

# An Ethically Nonindifferent Aesthetics

## An Interview with Mieke Bal

“Pathos dictates emotions; affect avoids  
that dictation without allowing indifference”

JACOB LUND. In the introduction to *Acts of Memory* you and your coeditors, Leo Spitzer and Jonathan Crewe, understand memory as a cultural phenomenon and see cultural memorization as an activity that takes place in the present, “in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future.”<sup>1</sup> In accordance with this view of memory, others, for instance Andreas Huyssen, understands it as *recherche* à la Proust rather than recuperation, as a cultural construction in the present rather than a storage and retrieval system.<sup>2</sup> In your recent book *Loving Yusuf* you write of cultural memory as the capacity to “have” the memories of other people<sup>3</sup> and take as your theoretical themes this cultural memory and the social production of meaning, on the one hand, and on the other, modes of representation and their effects.<sup>4</sup> I would like to accentuate and examine the aesthetic aspects and issues concerning cultural memory in which the object of memory is something that is mediated, constructed and re-constructed – i.e. in which the past is as formed and informed by the present as the present is by the past. Ernst van Alphen describes how it is the artistic rather than the historical and documentary modes of representation of past events, in his case the Holocaust, that make us reflect upon them and thus actualise them in the present.<sup>5</sup>

How would you describe the role of the aesthetic in relation to memory, and do you think that this role has changed within the last four or five decades, perhaps as part of a more general aesthetization of Western societies?

MIEKE BAL. I cannot answer the last part of your question, simply because I don't believe such historical sweeps are possible. Speaking of “a more general aesthetization of Western societies” seems to me to both idealise Western societies and to underestimate the aesthetic quality of “non-Western societies” (a negative phrase I abhor), which we simply cannot judge from the outside. But to the first part of your question, after

stating that I endorse both Huyssen's and Van Alphen's views, I would like to explain how I see the aesthetics of memory through the detour of an aesthetic work. The reason I need this detour is that I feel compelled to qualify what I mean by "aesthetic".

Finnish cinematographer Eija-Liisa Ahtila is doubtlessly best known through her work *The House*, which was a huge success at Documenta XI in 2002. Like many of Ahtila's later works, *The House* clearly revisits the idea of psychosis as dealt with in her *Me/We*, *Okay*, *Gray* and other early video installations. Psychosis, then, rather than the aesthetic is the "ground" or "field" on which memory is cast. In this work, psychosis is taken literally, or, to use that strongly contested word, "authentically". A young woman describes her house in the woods, and demonstrates the sliding shift from normality to psychosis when her house seems to melt down and the world enters her head.

How does psychosis end up in an aesthetic work? Not, of course, in documentary fashion. *The House* is based on interviews with people suffering from psychosis. But this authentic background of suffering is neither represented in the work in any obvious way, nor is it appropriated for aesthetic purposes. Both alternatives would be politically problematic, first of all because the way people are represented is in itself a political issue. Representation would be voyeuristic, and the concomitant appropriation would be exploitative. Instead, the transformation of documentary into aesthetic is performed by means of affect, which empowers the mentally ill subjects – more on which later.

Instead, the aesthetic comes in when the young woman named Elisa who is the protagonist of *The House*, the sole character and the narrator of this triptych installation, is *the figure bearing the mental illness that is staged in representation*. I cannot avoid this somewhat clumsy circumscription if I wish to avoid a realist reading, which would partake of the problems alluded to above. As the work itself offers clear indications that it is not realistic, such a reading will not only be false rhetorically; it will also fail to do justice to the inextricable bond between the work and reality. I am even inclined to generalise this point: realism by definition distorts, obscures, and otherwise bypasses the bond between art – or literary works – and reality. Realism, in this sense, is an aesthetic of deception.

If I try to see the work in that perspective, at some point near the ending a thematic element suddenly comes to the fore that prefigures elements of Ahtila's later work. Hinting at what is yet to come, and judging from the things Elisa says, I see as the primary subliminal theme – to which the works can by no means be reduced – the question of *refugees*.

