementing thick relations, memory becomes an obvious concern for ethics, which is the enterprise that tells us how we should conduct our thick relations’. The difference between ethics and morality is the degree to which empathy should extend. In the name of a general morality, memory should not be universalised (Margalit, 2002, pp. 8, 106).

Chapter 2 On Reading Sebald: The Rings of Saturn and Austerlitz

1. The centrality of the Holocaust in this and other of Sebald’s texts is of some debate and consternation among the author’s critics. Fritzsche (2006, pp. 292, 297–9) argues that the specificity of the Holocaust is subsumed by Sebald’s conception of a long history of modern catastrophe. Long, Eshel (2003, p. 88), Anderson (2003, pp. 117–21) and Sheppard (2005, p. 422) argue that modernity’s structural violence can be traced back to the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which is not to cancel out the specificity or uniqueness of the Holocaust, but rather to say that Sebald’s catastrophic worlds are not solely those of the Holocaust and post-Holocaust era.


3. The notion of a studious reader ‘unburdened’, as Benjamin would say, by practice and its teleologies is different from Deane Blackler’s concept of the ‘disobedient’ reader. The disobedient reader is a more generalised and post-modern notion that derives in part from the idea of the death of the author and birth of the reader and a non-specific conceptualisation of Sebald’s work as metafiction (see especially Blackler, 2007, pp. 136–7).

4. It is certainly not my intention here to engender a trauma paradigm the meanings of which are hypostatised. As this book demonstrates, the conceptualisation of trauma is manifold. In this chapter I will argue trauma has been defined in literary-theoretical discourses along formulaic lines – as an effect of certain structures of representation and discernible by certain theoretical approaches – but, in doing so, I also argue for a more productive conception of trauma. In other words, the following will not seek somehow a purer sense of trauma, which would smack of the unmediated, but rather to identify where trauma is structural and where it is generated by historical loss. It is Sebald’s separation of the structural and the historical that interests me here.

5. Radstone has introduced the idea that Sebald’s text is reparative in the Kleinian sense but has not developed that idea further (2006). The mastery of the past, or rather a fantasy of mastery, that pertains under some critical regimes might be deemed a form of ‘manic reparation’. For a discussion of manic reparation, see Klein (1988a, pp. 248–57; 1988b, pp. 262–89); for a discussion of the ethics of reparation in historical representation (the historian’s reparative posturing), see Figlio (2006, pp. 154–61).
6. See Sheppard (2005, p. 437) for one of the intertextual inspirations of this image, drawn from Sebald’s work on Kafka.

7. Another useful intertextual reference that establishes the way that Austerlitz’s images have to be reanimated, that they are effectively screens onto which subjective memory is projected, is Georges Perec’s W or The Memory of Childhood – another narrative of the 1.5 generation. A full exploration of the intertextual reference is beyond the scope of the present argument, but Austerlitz recalls a departure from his mother very similar to that of Perec’s recalled departure (Sebald, 2001, p. 308; Perec, 1996, pp. 26, 32, 54; see also Spiro, 2001). Perec’s reconstruction of his own life, via autobiographical narrative, alongside an allegorical fantasy of the Holocaust, is punctuated by descriptions of a few familial photographs (see, especially, Perec, 1996, p. 49) which, like Austerlitz’s, have been drained of affective charge and meaning and which have to be reanimated.

8. Brad Prager makes the interesting observation that the deceleration of the Theresienstadt film allows the ‘time stamp’ of the film to be seen more clearly. The numbers imposed on the image of what is thought to be his mother are an ironic reminder of the conditions in which she was filmed, as they resemble the tattoo worn by a concentration camp inmate (2008, p. 33).

9. For Lilian Furst, Sebald’s inclusion of faked reconstructions of the past such as this one means that all photographic images are tainted, rendered ambiguous (2006, p. 299). Furst has in mind the faked image of the Nazi book burning at Würzburg, which is reproduced in The Emigrants. While Anderson (2003, p. 109) suggests that, although this image comprises the genre and the materials by which we access the past, we should not lose sight of the particular political and ideological uses to which photograph is put in ascribing universal properties to photography. On the subject of that image he quotes Sebald (in interview): ‘I had that picture [and] thought very consciously that this is the place to make a declaration. It acts as a paradigm for the whole enterprise. The process of making a photographic image, which purports to be the real thing and isn’t anything like, has transformed our self-perception, our perception of each other, our notion of what is beautiful, our notion of what will last and what won’t’ (2003, p. 110).

10. As Zilcosky has argued in relation to The Rings of Saturn, ‘reading Sebald is like Sebald reading’ (2004, p. 118). Zilcosky has argued that Sebald’s narrator in that text rehearses something like the ‘fort/da’ game discussed by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle in an attempt to gain mastery over the experience of loss. The narrator’s repeated patterns of dislocation and relocation, losing and finding himself are reiterated in his textual wanderings or literary departures and returns. That which is lost, including the self, is substituted in a literary return. The narrator cannot truly lose himself always finding himself in a text. In this sense, Zilcosky posits an intertextual subject, but one whose interior is structured inter-textually (2004, pp. 104, 105–6, 109–11, 118). In the case of Austerlitz, intertextuality exteriorises the subject.

11. As many critics have pointed out, Benjamin’s Arcades Project is the inspiration for this project; see, for example, Schmitz (2004, p. 299).

12. Long has further argued that Austerlitz’s might be considered a postmemorial subjectivity – in the terms of postmemory as theorised by Marianne Hirsch – because his memories, if you can call them that, have to be
reconstituted prosthetically. In other words, his only access to the past is via an assemblage of textual traces (Long, 2007, p. 162). However, as Hirsch argues, and as discussed at various points in this book, postmemory is an affective form of remembrance. Long’s argument seems at odds with this definition of postmemory in flattening out or externalisation of Austerlitz’s subjectivity. For a different consideration of how postmemory might work in Austerlitz, see Crownshaw (2004).

13. Although, as Noam Elcott puts it, ‘Barthes’ dictum that every photograph contains an anterior future of which death is the stake’ is upheld in particular, historical circumstances (2004, p. 218). Sebald confirms this contingent convergence of historical particularity and general theory ‘in the case of a [Roman Vishniak] image depicting a brother of Mendel Singer and made shortly before the Germans marched into the region …. Barthes’ conjecture is doubly true … for we do not know what became of this general store owner – only that he almost certainly met an untimely and violent death’ (quoted in Elcott, 2004, p. 218).

14. As Anne Fuchs argues, in Sebald’s work, photographs are used to explore the relationship between ‘history and trauma’, whereas fine art offers a ‘haven of contemplation’. Generally speaking, lacking photography’s realism (or realistic surface) painting transports the reader to the moment and context of its production, which makes consuming the contents of the image more difficult than in photography, in which realism serves momentarily to collapse past and present, to flatten out history. Affording a contemplative proximity and distance, painting allegorises a melancholy (that is, non-appropriative and un-redeeming) cultural memory in which the reader can participate (2006, pp. 168, 175–6, 178, 185).

15. Indeed, LaCapra has argued elsewhere that in conceptions of trauma there is a great temptation to trope away from specificity and to generalise hyperbolically, for example through an extremely abstract mode of discourse that may at times serve as a surrogate for a certain form of deconstruction, elaborate an undifferentiated notion of all history (or at least of all modernity) as trauma, and over-extend the concept of victim or survivor (1998, p. 23).

16. Of course there are critiques of LaCapra’s emphasis on transference that date from his earlier work: ‘The generalisation is more than bold, and in History and Memory After Auschwitz, transference emerges as a foundational principle: everyone has a transferential relation to everything – or more to the point, selves and society are abstractions from transference’ (Klein, 2000, p. 140).

Laplanche (1999, pp. 222, 217) also expresses concern over the generalisation of transference, as if it is the same thing as a pre-existent and universal psychological process, and argues that we need to find a ‘kinship with what is most specific to the clinical situation, and what is produced, not everywhere, but in some privileged places existing outside it’. Nevertheless it is possible that in clinical practice, the beginning and end of transference between analyst and analysand becomes blurred – often because the milieu of transference has become naturalised. Transference may exceed the analytical scenario in terms of a ‘lateral transference, an acting out, an infidelity to the analytical relation’, which when folded back into the analytical relation may be described as transference of transference’. Laplanche remarks that in analysis since Freud, the dissolution or resolution of transference has
become secondary and that the process of analysis has become conflated with transference itself. How then can the analytical session be brought to an end without removing the basis of analysis per se, without shattering the illusions of transference?

17. In much more general terms, Christina Szentivanyi suggests something similar in that Sebald’s use of photography places the ‘reader in a textual situation where he – like the narrator – is challenged to question his point of view, modes and conventions of perception in relation to the photograph’s fundamental inaccessibility … the photograph places its viewer in relation to the Shoah’, provoking ‘self-aware commemoration’ on the part of the viewer (2006, p. 355).

Chapter 3  Holocaust Memory and the Air War:  
W. G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur (‘Air War and Literature: Zürich Lectures’)

3. See also Santner (1990, p. 47).
5. Sebald’s selection of German literature, as well as the brevity with which he treats some writers, is a matter of some contention, leading critics to charge his argument with generalisation based on an unrepresentative sample of literature. On this see Vees-Gulani (2006, pp. 342–3), Fuchs (2006a, p. 289) and Cosgrove (2009, pp. 170–1) for further discussion.
6. See Vees-Gulani (2003, p. 121). Vees-Gulani delineates a number of cultural, social, psychological and psychoanalytical conditions that limited the writing of catastrophe. Many writers or would-be writers did not experience the bombings first-hand because they were either living in cities less affected or because they were in exile or serving in the military. Externally imposed definitions of collective guilt, as well as the experience of personal guilt, made it difficult to claim the status of a victim-witness. That many texts about the bombings were published well after the war, that they display textual symptoms of the past’s uncontrollable intrusion, that they deploy aesthetic devices to contain an unruly past that might ostensibly appear to be redemptive, and that they describe emotional numbing of quotidian near-death experiences all suggest literary symptoms and literary descriptions of what would be defined in today’s psychiatric literature as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Vees-Gulani, 2006, pp. 340–1).
7. Sebald’s familiarity with the work of the Mitscherlichs can also be found in Sebald (2005a, pp. 102–29).
8. Adorno’s diagnosis of (West) German society anticipates the Mitscherlichs’ and is just as pertinent to Sebald’s thesis.  
Theodor Adorno’s essay of 1959, ‘What does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean’ is an illuminating pathologisation of the nation. During the Adenauer
government, 1949–63, the economic miracle (Wirtschaftswunder) had sublimated popular political energies that might have been turned towards the Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit (‘coming to terms with the past’) (Wolin, 1989, p. x). This sublimation was accompanied by a neurosis regarding matters of the past: ‘defensive gestures when one isn’t attacked; massive affect in situations that do not fully warrant it; lack of affect in the most serious matters; and often simply a repression of what was known and half-known’ (Adorno, 1986, p. 116). Adorno counts the language in which the past is recalled among the symptoms of this neurosis. For example, the ‘euphemistic circumlocution ... Kristallnacht’ (1986, p. 116). Symptoms could also be found in the comparative approach to violence: Dresden was weighed against Auschwitz, enabling Germans to claim victim status and alleviate their guilt (Adorno, 1986, p. 116). The FDR’s international position is appropriated as a retroactive justification for genocide: the war against the Soviet Union in the East during World War II, which subsumed and rationalised genocidal acts, was in effect still being fought in the Cold War (Adorno, 1986, p. 119). Germany had been on the right side all along.