Even before developing it I immediately want to complicate this seemingly thematic interpretation; for thematics is a handmaiden of realism in the sense I just described. Beyond the political issue itself, which is so crucial in our time, this work about the house with the melting walls first of all takes another step toward extending and generalising the dissolution of boundaries. The allusion to refugees is merely subliminal; to prevent it from becoming another master narrative, it must remain a “little narrative” if it is to retain its political agency.<sup>6</sup> In order to succeed, the precarious bond between art and politics, mutually dependent, needs to be cherished and kept alive. This breathing space provides a theoretical holding environment. That is to say, the work cannot belong to or be appropriated by the realm of party politics and propaganda.

In spite of being merely a little narrative, the allusion is powerful. Allusions, as distinct from metaphors, are small and unobtrusive, yet “in touch with” what they allude to. They preclude collapsing meanings, but they also preclude distance. They draw images from the realm of iconicity to that of the index.

The shift from metaphor, the figure that facilitates distance and collapse in favor of allusion, the figure of indexical “touchiness” and unobtrusive smallness, saves the bond between aesthetics and politics from dissipating into the anti-aesthetic of ineffective propaganda. To achieve this salvaging, cinema deploys the medium of affect. This subliminal message is proposed, but not enforced by affect, and not by the poor logic of persuasion either. It works by allusion – the closest affect will come to meaning and content – and not by metaphor.<sup>7</sup>

At first sight, however, it is metaphor which appears to be staged. Hence the boats Elisa mentions, but whose sounds we hear in hyperbolic loudness. The boats are an iconographic reference to the drama of contemporary refugees making the perilous journey to a safer life in overcrowded boats. When, towards the end of *The House*, the boundaries of the young woman’s subjectivity melt like the walls of her house, she says in voice-off:

I meet people. One at a time  
they step inside me  
and fill all the space  
Some for a moment  
Others stay

We are already far removed from being tourists merely visiting Elisa’s allegedly disabled but in fact equally hyperabled head. Strangely, the

temporal differentiation that memory entails returns when we least expect it. “Some for a moment, others stay” describes quite precisely the temporality of the encounter with refugees, and that of the spectators confronting this installation. The “psychoticological” result of this experience, so meticulously described and audibly staged, is that we can only share the rigorous positivity of her final words: “I shake myself and say for a long time: good, really good.” After that, all we see is Finnish wooden houses in a lush landscape, inhabited, yet clearly spacious enough to accommodate more people.

Beyond what the model of mental illness allows us to imagine, and also beyond the generalizations of philosophy, what enters into Elisa’s being is the world of others: refugees, people who come, some to stay, some to move on. Standing between Elisa’s images, we are caught in this history of the present. Here lies the relevance of the mix of past and present tense, of simultaneity and of the present’s failure to shed light on the past. Refugees inside you – what clearer image could there be of the impossibility of social and political indifference, if I may anticipate one of your later questions? This is, indeed, a key image of this work, an image of its own political position. More than an image in the sense of representation based on a reflection on social issues, this key image of refugees as being part and parcel of a permeable subject, a subject in “psychosis”, poses an aesthetic of ethical nonindifference.

The aesthetic of this work involves the cultural memory of its primary form. The triptych form is overdetermined by its long history in Western art, and by its employment in religion in the form of altarpieces that have given it a solemn importance. Here, it serves one of its multifaceted functions. Whereas the triptych usually is a strictly visual form, here it is deployed for the creation of an aural space as well. Speaking of another installation by this artist, *If 6 Was 9*, Yli-Annala writes that the triptych form in Ahtila’s work serves to “explore a different philosophy of time and place.”<sup>8</sup> In that work, the installation consists also of three screens, but in *The House*, the two side wings are at a dull angle from the middle screen, directly invoking the altar piece of old, as well as inviting the viewer inside a space that comes into being only if the viewer yields to this call, so that the sound can become a fourth wall.

This is most compelling when Elisa describes her perception of the sounds of the harbor, of the boat, specifically a “paddle boat” she projects there. Standing between the screens, surrounded by the sounds of the boat, we are inside that sound-generated space. Like Elisa, we lose hold of our subjectivity. The specificity – of both the noun and the sound, the

tense and the perception – of the paddle boat undermines our sense of stability. For me, this is the moment of aural truth; where sound, strong and specific in the entire work, becomes the bearer of complex, historical meaning. This is cultural memory in aesthetic elaboration for political purposes.

To understand how this meaning is both proposed and withheld, the following question offers an entrance: why so specifically a paddle boat? In the Western imagination, boats overwhelmingly signify the contemporary phenomenon of the refugee. Just as trains in film have a “Holocaust effect” and helicopters have a “Vietnam effect,” boats have nowadays acquired a “refugee effect.” But here the boat is not the overcrowded rowing boat we see on television when it lands in Italy or sinks near Gibraltar. The specification of this boat as a paddle boat adds historical weight to this particular refugee effect here. This is how a sonoric aesthetic merges present and past to transform both.

This type of boat Elisa mentions specifically is profoundly anachronistic. Although still in use for tourism, it predates the great streams of refugees that seem to be evoked here. It also predates Hannah Arendt’s putting the term “refugee” forward to explain the origins and consequences of totalitarianism.<sup>9</sup> Unless we update it to concern us today. While offering ideas, the detail also offers theoretical reflection on itself. Referring to the past and taken, in its descriptive precision, to denote riverboats on the Mississippi in the Southern U.S.A., the paddle boat is also reminiscent of a past that we have interpreted, perhaps too easily, in terms of its pastness. I am referring to the history of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

One may wonder if I am overinterpreting here. I don’t think so. In Arendt’s account, the figure of the refugee, partly autobiographical and certainly anchored in subjective experience, is primarily the stateless human being without rights. Hence, anyone without human rights is thus deprived of the very humanity that would be the only “property” remaining. This paradoxical state of the stateless refugee is comparable, if not identical, to the state of the slave. Refugees on boats, unable to stay in the place where they came from, tossed into deadly peril between enforced return, drowning, or arrival in a state of statelessness, defy any optimistic teleology of narrative and of history. They refute the chronology of cinema as well as that of our position in the present. The anachronism of paddle boats thus throws into question the evolutionist chronologic that opposes slavery to its antagonistic successor: individual freedom. Instead of liberation, individual freedom produces indifference, and with a “boomerang effect”<sup>11</sup> or according to a “preposterous” return to the past,

indifference returns refugees to the state of slavery. This is how circularity breaks the double linearity of chronologic. If it takes an aesthetic work to make this point, then it seems that the aesthetic is, if perhaps not indispensable for cultural memory, at least a very helpful tool to make cultural memory "work" against political indifference.<sup>12</sup>

JACOB LUND. In *Loving Yusuf* you argue that cultural memory is the gap between "the long-term continuity of the artifact's existence and availability on the one hand, and the faster pace of changing communities of readers on the other".<sup>13</sup> The artifact or the sign is an element in an essentially mobile social process of meaning making, based on a conception of the referent as negotiable and elusive. Offhand, this seems to run counter to how the historian comprehends his or her material. Oftentimes, the relationship between history and memory is presented in a highly reduced and almost parodic way, as an opposition between scientific objectivity and personal subjectivity. How do you view this relationship? Is it a conflict, or should we rather see the two as different modes of how to relate to the past, modes that supplement each other? Sometimes even interweaved in the same work, for instance in Saul Friedländer's two volumes on *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. Friedländer's is a history-writing that integrates both the voice of the historian and the memory of the survivors, simultaneously providing commentary and overt interpretation.<sup>14</sup> It is a history-writing that does not pretend to be based on disinterested authority but, on the contrary, one that marks its own interestedness – in the terminology of Émile Benveniste, perhaps one could say that it has given up *histoire* as its mode of enunciation.

MIEKE BAL: Friedländer's history–memory mix is a wonderful example of how I, too, see the relationship between the two engagements with the past. Let me backtrack a bit to explain where I come from with this: "Truth" is the name of the pursuit of scholarship and science, and epitomizes in particular the pursuit of the discipline of history. When, in 1973, Hayden White's *Metahistory* appeared, I was exclusively working in literary theory, and with my structuralist bend, not too versed in considerations of history. What I studied was the imagination; a richer field I could not imagine. But we literary theorists were somewhat embattled by those who did not believe the imagination had anything to do with reality, and could therefore not be subjected to the test of "truth." I countered that the imagination is part of reality, even if the worlds it produces may not exist.

I remember vividly how colleagues came into the building waving this new miracle book. For those of us on the far side of the historical vs. structural approaches, the appearance of this spectacular book was, indeed, a bit of a miracle. It vindicated our supposition that those colleagues who contradicted everything we said about literature, with the injunction to “Historicise! Historicise!” and scolded us for “formalism,” and worse, “interpretation,” were wrong. They were just blind to their own interpretative and formal choices. The word “imagination” in the subtitle, yoked to the qualifier “historical,” made our case.