However, if this discourse of displacement can be identified as neurotic, Adorno is careful to balance his identification of the workings of the unconscious with more conscious appropriations of the past: ‘The effacement of memory is more the achievement of an all too wakeful consciousness than it is the result of its weakness in the face of the superiority of unconscious processes’ (1986, p. 117). Lest the pathologisation of (West) German society suggest an interiority unmoored from historical context and cause, collective narcissism is not seen as a universal, collective psychological condition; instead it is traced to the defeat of 1918, following which the collective ego was restored by the narcissistic projection onto the Hitler regime, and the subsequent repair of that ego ideal via post-war economic prosperity (Adorno, 1986, pp. 117, 122, 127). So, the psychic economy that made fascism possible persisted in postwar Germany. Under fascism the economic order and social organisation built upon held subjects in a state of political immaturity given their dependence on and conformity to this society that promises the gratification modern civilisation did not deliver elsewhere. Autonomy under this system is only experienced through its necessary renunciation. Collective psychology has not adapted to the post-war condition, thanks to the practice of forgetting, or rather the social and economic conditions have not made the adaptation necessary (Adorno, 1986, p. 124). A fascist mentality, then, still lingers, against which Adorno pits a necessary psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis can achieve a ‘coming to terms with the past’ by a turn towards the subject: reinforcement of a person’s self-consciousness and, with that, of a sense of self (Adorno, 1986, p. 128). As Wolin points out, the ‘neurotic symptoms that result [from such defence mechanisms] can be readily transmitted to the character-structures of future generations, which only compounds the difficulty of confronting the historical trauma that wounded the collective ego’ (1989, p. xi).

9. For an overview of Habermas’s contributions to debates on German memory, see Wood (1999).

10. See also Santner (1990, p. 4).

11. Moeller concurs with Wilfried Wilms, who offers an alternative context in which the silence surrounding the Allied bombing of German cities can
be explained. Wilms argues that the British influence and control over the German media, in the British zone, which has been overlooked in most discussions of Sebald, directed attention away from British bombing of German cities. In a post-war and Cold War climate of political re-education and anticommunism, it was the task of the media to persuade Germans to become more like the British, a task that would have been more difficult if Britain were continually represented as the perpetrator of German suffering (Wilms, 2004, pp. 183–8).

12. For example, Wilms argues that in Sebald’s 1982 essay ‘Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Natural Destruction’, on which the Zürich Lectures are based, it was trauma and the unspeakable that impeded the adequate representation of ‘area bombing’ and its aftermath. However, in the 1997 lectures (published in 1999), the idea of taboo gained prominence. For Wilms, taboo suggests something ‘willingly embraced, [a] self-imposed censor of undesirable German memories’. For Wilms, the shift from unconscious to conscious action in Sebald’s ‘rather straightforward attribution of agency’ is something that ‘must be scrutinised’. According to this reading, trauma precludes agency and the more conscious acts of remembrance attributed to the Germans in the later version of the essay contradicts earlier diagnoses (Wilms, 2004, pp. 181, 187).

13. As Sebald writes (quoting the Mitscherlichs), ‘Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlichs’ theory of “the inability to mourn”, first formulated in 1967, has since proved – although statistically this can hardly be verified – to be one of the clearest explanations given for the mental disposition of post-war society in West Germany. The absence of “reactions of mourning after a national catastrophe of vast extent”, the “striking paralysis of feeling which was the response to the mountains of corpses in the concentration camps, the disappearance of the German armies into imprisonment, the news of the murder of millions of Jews, Poles and Russians and political opponents from the ranks of the German people themselves” left negative impressions on the internal life of the new society .... [T]he Germans had managed to avoid a phase of collective melancholy (whose objective correlate would have wrecked the Morgenthau Plan), instead bringing their psychological energies to bear “on resisting the experience of a melancholy impoverishment of the self.” ... In the circumstances the emotional collapse that psychologists might have expected had been displaced by mechanisms and strategies “very close to the protective biological strategy for survival, if not actually analogous to it.” ... Mourning and melancholy were suppressed’.

Germany’s dissociation from all that the Nazi regime entailed was so complete that even melancholia was avoided – the internal psychic preservation of the lost object and the inability to work through its loss – let alone mourning. For Sebald, the Mitscherlichs do not accuse Germany of an inadequate psychological reaction in the immediate aftermath of the war but of the continuation of such a reaction 10 or 12 years later (Sebald, 2005a, pp. 102–4).

memory of an equivalence between the suffering of non-Jewish and Jewish Germans in that they were both victims of the Nazis and generally of the war (of which Allied bombing is one aspect). My argument obviously differs: Sebald demonstrates the entanglement (but not equivalence) of the Holocaust and non-Jewish German wartime suffering as they are remembered and repressed in German cultural memory. In fact, Seidel Arpaci’s argument suggests that Sebald not only inscribes such an equivalence in cultural memory but also the establishment of this relation between Jews and non-Jews leads to the latter’s eclipse of the former when it comes to suffering. As she argues, Sebald’s use of the phrase ‘German catastrophe’ is too all encompassing and does not differentiate between types of catastrophe and their victims and so subsumes the Holocaust. The Holocaust is subsumed using the very terms of its representation – the term ‘suffering’ often connotes, in the context of World War II, Jewish suffering and the Holocaust (Seidel Arpaci, 2007, pp. 161, 168). Ultimately, this subsumption takes place in the frame of a universalised, non-differential sense of trauma. Seidel Arpaci argues that the personal trauma of those who experienced Allied bombings becomes the category through which history is understood. Traumatised, Germans are removed from collective responsibility for genocide: ‘We are left on an individualised psychological plane that does not – despite being embedded in historical developments – refer back to subjective decisions and responsibilities’ (2007, p. 166). In other words, Sebald takes Germans out of history – his discussion of a traumatised German culture locates that culture forever in the 1950s, before the shifts in historical and memorial consciousness, post-1968 and post-1989 that might facilitate the questioning of an overly individualised experience of history – and it is American and British critics who insert his text back into cultural history by falsely attributing it with breaking the silence on German suffering (Seidel Arpaci, 2007, pp. 172–3).

15. For further explications of postmemory and variations of this theoretical paradigm, see Hirsch (1997, 1999 and 2003).

16. Caroline Duttlinger points out that Sebald’s exhibition of photographic images of destruction in ‘Air War’ is, in light of his claim that the destruction over-shadowed him as an originary scene of identification, a substitute for the family photograph album. It is the album of destruction, then, not the familial album via which Sebald traces his lineage. The function of this alternative album reminds Duttlinger of Hirsch’s concept of postmemory and affectiveness of photographic images that are central to it, but the concept is not actually applied to her reading of ‘Air War’ (Duttlinger, 2007, p. 164).

17. Richard Sheppard makes a similar point, pointing out that no volumes of what could be described as postmodern or poststructuralist theory were found in Sebald’s library after his death (2005, p. 420).

18. The following discussion of photographic images disagrees, then, with Fuchs’s interpretation of their function in ‘Air wars’. Whereas Fuchs argues that the rest of Sebald’s work is marked by the ‘otherness’ of the past, the ‘epistemological gap between what happened in the past and how we reconstruct it’, Luftkrieg und Literatur is marked by graphic representation over ‘approximation’ and ‘indirection’ (2006a, p. 292). The images ‘largely illustrative purpose, which runs counter to Sebald’s poetics of instruction’ (Fuchs, 2006a, p. 290), is, for Fuchs, due to the fact that they depict the
ruination of *Heimat* and its ethical transformation in becoming a site of an encounter with otherness or what has been made other (the uncanny). (Their purpose, then, contrary to Fuchs is figurative not illustrative.)

19. With this phrase, Hell has in mind the dangers inherent to the literary situation in which a German writer narrates Jewish suffering, and to Sebald’s resistance to an over-identification that would be expressed by appropriating the trauma of the victim. As Hell puts it, Sebald’s texts ‘should not be read as expressions of personal trauma, but as part of a cultural discourse that writes postwar history from the vantage point of 1989 as a melo-traumatic story of German non-Jewish authorship’ (2003, p. 35). Post-1989 is an epochal point of departure for the rethinking of German memory, supposedly free from the politics of memory that shaped West and East German memorialisation. ‘Melo-traumatic’ therefore suggests a performative distance on trauma and is apt for my purposes above.

20. Zuckermann had agreed to write a report for the journal *Horizon*, to be entitled ‘On the Natural History of Destruction’, on what he had seen in Germany. The report was never written. In his biography Zuckermann wrote that what he had seen in Cologne required more eloquence than he possessed (Sebald, 2003, p. 32).

21. There is actually a critical consensus surrounding this argument. For example, Stephen Brockmann argues that, as in his reading of *The Rings of Saturn*, historical events can be explained by natural and environmental causes, subsuming the agency and responsibility of specific historical actors, blurring categories of perpetrators and victims: ‘The concept of world history as an ongoing process of destruction and suffering places Germany’s own past – the history of both German suffering and German perpetration – into a vast context of suffering and perpetration that ultimately relativizes any national specificity’ (2009, p. 19). German perpetration and suffering therefore becomes exemplary, of a general pattern of human or rather natural history. Fuchs suggests but does not develop the idea that ‘natural’ history is intimately related to social history. What is implied here is that bombing reveals the biopolitics of modernity. Natural history is a history of how citizens are reduced to a state of bare life, their bodies lethally and rationally instrumentalised by the process of air war (Fuchs, 2006, p. 299).

22. Duttlinger reads these images of post-war recovery in a very different way. In relation to the images of destruction (of the aftermath of bombing), images of recovery position those of destruction not as the ‘endpoint’ of Nazi history but rather as the ‘the beginning of a new era disconnected from preceding events’ (2007, p. 166). In other words, this visual ordering contributes to a cultural amnesia. Furthermore, images of recovery present, because of their transcendent perspective, an ‘abstract geometrical survey’, uncannily echoing an aerial perspective on the bombing. It is this transcendence that suggests ‘mastery in the face of chaos’ (Duttlinger, 2007, p. 166). My contention above is that Sebald critically represents but does not partake in cultural amnesia.