Those were days of fierce polemics, when we had not yet learned to be nuanced and to refuse being locked up in binary oppositions. You either did history, or you were “ahistorical”, and hence, dismissed. My sense of “form” – of the aesthetic side of the artifacts I studied and the influence of form on meaning – was too strong to compromise, and I happily called myself a “formalist.” When I started to work on visual art and realised that simultaneously with White’s “formal,” indeed, literary turn in historiography, the contextual turn was beginning to rage in art history, and there “formalism” rapidly became a fresh taboo.

And then, here was a book about the historical *imagination* – something that seemed almost inconceivable by definition. This book told us that historians too adopt a form, interpreting their alleged “data” after first selecting these according to principles of form. It bluntly stated on one of its first pages that: “My method, in short, is formalist”<sup>15</sup>; something I would never have dared say out loud. To adopt a formalist methodology at the time – and I see this as a historical moment – was to endorse a certain universalism of forms. Indeed, one of the constructive critics, of whom White has so many, criticised him on that point: he did not historicise his own categories of analysis.<sup>16</sup>

For me, this was not so clear. Not that Van Alphen was wrong in arguing that White did not historicise his categories. But I believed then, and still believe, that such historicisation is both possible and beside the primary point. Universalizing formalism has never been the only possible alternative to what we, alleged formalists, sometimes a bit easily labeled as “naïve historicism.” I did not see White as stepping over from one side of the picket fence to the other. For me, the book that made White famous across the disciplines overnight was not to be limited to the formalist side of a formalism–historicism divide, but instead cut right through that opposition, as well as through others. My excitement came from that realization. The key that opened all doors was the word “imagination.”

Suddenly, I had an ally coming from the other side, bridging – as I

sought to do – that divide that had so far made meaningful progress on either side difficult. Decades later, it was the figure of Joan of Arc that made me realize how profound White's impact on my thinking had been. The 2000 slide installation *Du mentir-faux* by Belgian artist Ana Torfs, a complex representation of the trial of Joan of Arc in what White, following Barthes, would call the "middle voice",<sup>17</sup> undermines binary opposition in rigorous and multiple ways. Like the writings of those old masters of history that White analyzes, Torfs' artwork approaches the story through her "historical imagination."<sup>18</sup>

I never believed that it was true that my work – or any work that was "formalist" in the sense that form was taken seriously as meaningful and meaning-producing – was for that reason ahistorical. It was, I realized retrospectively, *Metahistory* that had delivered me, not of history, but of the stigma that indicted my work for ahistoricism. What I have always considered eminently *historical* about White's position is the fact that he firmly positioned his analysis, not just in relation to form, representation, and ideology, but in the present of his thinking and writing; in a temporal version of his beloved "middle voice" – a preference he expresses in Friedländer's volume, and which he shares with the volume's editor.

White's book may have been suspected of an aesthetic formalism of its own. Its typology of four categories seems too systematic to be plausible – in the same way as Charles Sanders Peirce's threesomes are too neat to be true. But that comparison actually gives White excellent company. For in Peirce's work, if not so obviously in White's, the oversystematization of the categories makes it possible to follow, and play with that system to get at nuances that would have remained unseen otherwise. In the case of Peirce, and perhaps also of White, I would even go so far as to say that over-categorization helps rather than hinders a liberation from taxonomy's strait-jacket; that it is the over-categorization that allows for a bold amount of messiness in the analyses. This is manifest in applications of Peirce's categories.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Peirce's threesomes only work if one deploys them to map overlaps and crossings. To give a well-known example: the sign that indicates the exit of, for instance, a train station pertains to the symbolic, indexical, and iconic grounds all at once. The interrupted square iconically represents the exit; the arrow indicates it by continuity, which is contiguity, and the convention by which we see this sign all the time, its symbolism, makes it readable. The brilliant philosopher knew very well that not everything in the universe or the human mind can be divided into three possibilities, on the contrary. In my view, he made them threesomes for



other reasons than a systemic (over)drive. If I may speculate by taking the effect for the cause, he did so, firstly, to deliver us from the domination of binary opposition; secondly, to establish a dynamic, a temporal element; and thirdly, to make it possible, indeed, indispensable, to keep moving from one point of the triangles to another, none of them ever being satisfactory on its own as a label that would characterize a single phenomenon. In short, one system was mobilized to beat another, so that in the end, users of his theory were given tools to make up their own *combinatoire*.