23. ‘Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist
views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural
treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without
horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and
talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their con-
temporaries. There is not a document of civilisation which is not at the same
time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of bar-
barism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one
owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it
as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.’
(Benjamin, 1992c, p. 248).

24. For the following discussion, see Baer (2002, pp. 61–85).
25. Fuchs’s argument about inhabiting ruins (discussed above) is useful in that
it provides a bridge between the Holocaust and suffering caused by the air
war. To reiterate Fuchs, ‘ruined buildings are hybrid places where the interior
and exterior meet; they perforate the strict demarcation between inside and
outside, the familiar and the alien that characterised the National Socialist dis-
course on Heimat’. Where I argue that ruins can only be inhabited through the
act of brooding, or dwelling on (in) the past, Fuchs argues that inhabiting the
ruins risks too facile an encounter with National Socialism’s others – a homely
intimacy with the uncanny – that figuratively dwell therein. (Although
Fuchs published her argument in 2006, the original article on which this
chapter is based was in press in 2005.)
26. Baer’s conception of the spatial and temporal distance between viewer and
referent staged by the image is clearly influenced by Barthes, even though he
differs from Barthes’s melancholy logic. As the last chapter discussed Sebald’s
critique of the universalising use of Barthes, this chapter is not going to
uncritically deploy the very object of that critique. With this in mind, Baer’s
version of Barthes is useful and is reflected in the use of Baer above. Against
a ‘Barthesian, melancholic understanding of photography’, Baer argues that
‘photography retains its referent to any future – a future that might include
us, as viewers, in the present’. Baer has in mind Nazi ghetto photography,
and the ‘surrendering’ of its referents, which were still alive when the pic-
ture was taken, to a structural melancholy is akin to surrendering them to the
‘ideological perspective that would end their lives’. Baer sees the ‘split time
dwelling in every photograph – between an immobile past moment and its
possibilities for redemption –’ as open to future appropriation (2002, p. 23).
Sebald’s use of photographic images in ‘Air War’ is futural in a related sense
in his resistance to historicism, abstraction and objectification.

Chapter 4 Grey Zones of Memory?

1. Hirsch cites the following texts that reproduce the image from the Stroop Report:
David Levinthal, Mein Kampf, Nancy Spero, The Torture of Women, Judy Chicago,
Holocaust Project, Jaroslaw Rymkiewicz’s The Final Station: Umschlagplatz.
2. Of course, the feminisation of the victim through the iconisation of certain
images does not just generate an air of innocence, but also of sexuality, making
the fantasy of rescue more voyeuristic or pornographic than naïve.
3. Omer Bartov is initially attracted to the film for the potential it might have for producing just such a crisis of identification: ‘Spielberg ... complicates the popularly accepted tale of the Holocaust as neatly divided into victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Schindler belongs to none of these categories, yet potentially he could fit into any one of them. Initially a bystander hoping to profit from other people’s misfortune, he can at any time choose to join the perpetrators; and since he elects to help the victims, he stands a good chance of becoming one himself. Because he chooses to act, and because he thereby assumes a new identity, Schindler belies the assertion that his (bystander) world had denied one the freedom of choice and the choice of identity’ (1996, p. 167).

However, Bartov goes on to argue that this character who resists categorisation, and is able to stand the extremes of his position – verging on victimhood, profiteering from victims, colluding with perpetrators, tricking perpetrators, helping victims – would not have broken down like he did. His sentimental breakdown at the film’s end collapses and banalises his complex identity (1996, p. 168).

4. As Rose says, ‘The limits of representation are not solely quantitative at: how much violence, or even, what kind of violence, can I, and should I, tolerate? More profoundly, the limits of representation are configurative: they concern the relation between configuration and meaning .... This is not the question of the limit of veracity, or of decency or of obscenity in the representation of the past. It concerns the positioning of all categories of participants’ (1996, p. 48).

5. For examples of a disorientating perspective, which blurs the dividing line between perpetrator and victim, Kapo and guard, see in particular the narrator’s description of his participation in the unloading of trains at the ramps at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Borowski, 1976, pp. 36–40, 40–2).

6. At this point in the argument it is worth, for the sake of clarification, referring Goldhagen’s methodology back to Friedländer’s use of memorative, testimonial ‘commentary’ on historical narrative. Through a dialectic of history and memory, Friedländer, among other things, framed memory with historical specificity, making that memory less easily available to acts of readerly identification but nonetheless foregrounding the role of affective memory in the construction of history. In my argument, Goldhagen does something very different. Here, I am not initially measuring Goldhagen according to Friedländer’s model. Rather, I will be measuring Goldhagen’s use of affect by Rose’s conception of the representation of fascism/the fascism of representation. Goldhagen, I will be arguing, does not so much humanise the perpetrators, affording an identification with them, an ensuing crisis of identification, and scrutiny over where the representation of fascism might slip into the fascism of representation. Instead, that ventriloquism circumnavigates the productive difficulties of a critical identification. Goldhagen’s perpetrators, the following will argue, are more monstrous rather than human, and are in effect seen from the victim’s perspective and less available for identification. Once again, the victim is available, albeit by a convoluted route, the subject of over-identification, against which a specifical historical frame offers (as it would in Friedländer’s methodology) no protection.

7. For example, Dominick LaCapra’s main objections to Goldhagen’s thesis can be summarised as follows. The deep-seated anti-Semitism of German society does not explain the role played in genocidal (face-to-face) acts by non-German auxiliary agents, for example in Lithuania (2001, p. 128). Goldhagen
Notes
downplays the role of modernity in terms of bureaucracy and industrial technology and the way they feature in genocides. Although Goldhagen’s thesis relies on the face-to-face perpetration of mass murder, driven by the deep-seated anti-Semitism of those who perpetrated such crimes, genocide is not wholly explainable in these terms. The organisation of death camps could not have taken place without certain features of modernity. While Goldhagen’s version of anti-Semitism may explain some mass murder, it does not necessarily account for all of its practices (2001, p. 128). As Nancy Wood points out, it is the modern, technological and industrial nature of the Holocaust that makes it distinctive (1999, p. 81). Or as Omer Bartov puts it:

What was – and remains – unprecedented about the Holocaust ... which Goldhagen avoids treating: the industrial killing of millions of human beings in factories of death, ordered by a modern state, organised by a conscientious bureaucracy, and supported by a law-abiding, patriotic, ‘civilised’ society’.

Never before, or after, has a state decided to devote so many of its technological, organisational and intellectual resources to the sole purpose of murdering every single member of a certain category of people in a process that combines the knowledge acquired in mass industrial production with the experience of waging total war. This was a novel phenomenon: striving to produce corpses with the same methods employed to produce goods.

In circumstances of mass murder, sadism flourishes; but sadism is not unique to the Holocaust. Antisemitism is a pernicious phenomenon with long historical roots, but the question remains as to how was it employed in creating and legitimating death camps rather than expressed in savage pogroms (2003, p. 135).

What is more, Goldhagen’s focus on ordinary men and women ignores the spectrum of relations between ‘political culture and personality’. His simplistic questioning of whether perpetrators were willing or unwilling eclipses degrees of ideological commitment and interpolation, ambivalence and equivocation, in relation to the task at hand, as well as psychic dynamics such as the compulsive repetition and dissociation of traumatic acts (LaCapra, 2001, p. 129). Although political ideology might convert prior held anti-Semitic beliefs into genocidal actions, resistance to ideological indoctrination by some meant that brutalisation and acclimitisation might also be significant motivating factors (Bartov, 2003, pp. 131–4).

8. For a further discussion of voyeurism, see Wood (1999, p. 91).
9. Interestingly, Gillian Rose points out that killing of children in the ghetto clearance in Thomas Keneally’s Schindler’s Ark is excluded from the Spielberg’s film, which is based upon the book:

During the liquidation of the ghetto, he [Schindler] watches the killing of a mother and son within the sight of the tiny, otherwise girl in the red coat, who has also been rounded up. Schindler understands the indecency of exposing her to the shootings as the seal of her fate, too. He becomes acutely aware of the indecency of his own status as he stares down from a safe position. In the film Schindler, a ludicrous saviour on a charger, dominates
the liquidation from a promontory overlooking it. The audience is thereby
spared the encounter with the indecency of their position.

(G. Rose, 1996, p. 45)

In the book, Schindler is a self-conscious voyeur; in the film, we see what he
sees and more, but we can displace our potential voyeurism on to his percep-
tion of the mediating presence of the girl in red.

10. Although a full comparison of their interpretive and historiographical
methodologies and related narrative styles is beyond the scope of this chapter,
Christopher Browning’s reconstruction of the Jozefow action narrated by
Goldhagen demonstrates, relatively speaking, objectivity. Although, he
does attribute a post-event psychological reaction to the perpetrators that is
speculative (see Browning, 1992, pp. 22–4). For Browning’s theorisation of
his own methods, see (1992, pp. 29–33). For a comparison of the two histo-
rarians’ approaches, see Wood (1999, p. 89).

11. Niven argues that while ordinary Germans welcomed Goldhagen’s book,
German historians did not, on the grounds of Goldhagen’s mythologisation
of the Holocaust, particularly its characterisation of the evil of the perpetra-
tors. The public perception of the critical historians was that they had adopted
positions similar to those of the conservatives in the Historians’ Debate in
their attempt to complicate representations of the Holocaust rather than take
the intellectually and ideologically easier course of caricaturing the perpetra-

12. LaCapra considers such a conversion of anti-Semitism into philo-Semitism
to be part of a ‘quasi-sacrificial scapegoat mechanism whereby victim of the
past becomes redeeming figure of the present with whom one identifies’
(2001, p. 123). Jewish identity is still defined by the logic of anti-Semitism.
As Niven puts it, Goldhagen was offering a form of ‘secularised redemption,
acting more like a priest than a judge’ (2002, p. 131).

Chapter 5  Reading the Perpetrator: Bernhard
Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*) and
*Die Heimkehr* (*Homecoming*)


2. See, for example, Schlant (1999), Bartov (2000a), Donahue (2001), LaCapra

www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,542503,00.html, accessed 23
April 2008.

4. On this family loyalty and the ‘cumulative heroisation’ of the wartime gen-
eration, see Fuchs and Cosgrove (2006, p. 7) and Wittlinger (2006, p. 75).

5. Interestingly and relatedly, Harold Marcuse has argued, albeit in brief, that
the national memorial might be thought of in terms of a paradigm of ‘mythic
resistance’. Arguing that the culture of German memory took a self-reflexive
turn in the 1980s and 1990s, Marcuse tracks the persistence of concepts of
resistance that still posited the figure of the ‘good German’, defiant of the
Nazi regime, that should have been exposed as untenable by that cultural memory work. Resistance was the exception that proved the rule of collaboration. Nonetheless the spectacular, symbolic display of national guilt could be read as belated act of democratic resistance to the regime, when in fact it diverts funding from the preservation and memorial activities of Germany's network of former concentration camp sites – activities designed of course to represent perpetration (Marcuse, 2008, pp. 377–8).

6. Lest the present argument compound the binary opposition it seeks to critique, Harold Marcuse's comments on the German cultural memory of the 1990s are worth noting by way of a complication of the binarism that I have mapped out. In other words, the institutionalisation of Holocaust memory has not always led to the conceptualisation of perpetrators as victims. As I will demonstrate in the following argument, the fiction of Schlink problematises that conceptualisation, but Marcuse also points out an enthusiasm for claiming perpetrator status that is not necessarily ameliorated by the simultaneous claim of victim status. For example, the Wehrmacht Exhibition and Goldhagen effect prepared the cultural grounds on which present institutions and organisations, such as the German Protestant Church and the German Society of Pediatrics, could claim past complicity with Nazism and in fact vie for perpetrator status (Marcuse, 2008, p. 382). The question remains – unanswered by Marcuse – as to how ethically rigorous such a claim is, even in the context of a culture of remembrance that is progressively moving away from a problematic inhabitation of victim status.

7. The following will argue against LaCapra's argument that identification in Schlink's work produces not 'varying modes of empathy and critical distance' on various types of perpetrators (as opposed to simply replicating those subject positions in a 'fatalistic grid') but instead 'objectionable (or at best deeply equivocal) kind of discomfort or unease in the reader … furthering fascination and a confused sense of identification with or involvement in certain figures and their beliefs or actions in a manner that they may well subvert judgment and critical response' (2001, pp. 198, 203). Katharina Hall also argues that the identification provoked by The Reader does not lead to a critical engagement with the subject matter but rather a passive mode of interpretation and literary consumption of what is a 'closed text' (2006, p. 449).

8. Helmut Schmitz argues that The Reader usefully complicates binary oppositions between perpetrator and victim and briefly cites the work of Gillian Rose – her critique of 'Holocaust piety' – as doing something similar, but he does not actually apply her work to the novel. Rose, then, very generally frames Schmitz's general questions about how we might explain and, more to the point, represent how a perpetrator moves from a pre-Holocaust normality to committing atrocities (redefining the normative) (Schmitz, 2004, p. 70).

9. If the ventriloquism of Goldhagen is such that empathic bonds, if made, do not generally result in a crisis of identification, it is also worth placing Schlink's work alongside, and in contradistinction to, other cultural producers that similarly engender empathy but no crisis. According to Wulf Kansteiner's critique, the television documentaries of Guido Knopp make an interesting comparison. For Kansteiner, Knopp radically changed the direction and focus of public television's (or ZDF's at least) Holocaust documentaries. During the Federal Republic, public television's historical
documentaries tended to focus on victims, evoking in audiences an empathy that was certainly not displayed when some of them actually saw victims deported. Ironically, after the fact of the Holocaust, empathy was safely available. The perpetrators, if displayed, were isolated as an elite or small group, motivated by abstract ideologies and, if not infamous, often anonymised. In other words, the audience did not have to confront their own possible implication in perpetration (Kansteiner, 2003, pp. 157, 159, 160–1). In his earlier career, Knopp certainly contributed to this trend.

However, his work in the 1990s changed all of that. Knopp’s Der verdammtte Krieg and its sequels (1991) used unseen, stunning archival footage but also historical re-enactment, accompanied by a dramatic musical score and commentary, an engaging eye-witness testimony, all to evoke empathy with the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front (failing to highlight its implication in genocidal activity). In other words, this was Nazi kitsch (Kansteiner, 2003, p. 136), or as Kansteiner argues elsewhere, ‘Holocaust pornography’ (2006, pp. 155–77). The problem lies in the visual dimension of Knopp’s narratives that exceed the narrator’s verbal, politically correct commentary and its interpretive framework (Kansteiner, 2006, pp. 155, 156). The effect was to usher in, surreptitiously and at least temporarily, a collective ‘we’ including both audience and perpetrators that was officially prohibited in the politically correct Federal Republic-era productions (Kansteiner, 2006, p. 163). (What Knopp did for ordinary soldiers in Der verdammtte Krieg, he did for the elite and leadership in Hitler’s Helfer, Hitler’s Krieger, and Hitler: Eine Bilanz in the mid-1990s (Kansteiner, 2006, pp. 156, 171).)

To be precise, Knopp was not reinforcing the ‘visual and discursive codes of Nazi propaganda’, but was rather, Kansteiner argues, translating the codes of Nazism into the political and visual languages of the late twentieth century, and in doing so, decontextualising them. Formally, Knopp’s documentaries do two things at once: on the one hand, the contradictions between the visual and the verbal, the ‘aesthetic revisionism’ and the ‘explicit political message’, meant that the ‘programs were not direct reflections of Nazism but fragmented and fractured revisions of the past that offered viewers the exceptional pleasure of remaining within the political consensus of the German democratic mainstream while playfully exploring the perspectives of the former perpetrators in a collective setting.’ (Kansteiner, 2006, pp. 165–6). Those internal contradictions create textual space enough for the viewer’s inhabitation and realisation of perhaps pre-existing identifications with the perpetrators (Kansteiner, 2006, p. 167). On the other hand, the visual stream overrides the internal contradictions of the documentary, offering a ‘slick projective surface that allows the audience to become Nazi, while that pleasure is, at the same time, rendered illegal and even more interesting through the superficial yet efficient commentary that directly contradicts the visual language’ (Kansteiner, 2006, p. 176). In other words, the documentary style allows the audience to identify with the perpetrator but controls that identification so as not to engender a genuine crisis of identification. The identification is textually contained and encourages not so much a thinking through of what it means to identify with a perpetrator but rather a thrilling transgression. Where such transgressions had once to be found in subcultural environs, now the same media package, Kansteiner quips, delivers
both the taboo and the transgression. In that sense the documentary style is pornographic rather than fascist. It certainly will not generate fascism among its audience, let alone a critical and crisis-ridden thinking through of that political and ideological position (Kansteiner, 2006, pp. 176–7). If the flirtation with Nazism is politically inert, Kansteiner is concerned that more recent generations of viewers will not have experienced the self-critical phases of German cultural memory during which the encouraged empathy with the victims offered identificatory ballast to counterbalance the new identification with the perpetrator. In other words, young Germans have not consumed enough media to critically frame the productions of Guido Knopp (Kansteiner, 2006, p. 179).

Knopp’s Die grosse Flucht (The Great Escape) of 2001 about the experiences of expellees and refugees was consonant with the evolution of German memory in the early twenty-first century, which was marked by a public and emphatic exploration of notions of Germans as victims, but the earlier work that generated empathy for perpetrators, high and low, certainly laid some ground work for the predominance of this concept: Germans as victims (Kansteiner, 2006, p. 174).

10. On gendered, cultural stereotypes of Nazi perpetrators, in which sexuality and gender become barometers of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, see Horowitz (2005, pp. 175–6).

11. Stuart Taberner suggests a different reading of these pre-war clues. Taberner argues that the narrator’s mention of Hanna’s illiteracy would have explained her violence towards the teenage narrator, and it would relate her wartime and post-war worlds. The narrator’s failure to mention illiteracy with hindsight is therefore deemed an attempt to reconstruct in memory an enclave of childhood innocence unburdened by cultural responsibilities to remember the Holocaust (Taberner, 2003, pp. 24–5). As Taberner would argue, these clues are among the ‘loose threads’ at which we are supposed to pull to ‘unravel’ Michael’s narrative and its rationalisation of his past (as well as her past actions). On the one hand, Michael’s failure to spot her illiteracy undermines his narrative authority, but, on the other, ‘posterior knowledge’ undermines the ‘authenticity of the moment’ and the model of historicisation followed by Schlink (Taberner, 2005, pp. 147–8). The idea of remembering a pre-cultural era, which might be supported by the descriptions of Hanna’s body as the incorporation of oblivion and indeed by the emphasis on the physicality of their relationship, suggests something akin to Walser’s isolation of private memory. However, this essay argues that the construction of childhood memory is rather a symptom of a crisis of identification.


13. It is important to note here that Schlink is attempting to install the grey zone as a differential terrain, on which the positions of perpetrator and victim are not conflated and on which the implication of the victim cannot be universalised and homogenised. Put differently, Schlink is, in my reading at least, not guilty of the ‘aesthetic affectation’ about which Levi warns: ‘to confuse them (the murderers) with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth […] that
confusing the two roles means wanting to becloud our need for justice at its foundations’ (1995, p. 33). For an emphatic exploration of this differential terrain, see Leys (2007, pp. 157–60).

14. Conversely William Donahue argues that it is the ‘numbness doctrine’ that elides the details of atrocity (2001, p. 71). In a more interesting reading, Helmut Schmitz suggests that this numbness can be read as part of Schlink’s ‘intellectual honesty’ about the memorial capacity of his narrative-protagonist. The numbness is part of the paralysis of the second generation when faced with the crimes of the first and can be explained by the Mitscherlichs’ thesis on the general derealisation of the past. That paradigm of memory explains why it will prove so difficult to attribute guilt to Hanna (at least for Michael) because the guilt of the perpetrators cannot be measured by bourgeois concepts of guilt and justice and because the perpetrator generation have been silent about their crimes to the subsequent generation (hence the figure of Hanna will always remain opaque). Schmitz argues that Michael figures both the first and second generation in his numbness. In thrall to Hanna before and after her trial and during her prison sentence, he is in effect playing out ‘a symbiotic fantasy’ in which Hanna represents a more powerful ego ideal to which he submits, splitting off the outer stimuli (pre- and post-trial) concerning the reality of Hanna that he finds hard to countenance. In sum, this is a narcissistic surrender to a more powerful personality – a projection on to an ego ideal as in the collective configuration of Hitler identified by the Mitscherlichs. Just as the first generation was trapped in a kind of melancholic immaturity unable to accept its losses, so too is Michael. Given the state of German memory, it would be unrealistic to expect Michael to be able to transcend these memorial conditions (Schmitz, 2004, pp. 58, 63–8).

15. To argue that Schlink stages a fantasy that by its very definition is an acknowledgement of that which is socially impermissible necessitates a larger definition of fantasy. It is a topic that warrants more comprehensive treatment beyond the scope of this book, chapter, and, indeed, note, but the following sketch may be of use in relating cultural memory, national identity and fantasy to each other, as well as in drawing attention to problems in how fantasy is modeled. Radstone above has described fantasy in terms of associations (as opposed to dissociation) that have to be repressed on an individual level. Caveats notwithstanding about the mediation of memory and the problems of conflating the individual and the collective that have been made throughout this book, the following looks at national fantasies, their repression and return.