For me, White's book had a similar effect. His categories are so clearly readerly devices, hints for establishing contexts and connections, rather than rigid grids, that I would venture to say that his "system" of foursomes, in its invitation to disobey it, virtually contains its own historicisation, but as established in the present. The casual language in which he introduces these foursomes already indicates this.<sup>20</sup> And, even when he is on his best academic behavior and leaves his tongue out of his cheek, his discourse cannot be locked up in an either/or (formalist or historicist) camp.

White characterizes historical writing as follows:

a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*.<sup>21</sup>

In the first half of the description, formalist terms abound: a historical work as a (verbal) structure; in a particular form, espousing a semiotic mode – narrative – and a discourse that, as we have learned from Foucault, produces what it analyzes; a model to be followed or an icon to keep the work protected from change. In the second half, however, we counter the terms that are contested at the other side of the formalism/historicism divide. The structures are now in the past, even if they remain structures and, hence, are "contaminated" by the formalism of the first half. The term "interest" stipulates a goal-orientedness that, after Habermas (1972), we cannot take lightly either. If this is formalism, then there is no opposite easily captured.<sup>22</sup>

In this, White remains abreast of those who come after him. Fellow historiographers Hans Kellner and Frank Ankersmit – coeditors, with Ewa Domńska, of a recent volume devoted to White's influence<sup>23</sup> – characterized *Metahistory* as debunking the traditional conception of history. Kellner saw it as an attempt to "challenge the ideology of truth";<sup>24</sup> Ankersmit called it "postmodernist".<sup>25</sup> Both these responses remain – given the academic climate at the time, understandably – bound to a binary

opposition in which “truth” is one thing, and form, or relativism, is another. It almost seems a question of personal preference. Ankersmit’s later book on historical experience<sup>26</sup> explicitly makes this an acceptable choice for a historian.<sup>27</sup>

Detractors and admirers alike have kept their loyalty to the pact of binary opposition, with truth on one side, and myth (Bann), language (Harlan), narrative (Partner), or rhetoric (Megill) on the other, even if they admire and approve of the mix. Yet, all these terms are complicated in White’s hands. Myth, in White’s vision, becomes “remythification”;<sup>28</sup> language becomes poetic or “a verbal structure”;<sup>29</sup> narrative, story and “emplotment”;<sup>30</sup> and rhetoric, signs.<sup>31</sup> None of these alternative terms can be opposed to truth. Instead, as some of White’s articles demonstrate, the problem is binary opposition itself. And if I apply that critique to the distinction between history and memory, you can see why I end up in a near-indifference to the question itself.

JACOB LUND. You write of “being embedded in cultural memory”<sup>32</sup> which means that what we witness – or perceive of events and artifacts – and remember is predetermined and conditioned by certain values and ideas. Your wish is to become aware of this predetermination in cultural memory and to make it explicit – and to be “a reluctant witness to memories, my own and those of others”.<sup>33</sup> How does this cultural memory come about? And what is the relationship between individual and cultural memory in which the individual is embedded? How does this relationship relate to your distinction between a literal reading that takes the signifier, words and images, seriously, and a fundamentalist reading that takes the signified, which is arbitrarily fixed, as its law?<sup>34</sup>

MIEKE BAL. Hey, there are three different questions here. I cannot answer the first, how this cultural memory comes about, except by saying that memory is always cultural, since the subject is steeped in culture. The second question, how cultural memory relates to individual memory, is also only answerable in very general terms. *There is no individual*. Not, at any rate, one who can escape culture. We have seen what happens to those who try through the many mythical representations of “wild children” brought up outside society.