Alon Confino’s suggestions for future historiographical research on the Holocaust centre on questions of Nazi belief and fantasy. Confino argues that historiography needs to account for what the Nazis thought was happening throughout the National Socialist regime, which means an account for how Nazi culture made the Holocaust ‘conceivable’ via a ‘cultural making of Nazi beliefs and values’ about Jews (2005, p. 300). Current trends in historiography tend to emphasise context and ideology as the frames by which genocidal acts can be understood. In terms of those frames, the brutalisation of soldiers and their habituation to killing is used to explain their actions. What is under-emphasised, Confino argues, is how belief and values about Jews, articulated within professional, private and social realms
generally, which existed prior to and after 1939, might have informed the killing. It is not a case that the wartime context ‘weakened moral values’ but rather that moral values held prior to war brought about the war context. (War) context in this historiographical trend is reduced to situation, but actions are not solely reducible to situation and circumstance. Indeed prior to the war, fantasies of a Germany without Jews were disseminated from a variety of professional, disciplinary, bureaucratic and governmental sources (Confino, 2005, pp. 300–1). The second explanatory framework, that of ideology, is central to understanding how the Holocaust happened, but it is not a complete explanation, because it does not, for Confino, represent modes of thought and belief outside state-sponsored and disseminated ideas, nor those preceding the regime but which persisted during it. Confino suggests the concept of ‘culture’ rather than ideology or context as a frame by which the meeting of old and new and their modifications and appropriations of each other can be understood (2005, pp. 302–3). The cultural focus of the extirpation of Jews, from German space and then life, illuminates the way in which German fantasies about a Germany free from Jews were ‘malleable and contingent’, suggesting not an orderly progress towards the realisation of genocide (made possible by the necessary, successive ideological or contextual conditions). In particular, ‘culture’ in this sense frames an understanding of the combination exercised in ‘fantasies’ of racial civilisation of racial pseudo-science and a ritualised sense of the redemptive murder of Jews that allowed Germany to return to an idea of its originary self – a Germany built on mythical and biological assumptions (both impossible to prove, both a matter of fantasy) (Confino, 2005, pp. 307, 311). ‘Culture’, then, is different from ideology, in Confino’s understanding of that term, in that ‘culture’ allows us to ask not whether Germans really believed in Nazi ideology but to ask what was symbolically available to them and the regime that allowed them to make a particular reality that informed mass murder – a changing fantasy of what was racially and therefore nationally possible (2005, pp. 315–7).

Confino characterises cultural fantasy in terms of cultural memory (2005, p. 15). In other words, fantasies about Germany and what it could be during the Third Reich are informed by memories of German ideas and beliefs remembered in the course of National Socialism. This is a particularly useful characterisation for our purposes. Confino (2006) develops the relationship between nation, fantasy and memory elsewhere by drawing on Freud’s Moses and Monotheism as a model. Although it may seem problematic to use a narrative of Jewish history, myth and identity to model German national identity, Confino explains the applicability of Freud in this context. Despite Freud’s arguments for a phylo-genetic Jewish memory that informs individual and collective psychology, dismissable by the standards of today’s memory studies, it might be better in the first place, argues Confino, to think of Freud’s theory as representative of (or at least correspondent with) of ideas of national belonging articulated during his lifetime (2006, p. 160). Confino finds examples of correspondent thinking in Italian, French and German discourse, but the German example is perhaps most pertinent. Following unification in 1871, an idea of nation was established, or grounded, through the exhibition in Heimat museums of relics from the everyday of ancient
Germanic tribes or Middle Age settlements. The search for lineage constructed a myth of origins given a positivistic, scientific gloss. Similarly, Freud could not prove the murder of Moses but compensated for this by the scientism of his psychology of Jewish belonging. Fantasy describes this meeting of science, myth and cultural memory in the establishment of collective origins (Confino, 2006, pp. 161–2).

Confino maps the narrative of Moses and Monotheism onto modern nationhood in terms of Zionism. The return to monotheism is a return of the repressed murder of the monotheistic Moses. The return to a national homeland was a return to origins and national character forgotten through diaspora. In the relation of past to present over the gulf of centuries, ‘overcoming the repression of Moses was functionally equivalent to overcoming exile’, converging in a national awakening (Confino, 2006, p. 163). Despite the religious specificity of this narrative of national awakening, for Confino the remembrance of repressed origins, projected by fantasy, is a common component of fantasies about what nations could and should be, as described above in post-1871 discourse, during the Third-Reich and in other totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. In fact, memory is common to post-1945 national character, as nations have in recent years, through official ceremonies, declarations and memorial projects, mourned their once-repressed complicity in totalitarianism. Memorialisation and memorative apology or contrition underpins the current democratic self-characterisation and identification of nations (Confino, 2006, pp. 166–7). What makes Freud’s model particularly useful in Confino’s diagnosis of nationhood is the Freudian dynamic of repression and forgetfulness, a resultant neurosis and its symptoms, the belated return of the past and its mourning. In other words, before and during totalitarianism, the fantasy of nation (what it supposedly was and what it could be) was a matter of remembrance of repressed origins; after totalitarianism, the fantasy of what a nation could and should be (a democratic ideal) is bound to the remembrance of what it was and did – also often a matter of overcoming repression (Confino, 2006, p. 165). The fantasy life of the Third Reich, by contrast, attempted to solidify its myths of origin by shoring up, if not disguising, its acts of cultural memory by resorting to so-called scientific and biological grounds. It is this critical relation between memory and nationhood that is useful in scrutinising post-1945 patterns of national memorialisation that might slip into myths of origin, which would also be a return of the repressed.

The recognition of cultural fantasy can explain what is done in the name of nation, and it can also illuminate the contingencies of nationhood based on acts of memory. Put differently, the recognition of fantasy is a way of recognising the politics of memory. This is essentially Jacqueline Rose’s point. Rose argues that fantasy is not ‘asocial’, merely creating a world of pleasure without regard to what is socially ‘permissible or possible’. ‘Never completely losing its grip, fantasy is always heading for the world it appears to have left behind’. It always con*tains a historical referent because its arrest of the present moment entails a ‘journey through the past’. Given its social and historical characteristic, Rose sees it playing a ‘constitutive’ role in modern statehood (2004, pp. 2–3, 4–5). Fantasy is not just a protective fiction that bars certain memories, but rather re-elaborates those memories,
as in the example of transgenerational haunting – the unconscious acting out of the secret by the one of the next generation who carries it – a reliving in fantasy of the acts of others (2004, p. 5). Fantasy, then, undoes the ego in a kind of abdication of self-authorship, constituting a state within a state (2004, p. 7). Or, we could argue in Confino’s terms that the nation can be described in terms of a symptom, a return of the repressed. Constituted by an act of remembrance or return, the state is in a constant state of reconstitution – of forgetting and remembering itself. The ‘modern state enacts its authority as ghostly, fantasmatic authority’, but it is ‘no less real for that’ (Rose, 2004, p. 9).

Just as the state is in a constant state of remaking itself, so too the individual seeks an ideal embodiment by repeated participation in statehood. As in Freud’s relation between individual and mass psychology, the desires or fantasies of the individual are projected out on the collective stage, constituting the state’s authority. Even if the state cannot imagine, permit or realise those fantasies – ‘Fantasy’s supreme characteristic is that of running ahead of itself’ – it is still dependent on this source of the authority, just as the individual is dependent on the collective for the possibility of a fantasy life, and so the individual ego is bound to the state’s superego (Rose, 2004, pp. 9–10). Just as, for Confino, fantasy is always a matter of memory and therefore of reconstructing the past, so for Rose, the state’s source of authority is a fantasy, or fantasies, not quite its own, that is both constitutive and excessive. As Rose puts it, ‘If the modern state is a fantasy if it relies on fantasy or an authority it can ultimately neither secure not justify – then fantasy will always be there to one side of it … calling its bluff, knowing better, wanting something more, something else’ (2004, p. 10). Not then the ‘total psychic redemption’ of its people, statehood is a form of fantasy that ‘takes hold and binds its subjects, and then, unequal to its own injunctions, lets slip just a little’. So although ‘coerced and coercive’, fantasy is also unpredictable, and in its unpredictability, the ‘worst of modern statehood loses its conviction, falters, starts to let go’ (Rose, 2004, pp. 12, 14–15). This chapter argues that, on these unstable, constitutive grounds of national identity formation, Schlink attempts to stage fantasies of identification with Nazism.

16. In arguing the strategies by which Michael deals with the predicament of the 1968-generation, I differ from Taberner for whom Michael’s critique of that generation’s stance is paradoxical. The second generation’s critique of the first is undermined by Michael (and presumably Schlink), but that critique offers one of the few perspectives in the novel by which Hanna’s crimes, in terms of their specificity and for what they metonymically stand, can be illuminated. What is more, this rational approach to the past, as opposed to the realm of affect in which Michael is caught, suggests a way of penetrating German melancholy. Yet, if this perspective is the subject of criticism for its moral simplicity, how are we to see through Michael’s psychic haze? The novel’s equivocation, in which the narrative structure is divided into two sections (a narrative of adolescent emotion that might undermine the supposedly more mature and knowing reflection on excavating the past that follows), where the means of excavating the past are offered and then undermined, suggests, for Taberner, a postmodern ambiguity resistant to narrative resolution (2005, pp. 148–50).

17. For Holocaust iconicity and its dynamics, see Brink (2000, pp. 135–50).
18. For a different use of Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay on *The Odyssey* in relation to Schlink’s work, see Niven (2003, pp. 381–96).

19. For a discussion of Milgram’s experiments, their relationship to the Holocaust and their Holocaust-related structures of bureaucracy, technology and authority, see Bauman (2007, pp. 151–68).

20. LaCapra (1996) describes this conflation of witness and perpetrator as Bitburg-like in its implications and points out that Felman does not mention the warning that accompanies Levi’s articulation of the grey zone that states the confusion of perpetrator and victim is an aesthetic affectation (p. 120).

21. As LaCapra (1996) complains, Felman has applied a universal condition to explain a specific historical situation and the logic of doing so reeks of the very evasiveness for which she seeks de Man’s acquittal (p. 117). Furthermore, and this is consonant with the critiques of testimonial language with which this book began, Felman’s insistence on the failures of language implies an ahistorical, impersonal and mechanical working of language. In other words, the structural failures of language that lend themselves to silence as the true form of witnessing here, once again, suggest that it is language, rather than people, which witnesses history. Language/silence therefore subsumes and assumes historical agency and responsibility for past actions and present remembrance. If history happens, and is witnessed, on such an impersonal rather than social terrain, then the implications are that the Holocaust is a quasi-divine, or transcendent, event, sacralised and beyond the human. These may be the hallmarks of a sacred uniqueness, yet the confusion of this (non)language for witnessing, of a universalised condition of language for historical specificity, turning all silence into a form of witnessing suggests the infinite experience of the Holocaust in (non)language – its infinite linguistic replication (LaCapra, 1996, pp. 123–5). If silence is the only appropriate response to history, then speech, along with silence, is equally universalised, as if all utterance were mendaciously apologetic. In the binary opposition between appropriate and inappropriate responses, silence and speech, the act of mourning – a working through the past that will inevitably return language to the social realm and that will need to engage in the problems of language use in relation to the Holocaust – seems to have been paralysed. As LaCapra (1996) asks, when can history begin again (pp. 124–5)?

Chapter 6  Countermonumental Memory

1. The innovative scholarship of Jordan’s research, which moves beyond a two-dimensional understanding of memorial topography as the materialisation of the politics of memory or of national identity, which are obviously important factors (2006, p.131), merits a fuller explanation. It is difficult to summarise the myriad intersections traced by Jordan’s study, but the national and international resonances of memorial projects, sites and forms are dependent on, begin with and are repeatedly subject to the entrepreneurial activities of an agent or agents generating political advocacy at local, regional and state level, and consequently a local and then larger public resonance of the historical significance of particular sites and their need of memorialisation of some kind. (The public significance of the site grows as
entrepreneurial activity deploys an array of interpretative materials by which to secure public resonance and political advocacy.) Sites, then, do not speak for themselves, no matter how auratic they are deemed to be (in terms of the perception that the material remnants share an organic relation with the events of the past). (2006, pp. 11–12, 95, 14). This is not to suggest Jordan argues that ‘collective memory’ becomes increasingly homogenised through these intersections. Her model of collective memory is conflictual and processual: there are discrepancies between (and within) the popular understanding of the past and acts of state-sponsored representation that are the culmination of the memorial project; memorial processes and forms do not begin and end neatly with the life-span of a political and ideological regime (pre- and post-1989, in the Federal and Democratic Republics) but rather lead to a palimpsestic memorial topography; just as sites of memory do not speak for themselves, the continuing significance and public resonance of memorials – active memory work done at and around them – depends not on the provocative forms or physical permanence, but on their institutional, political, financial, generational and ideological frameworks, which can collapse (2006, pp. 25–6, 52–3, 57, 60). The processes of activism that Jordan describes, the interface of agents, organisations and institutions of memorialisation, political and entrepreneurial, have to negotiate one more social factor, that of land-use. As Jordan argues, memorial projects have to fit into the existing grid of land-use: private- and state-owned property, civic-, state- and commercially-planned urban development. Reunification has obviously changed the predominant patterns of land ownership and use in East and West Berlin, and, generally speaking, while property and values have not dominated the planning memorial projects after 1989, those projects are more easily realised on state-owned and public land (Jordan, 2006, pp. 131–2, 13, 16, 20).

2. This section of the chapter will not provide a history of the memorial’s evolution. That has been done with thoroughness and precision elsewhere; see Niven (2002, pp. 211–32), Till (2005), Carrier (2005) and Wiedmer (1999, pp. 140–64).

3. Indeed, James Young, whose theories of memory are correspondent with countermonumentality, was a member of the Finding Commission (1997), set up to define revised memorial parameters and competition guidelines. In those guidelines and parameters he placed emphasis on the ‘loss and emptiness left behind’. The subsequent design registered Young’s influence and insistence that ‘in the heart of the German memorial there will have to be an emptiness that must somehow be represented by the artist as his or her inspiration or concept (quoted in Niven, 2002, p. 227).


5. Godfrey argues the Eisenman memorial to be an example of Holocaust-related abstract art. Such art can be defined by but is not reducible to the following characteristics: the abstract nature of art creates space for meanings defined by the viewer/visitor, which will be contingent and transient; the ‘mnemonic environment’ created by abstract art does not marshal memory ‘towards a specific image or symbol’ but rather creates a space in which visitors can apprehend and negotiate the symbols and images before them; abstraction registers the ‘bankruptcy of former modes of communication’,
whose untenability arises from the necessity for post-war thought to think against itself lest it rationalise violence; and abstraction's resistance to the 'spectacularization' of the art object (including Eisenman's), because of its resistance to fixing the spectator's perspectival position (Godfrey, 2007, pp. 249–54).

6. Where Godfrey argues for the disarticulation of what I would term monumentality and countermonumentality, his treatment of referentiality should not be dismissed. Godfrey argues against conceptions of the memorial that find it illegible as opposed to the legible, informational and documentary visitor centre below the memorial field. Nor does he see its alleged illegibility as a sign of the impossibility of representation and mourning and the maintenance of the purity of form. For example, the stelae resemble the amassed gravestones of the Jewish cemetery in Prague and therefore the idea of Jewish community. Their blank surfaces figure not the un-representability of what happened to Jewish communities but rather the erasure of those communities (Godfrey, 2007, pp. 147–9).

7. Criticism of the postmodernist abstractions and lack of historical specificity – lack of narration of the victims – was partially assuaged by the toning down of the original design and by the addition of the subterranean documentation centre, although the taint of aesthetic pollution remained (Kaplan, 2007, p. 158). For a more general discussion of the German architectural debate between the modernist and postmodernist camp, over the ability of architectural modernism and postmodernism to represent the past, see Rosenfeld (1997, pp. 189–225).

8. Conversely, in Jordan's comprehensive sociological exploration of sites of memorialisation and forgetting across the landscape of Berlin, context subsumes form. Concerned as her work is with the relationship between land use and memorial processes, her consideration of form is limited to a brief comment on proposals deemed unsuitable because of their disruption to city life, such as Horst Hoheisel's deliberately unrealisable suggestion to blow up the Brandenburg Gate (2006, p. 124).

9. Arguably Dekel's focus on the scopic nature of the memorialisation participates in the logic of the capitalist spectacle and visual consumption. Andreas Huyssen argues that the very redevelopment of Berlin in the 1990s itself become a spectacle, facilitated by the various Schaustellen (viewing sites), which the city mounted in the summer of 1996 at its major Baustellen (construction sites). Berlin's urban spectacles, which could be said to include the memorial, transform the city into a series of depthless images: 'Berlin becomes image' (Huyssen, 2003, p. 64). Jordan usefully complicates Huyssen's vision of memorial spectacle and visual consumption by placing the site in the context of urban development plans. The site was actually designated for diplomatic use and would only have been commercially valuable with a significant change in the city's land-use plan. Its proximity to Potsdamer Platz and other places of commercial redevelopment proves Jordan's argument that commercial land value after 1989 does not always delimit memorial topography (2006, p. 127).

10. As Niven argues, after 1989, national 'History' is not defined as 'triumphalist', something to emulate, but as something not to repeat. Negative events become points of orientation for national 'History', and the difference
between past and present the measure of progress (Niven, 2002, p. 215). Niven argues a more positive interpretation of the memorial's European coordinates, in terms of a reminder of the European dimensions of Germany's responsibility and German-inflicted loss, which will in turn prevent German remembrance from looking inwards – using memory in instrumental and nationalist ways (2002, pp. 215, 228).

11. Writing during the planning stages of the memorial in the late 1990s (after the second design competition was announced in August 1997), Caroline Wiedmer comments on the problems of an excessive national memorial: ‘a public act beyond the call of duty, an act in excess as it were, giving Germany a positive image instead of merely cancelling out a negative one. Living victims, of course, can’t be memorialised, and the loss of their cultural contribution can’t be regretted. All they can do is serve as reminders of a German debt still outstanding, inherited as a responsibility and not as guilt, from previous generations. Such reminders of present-day responsibilities are difficult to reconcile with the simultaneously self-effacing and self-aggrandising of gesture of public memorialisation’ (1999, p. 141).

12. Cracks have recently appeared in 400 of the steles, which because filled with rain have caused ‘a hard lime deposit to appear to ooze’ from those steles. Cracking is possibly caused by subsidence generated by surrounding construction work (Connolly). Albeit it is glib, this is too irresistible a metaphor for the failure of the memorial to contain what it has suppressed and repressed.

13. For a discussion of debates over the inclusiveness of the memorial, when it was proposed in 1989, and how those debates fed into arguments about the Holocaust's singularity, see Wiedmer (1999, pp. 142–8).

14. This essay will focus on the architecture of the museum's extension rather than the specifics of its exhibitionary contents.

15. Despite its city context, the museum from its early planning stages – the Berlin Senate resolved in 1988 to build an addition to the Berlin museum and commissioned Libeskind's design, which was conceived and submitted before the fall of the Wall – the idea of an extension has national resonance. Reunification, at least symbolically, had National Socialist connotations, which meant for the Jews of West Germany a symbolic renegotiation of their citizenship status and of a Jewish identity in relation to the German state made all the more conspicuous by the influx of Jewish immigrants from a disintegrating Soviet Union and the combination of former East and West German Jews (Wiedmer, 1999, pp. 124–5).

16. Derrida asks of Libeskind:

There are two kinds of void in your work. One is the general spacing of the structure in discontinuity. The other is this very determinedly sealed space which nobody can experience or enter into. These two voids are not of the same quality. One needs the other to be determined, in order to relate to history, to memory, to what is kept as a nameable or nameless secret. There is some sealed memory, kept as a crypt or as an unconscious, which is encrypted here. The sealed memory is not exactly the general void and the emptiness of structure.

(1997, p. 115)
Put another way, one void is ‘totally invested with history, meaningfulness and experience, and place itself’; another is ‘place as a nonanthropological, nontheological possibility for this void to take place’ (Derrida, 1997, p. 111).

17. In a related argument Rudy Koshar (2000) suggests the Gerzes’ monument, rather than constituting a break with past forms, is part of a longer tradition of Germanness that stretches back to Romanticism, characterised by a tormented ‘inwardness’ over the question of dentity (p. 367).

18. The work of Rachel Whiteread, as theorised by Lisa Saltzman, provides an interesting counterexample of self-absenting memorial structures that are not predicated on presence (see Saltzman, 2006, pp. 80–9).

19. Lupu argued that the emergence of neo-Nazi graffiti contributed to feelings that the monument was a disgrace rather than to a self-consciousness of identity in relation to the past and so fed into victim discourse and meant that the monument’s disappearance did not necessarily mark a transfer of the burden of memory to the monument’s constituency but rather a salve to a sense of victimhood (2003, p. 146).

20. For a critique of the Holocaust sublime in this context, see also Kaplan (2007, p. 9). Wiedmer continues the critique of the sublime: ‘Rather than provoking thought and remembrance, after all, sublimity most often produces silence, or at worst a cheap catharsis that mimics the act of remembrance without leaving lasting traces. Holocaust memorials for the second and third generations are not primarily about emotions, anyway. Their foremost importance arises rather in educative representation of events of which their observers have no personal experience’ (Wiedmer, 1999, p. 156). Ernst Van Alphen, though, conceives of the sublime in more politically and ethically progressive terms by tracing its continuities and discontinuities with the uncanny. The uncanny is that which defies cognition because the uncanny object has been repressed. If the uncanny, in Freudian terms, is the return of that which was once familiar but made unfamiliar and repressed, repression was an attempt to protect the integrity of the self, now under threat from what has returned. However that which threatens return and the boundaries of the self can be projected onto an external object or spatialised and thus demarcated, in turn preserving those boundaries (Van Alphen, 1997, pp. 198–9). The sublime has a different dynamic, as the threat to the self is not externalised but internalised. ‘Instead of safeguarding the self, then, there is in the sublime an inclination to lose the self in the extensions of the ungraspable and unattainable, and thus to engage with it’ (Van Alphen, 1997, p. 201). This is ‘therapeutic and political’ dynamic that allows a ‘dialectic between the private and public, personal and collective’ (Van Alphen, 1997, p. 202), as the engagement with otherness permeates the boundaries of self and the uncanny spaces delimited to frame that self in relation to what threatens it. In the German context this has an obvious resonance, recalling Young’s use of the uncanny. Rendered uncanny, then, German memories of Jews can be contained. Indeed, we have seen, via Wiedmer, how Libeskind’s building might have been appropriated for such purposes – its voids used to domesticate the memory of Jews so that Germany can regulate the boundaries of its wounded self bereft of those Jews. Van Alphen suggests that ‘Whereas within the realm of the uncanny the memory of the Holocaust is life- (or subject-) threatening, within the realm of the sublime it gives a perspective
outside the self. Precisely because the content of the Holocaust, its meaning, is ungraspable, its sublime ungraspability can become the significance of the moment in which our individualism crumbles away’ (1997, p. 204). Again, it is precisely ‘our individualism’ that we must hold onto in the act of memorialisation, otherwise we lose track of how we mediate the spaces in which we remember and of how we might reconstitute ourselves in that act.

21. See Geyer and Hansen (1995, pp. 175–90) for their warning (from the 1990s) about ubiquitous Holocaust representation constituting a new language of nationhood that could be used to bind national identity rather than remember things done in the name of the nation. Wiedmer would take the converse view of LaCapra in arguing that the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in its conception, stakes a claim on Germany’s murdered Jews. Via the memorial, Germany mourns the loss of its Jews and the consequent impoverishment of its culture. Memorialisation is, then, not for the sake of the victims but for the Germans, which is different from LaCapra’s sense of sacrifice. As Wiedmer argues, the memorial articulation an absence that impoverishes contemporary Germany resonates most famously in Libeskind’s concept of the void, which, arguably, influenced the second design competition (1999, p. 140). As Niven reminds, ‘Emptiness poses the question as to who did the emptying’ (2002, p. 211).

Chapter 7  Photography and Memory in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

1. Placed on a landscape of national memory (Washington’s Mall), the Holocaust (via the museum) finds itself represented within the context of American national identity. For example, one-time director of the USHMM Michael Berenbaum wrote: ‘In America … we recast the story of the Holocaust to teach fundamental American values. What are the fundamental values? For example – when America is at its best – pluralism, democracy, restraint on government, the inalienable rights of individuals, the inability of government to enter into the freedom of religion, and so forth’ (quoted in Crysler and Kusno, 1997, p. 52). Greig Crysler and Abidin Kusno argue the USHMM intends the Holocaust to be remembered in these very American terms. They argue that, despite American pluralist values, the museum represents cultural difference only in the past, embodied by Jewish as well as other religious, racial, ethnic, political and sexual victims of the Holocaust. As represented in the museum’s permanent exhibition, religious, racial, ethnic, political and sexual difference is subject to oppression (and annihilation) by the nation state. In the present, it is the nation state that safeguards difference through the nationalisation of Holocaust memory, in the form of the museum itself. However, it is past differences that are represented not present ones. Within the museum difference is literally a thing of the past, ‘a museological prosthesis that is maimed, murdered’ (Crysler and Kusno, 1997, p. 52). In effect, by progressing through the museum’s exhibitionary narrative, difference is left behind (as a damaged thing). Not only is the victim's identity left behind, so is that of the visitor. As the exhibitionary narrative identifies the museum visitor with the Holocaust victim, placing him/her in the position
of ‘witness’, the cultural and social difference embodied by the visitor is, in the museum’s scheme, evacuated by that identification. The reward for leaving behind one’s differential identity can be found at the narrative’s conclusion. The permanent exhibition concludes by positing redeemed nation states (America and Israel) antithetically to Nazi Germany, as rescuers of those who survived the Holocaust. The visitor can now embrace the nation state that will safeguard his/her differential identity if he/she so wishes, but at the cost of identification with the state in which one’s identity is subsumed. As Crysler and Kusno put it, ‘The spectator’s identification … reborn demands an attitude of indifference towards the particularities of his or her ethnic/social/sexual/gendered/classed body’ (1997, p. 52). So, the USHMM instrumentalises the Holocaust in the construction of a national identity and its projection of an idealised, homogeneous citizenry of the present. In short, the Holocaust is remembered for the wrong reasons; the effect is one of dehistoricisation.

2. See Peter Novick (2001), Hilene Flanzbaum (1999) and Alan Mintz (2001) for cultural histories of this process of Americanisation.

3. Timothy Luke further extends the implications of museal logic by pointing out that Holocaust museums not only echo the dialectic of extermination and preservation, they are also dependent on that dialectic for their very contents, comprising the Nazi’s obsessive documentary material concerning their genocidal activities and the artefacts collected as all that remains of the victims of genocide. Furthermore, Luke argues that the USHMM repeats the industrial logic of mass killing in the way it mechanically processes the past and visitors’ experience of that past (2002, p. 55).

Just as a bureaucratic consciousness shielded the participants of modernity from the part they played in a system that produced genocide, the same bureaucratic consciousness shields those who participate in the museum as its designers, curators, sponsors and visitors from their implication in the mechanical reproduction of a social life predicated on routinisation or seriality of death. Luke goes so far as to conflate modern technology and fascism in a way that essentialises its potential, regardless of ideological usage and historical specificity:

The fascist qualities of all the automatic means integrated into any ordinary materials-processing technologies, which are always heedless of the ends to which they are put, are rarely identified in modern life, even though this phenomenon is one of the technical bases on which the whole Holocaust museum, as well as the Holocaust itself, rests. In fact, the museum’s ‘Disneyfication’ of the death camps ignores how deeply and easily the death camp can nest inside of the routines of Disneyfication. (2002, p. 55)

Luke’s rather generalising deployment of a culture industry critique runs counter to the argument developed in this chapter. As this chapter argues in what follows, mass media representations of the Holocaust, such the permanent exhibition of the USHMM, do not simply turn the past into a consumer spectacle that repeats the technological logic that informed the Holocaust in the first place. Mass media representations can be subject to
more complex readings and appropriations rather than just consumption, which are contingent on the context of both display and its spectators – a context elided or simplified in Luke’s argument. (For a converse argument as to how the logic of commodification and mass media representation can provoke memory work rather than amnesia, see the discussion, and critique, of Alison Landsberg’s concept of ‘prosthetic memory’ later in this chapter.) Therefore, this chapter follows in the vein of Andreas Huyssen’s complication of the binary opposition between modernism and mass culture, unrepresentability and aestheticisation, traumatic and palliative memory that threatened to define a canon of Holocaust (non)representation and its acceptable forms under the influence of a misunderstanding of Adorno’s prohibition on poetry after Auschwitz. Via, for example, a reading of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Huyssen pits Adorno’s *Bilderverbot* against another of Adorno’s concepts, that of mimesis, or rather, ‘mimetic approximation’. This is not then imitation in terms of the commodity form and ‘its powers of reification and deception’ but rather mimesis as a nonidentical and as a process of becoming. In the example of *Maus*, Huyssen argues that the (approximate) mimetic principle at work therein demonstrates the temporally complex textual mediation of the past rather than its identical reproduction. This aesthetic process of becoming, then, seems to be driven by Spiegelman’s work of secondary memory, which by definition can only approximate the past events and lives that haunt the artist (see Huyssen, 2001, pp. 28–42). As we shall see, secondary memory in the USHMM informs a process of becoming.

4. Wolfgang Ernst comments that the historical value of objects found within museums is predicated on their obsolescence, their status as waste or rubbish, which is then subject to ‘transubstantiation’ and transvaluation through the processes of retrieval, preservation, storage, curation and exhibition. As Ernst argues, in the case of the Prague museum that process of transubstantiation is short-circuited – a ‘fatal perversion of museal transubstantiation, translating previously religious semiophors into pure cultural materiality’:

In an economy of recycling, every piece of rubbish is conceivable as a potential object and vice versa; in the case of the Prague museum, though, the circle of cultural dis/appropriation short-circuited symbolic exchange and death. Objects arriving from closed synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia transubstantiated into museum objects without a time of transition in between – a fatal interlacing of inventory data and death lists. There was a mortal real-time relation between the inventory numbers of dead objects arriving at the museum and the list of living people (their possessors) facing deportation to concentration camps. While the storerooms of the museum abounded with objects, Theresienstadt was emptied in 1943, with the victims being transported to Auschwitz (Ernst, 2000, p. 24.)

Ernst argues that a process of ‘real-time’ musealisation continued at the camps themselves, with the removal of remaining possessions from those newly arrived and the plundering of their bodies for gold teeth and hair after their death. The liberators of the camps who encountered storerooms full of these objects also encountered the logic that was to be repeated in the organisation of the Auschwitz museum itself (Ernst, 2000, p. 25).

mindful here of Michael Rothberg’s very useful conception of the idea of ‘screen memory’ as not the cultural apparatus for competitive memory but an arena for the consideration of the confluence of asymmetrical memories of modernity’s different extremes of genocide, slavery and colonialism (2009, pp. 12–16). I discuss Rothberg’s ‘multidirectional memory’ in my conclusion.

6. For an overview of (some) theories of museal performance, and how they might be applied to Holocaust museums, see Crownshaw (2000).

7. Susan Crane argues that the cultural memory organised by museums through acts of retrieval, preservation, storage and exhibition can only be thought of in terms of a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between individual visitor, the public and the institutional organisation of the past. This is not a top-down relationship in which a version of the past is imposed, but, rather, the museum provides a ‘medium’ (and ‘metaphor’) by which individual memory can be formed and organised and so by which cultural memories form that are not contained by the museum. In other words, we must think ‘through’ the museum, beyond institutional histories of any singular type’ (Crane, 2000, p. 5).

8. In Andrea Liss’s earlier, similar but less developed concept, ‘Postmemories … refers to … artists’ distance from the events [of the Shoah] as well as their relationship to the fallout of the experiences [of those events]. Postmemories thus constitute the imprints that photographic imagery of the Shoah have created within the post-Auschwitz generation. Artists and museum planners have developed ways to respond to these memories, to give new life to the representation of the events, and to provoke respectful remembrance for its victims’ (1998, p. 86). Liss’s definition seems to predate Hirsch’s conception of the term (in its singular form) (1998, p. 134 n2). Although Hirsch’s concept is more thoroughly elaborated, Liss, as we shall see, problematises more rigorously the concept of vicarious or secondary memory.

9. Yaffa Eliach and her family escaped but returned in 1944 and were subject to a local pogrom in which many of the original 29 survivors, including Eliach’s mother, were murdered. Eliach and her brother escaped with photographs hidden about their persons. These smuggled photographs, together with those saved by other survivors or collected from relatives of Ejszyszki’s population were reproduced to comprise the archive housed in the Tower of Faces (Hirsch, 1997, p. 256). For further details of the survival of these photographs and Eliach’s collection of them, see Liss (1998, pp. 26–9, 33–4).

10. Diane Taylor would describe the difference between place and performed or spatialised place as that between the ‘archive’ of ‘enduring materials’ and the ‘repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge’, which, importantly, is not a binary opposition between mediated and inauthentic and unmediated and authentic memory (2003, pp. 19–22).

11. In the ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin describes the ‘optical unconscious’ thus:

The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject …. Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.
The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

(1992b, pp. 229–30)

12. As Benjamin puts it: ‘eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense’ (1992b, p. 212).

13. See also Van Alphen (1997, pp. 100–2).

14. Interestingly, and as Liss notes, an exhibit of Vishniac’s photographs precedes the Tower of Faces. These images of religious communities on the verge of destruction ‘emphasise otherworldliness, as well as the real material world of anti-Semitism in the 1930s’ (Liss, 1998, p. 32). The effect of exhibiting them as a precedent to the Tower highlights the relative modernity of the Jewish world of Ejszyszki, while ascribing an antiquitous character to the world depicted by Vishniac (Liss, 1998, p. 32). To a museum audience, Ejszyszki is more recognisably modern and so available for an affiliative gaze. The accoutrements of (Jewish) domesticity that decorate the room in which Vishniac’s images are displayed add to the ‘otherness’ of the photographed subjects. Vishniac’s images, by their exhibition, are once again misinterpreted to generate a generalising nostalgia for a lost Jewish world (Liss, 1998, p. 32). The implication of their place in the exhibition is that such a world was only modernised by its encounter with processes and agents of genocide. The antique character of this lost world may generate nostalgia, but that exquisite nostalgia is predicated upon and therefore painfully enjoyed at the expense of the loss of life. The unfamiliar world of Vishniac’s Jews is displayed near the exhibition of American popular sentiment and government policy towards the Jewish refugees, both of which were reluctant to afford sanctuary despite knowledge of an unfolding Holocaust. Liss wonders whether logic of putting these two exhibits in proximity to each other might rationalise American reluctance. Vishniac’s premodern Jews would never integrate into modern America (Liss, 1998, p. 32).

15. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart have argued for a theorisation of photographic images that considers the materiality of the images without reducing them to the status of commodity or ideological prop (2004, p. 1). Making the image tangible and physically present, photographic theory can map the performances around such objects, as the material presence of the image is ‘enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions’ (Edwards and Hart, 2004, p. 1). In finding meaning in materiality, photographs are not given a ‘positivist character’. In other words, meaning is not identical with physical presence, but determined by a ‘fluid relationship between people, images and things’ (Edwards and Hart, 2004, p. 3). What is more, a recognition of the different material forms of photographic images means differentiating between the ‘embodied experiences’ of meaning that are contingent upon different materialities as well as different ‘theatres of consumption’ (Edwards and Hart, 2004, p. 5). Rendering the images more tangible allows their social biography to be mapped out, for ‘an object cannot be fully understood [unless] belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning’ (Edwards and Hart, 2004, p. 4). Social biography can determine the intersection between photographs and the powerful
systems by which they are classified and exhibited in museums and archives. Or, social biography can narrate the way that photographs elude or exceed such classification (see also Edwards, 2001, pp. 19–21). In terms of the Tower of Faces, the social biography of Eliach’s photographs – the story of their survival, which is narrated in the exhibit, and the story of their exhibition which takes the form of the exhibit itself – lends an aura to the images that, as we shall see, works with and against the museum’s nationalist intentions. Whatever their work, the social biography of those photographs is necessary to understand their function in the museum. As this chapter will argue, it is the biography of the photographs that belie the aura of their reproductions in the USHMM.

This is not to suggest that the biography of Eliach’s photographic images should be read in a chronological fashion, as their auratic meanings are determined by an oscillation between their past and their present. The photographic images accrue aura through their survival and the reception of that survival but that aura is equally generated by the moment of their original creation. Although mechanically reproduced, the original is a precious indexical trace of a subject who cannot be re-photographed. As Jean Baudrillard would put it, ‘the moment of creation’ cannot be reproduced – ‘we search for traces of creation: the object has passed through someone’s hands’ in terms of its genesis (1996, p. 76). Of course this relation between past and present that shapes the visitor’s experience of these images is not unmediated but is the effect of the mise-en-scène of the museum. For Baudrillard:

The deep-rooted power of collected objects stems neither from their uniqueness nor from their historical distinctiveness. It is not because of such considerations that the temporality of collecting is not real time but, rather, because the organisation of the collection itself replaces real time. … this is the collection’s fundamental function: the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension … [the collection] abolishes time … by reducing time to a fixed set of terms navigable in either direction, the collection represents the continual recommencement of a controlled cycle.

(1996, p. 95)

For a general discussion of the relationship between the reproduction of the artefact in museum exhibitions and the original object, see Ernst (2000, pp. 26–33). Ernst identifies a general tendency in which museum display incorporates the storage systems and structures of artefacts, so that the boundaries between museum exhibition and archive become permeable, and the museum itself ‘transparent’. Historical narrative and therefore the temporality of the museum and of the memory it shapes are displaced by an act of retrieval that flattens out time (revealing at the same time the mechanics of display that underpinned and naturalised the historical narrative) (Ernst, 2000, pp. 26–7). The USHMM would belong to a category of museums that Ernst describes as ‘didactic’ and which distracts attention from the basis of display in storage systems. In other words, where the exhibition’s interpretation of the past often appears self-evident because the artefacts stand in for the past events represented in the museum, that
exhibition is actually structured by the process of the museum’s transubstantiation of objects that have become obsolete – their retrieval, preservation, storage, selection for display and arrangement in an exhibition. In other words, the transubstantiation of dead objects is eclipsed and the museum is ‘catechontic’ in its ‘stowing away and suspension of death’ (Ernst, 2000, p. 27). However, the presentation of the photographic images (reproductions) as authentic objects – at least under certain theoretical regimes – may distract attention away from the mechanics of musealisation and display, but as Ernst would argue, the authenticity of objects always needs supplementation by a ‘rival textual medium’ to document and interpret the objects, thereby staging at once (the illusion of) an unmediated encounter with an artefact of a past event and the mediation of that encounter (2000, p. 33). In fact, and generally speaking, the attempts to preserve the original artefact in its materiality are dependent on processes of immaterialisation, that is, interpretation and documentation that make significant the materials of memory (Ernst, 2000, p. 28).

17. Given Hirsch’s slippage, the Tower of Faces begins to resemble the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) exhibition the ‘Family of Man’ (1955), a conflation against which she had warned but which was made possible by her familial gaze (Hirsch, 1997, p. 49). ‘The Family of Man’ was curated by MOMA director of photography Edward Steichen, who conceived it as ‘a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life – a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind through out the world’ (quoted in Hirsch, 1997, p.49), which, through the realist codes of viewing it engendered, transcended (or rather domesticated) the differences of nationality, race, ethnicity, class and gender (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 50–5).

In light of the Holocaust (and Nazi ideologies of difference/sameness), and differences between communism and capitalism (as violently evident in the Cold and Korean War) colonised and colonisers, rich and poor, Steichen sought a liberal humanism that did not recognise difference but sameness (Hirsch, 1997, p. 50). This kind of liberal humanism is an extension of that which shaped post-Holocaust memory in Britain and the US in the immediate post-war years. Liberal humanism allowed a rethinking of national identity in terms very different to those of the Nazis. While the expanding Nazi state was based on the exclusion of the cultural, religious and ethnic differences primarily embodied by its Jewish inhabitants, Britain and the US sought to redeem nationalism by not recognising such differences. To draw attention officially to the particularity of the indigenous and immigrant Jews in Britain and the US might, it was feared, invoke the same kind of deadly resentment of them induced by Nazism (see Kushner, 1994).

18. Dirk Baecker places belatedness in the context of the cult value of an auratic object and illuminates just how much aura fluctuates or flickers. Reiterating Benjamin, he points out, it is the cult value and consequent ritual usage of such an object that weaves it into tradition, religious and then secular. However, ritual is defined by its repetitiveness, and, concordantly, to define the auratic object as incomparable suggests its comparability (Baecker, 2003, p. 12). Baecker sees this tension between the proximate and the distant as most apparent in ritual or cult use of religious objects. However, religion and art are deeply imbricated in this
context: ‘the loss of aura is the memory of religion in art’ (Baecker, 2003, p. 13). The (dis)appearance of the aura of the artistic object recalls the paradoxical nature of the aura of religious artefacts, which in effect recalls and emphasises the cult value of art (Baecker, 2003, p. 13): ‘When a beholder of art identifies as “art” something that is not – strictly speaking – a work of art, a “loss of aura” is produced at the moment of identification. To name a cult object a “work of art” entails a simultaneous acknowledgment that it is “no longer a work of cult” .... This self-cancelling operation of naming produces a play of tensions around Benjamin’s discussion of the loss of aura’ (Baecker, 2003, p. 13).

19. Above this exhibit is the following inscription:

We are the shoes, we are the last witnesses.
We are the shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers,
From Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam,
And because we are only made of fabric and leather
And not of blood and flesh, each one of us avoided the hellfire
Moses Schulstein (1911–1981),
Yiddish Poet

As Huysen might say, the fact that these objects have survived the events that claimed their owners suggests (to the suggestible) a materialisation or embodiment of those events and identities.

20. As we have already seen, Luke is suspicious of the Disneyfied spectacle of Holocaust representation. Omer Bartov (1996) argues differently: the mass media distribution of images of Holocaust atrocity has meant that their affect has waned, especially when experienced in relation to more recent footage of current atrocity, and consequently their documentary or evidentiary status has been rendered questionable. The current exhibition of Holocaust images, then, is in competition with past displays as well as with the media distribution of images of other atrocities. The unprecedented atrocious image, if it is possible, becomes the sign of authenticity (p. 179).

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