Every personal, individual memory, touches – or is indexically bound to – memories of others. These are different yet structurally comparable. For example, the memories I invoke at the beginning of *Loving Yusuf* are not individual. That is why I had to specify that “I attended a catho-

lic girls-only school in a predominantly protestant village near Haarlem in the Netherlands” and that the storytelling that had such an impact on me happened “in the afternoon, when concentration is hard to muster, [and] the classroom was hot”. Key to the memory is also its negative side, namely the fact that I learned about a sexual transgression without knowing about sex, hence, without being able to frame what I heard. Perhaps that is why it became a memory in the first place. The first chapter of *Loving Yusuf* explains the concept of cultural memory as, again, not the opposite of individual memory but its necessary condition.

In that chapter I also make the argument about the distinction between literalism and fundamentalism. I argue that the interest in the precise wording is a reading attitude, which I call *literalism*. I am a strong advocate of that reading attitude. On the other hand, the idea that the texts also *contain* the questions we ask of them is, I will argue, akin to *fundamentalism*. My argument in that book sought to carefully delineate the distinction between these two understandings of textuality and reading. The one treasures the cultural inheritance, and opens it up for the contemporary world. It sides with cultural memory, deploying the tools of culture to instill memories in culture’s participants. The other makes a devastating appeal to an immutably referential, prescriptive meaning; an appeal that is based on a radical denial or negligence of how signs work, and of memory as well.

In terms of what I said above about the cultural memory of slavery as a way to actualize the question of refugees in the present, it is useful to consider the temporalities at stake in the merging of individual and cultural memory. There are two paces at work – the long-term continuity of the artifact’s existence and availability on the one hand, and the faster pace of changing communities of readers on the other. Between these two paces the inevitable discrepancies define what has been called “cultural memory.” To put it simply, cultural memory is the gap – sometimes abyss – between the words on the page and the meanings such as the one I took home, that winter day in the 1950s from the overheated classroom. The question “Why?” in interpretive studies of older artifacts is the most tangible site of that cultural memory. As such, it is neither “in” the text nor outside of it, but “into” it, towards it; it is the reader’s relationship to the text.

JACOB LUND. Do you see a danger of a negative form of “preposterous history” or history writing when it comes to the representation of e.g. the Shoah? In *Quoting Caravaggio*<sup>35</sup> you write of art’s dealings with past

works: “the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead.”<sup>36</sup> If we were to make a parallel to the representation of Auschwitz – if we regard Auschwitz and what took place there as a kind of “old image” – or some other actual, perhaps traumatic event, is there not a danger of losing sight of this event, of obliterating it, when artists act upon it? When we enter the postmemory of Auschwitz and the events become what James E. Young has termed a “vicarious past”, images and texts – and some other re-presentations – are all we have. Is there a danger of turning the “original” events into something else, of creating “new versions of old images”, or is this perhaps not necessarily to be regretted as some kind of distortion?<sup>37</sup>

MIEKE BAL. Let me address this point before going on with the question (which is in fact a multiple one again). I don’t think the concept of preposterous history is negative. On the contrary, if the present has such power over the past as the concept implies, then the responsibility that comes with it is equally great. This is why revisionist historians and Holocaust deniers can be held responsible, indeed brought to justice. There is no other way to deal with the past, and historians know it. As you say yourself, “images and texts – and some other re-presentations – are all we have”. Hence, preposterous history is the closest you can come to *responsibly* keeping the past alive. That this agency comes with distortion is perhaps regrettable; but it beats forgetting, denying, or romanticizing. The new images can be held up to the light of cultural memories of others, and of the old images that, with the problematic of reading them, is still all we have.

JACOB LUND. You want to oppose the tendency “to lump together different stories as ‘versions’ of the same one”.<sup>38</sup> How should we comprehend the stories and depictions of Joseph/Yusuf and Potiphar’s wife that you analyse in *Loving Yusuf*? Do they share the same fabula, only with different sujets, or is there more than one fabula? What is it that brings them together?

MIEKE BAL. Here, I would say that what brings them together is the simple fact that they have been brought together; their having been read as versions rather than being versions. The notion of a common fabula is already tenuous; but as long as we recognize that fabulas are never identical, only conventionally considered so. In other words, the textual

material of my book is collected on the (admittedly shaky) ground that they have been collected before. My pursuit in the analysis is to decompose that unity; to argue for their differences.

JACOB LUND. Could we, inspired by Hayden White, speak of them as different emplotments of the same “historical facts”? When it comes to actual historical events, something did take place. There are some facts that can be narrated in different ways, different versions, or should we rather speak of different “versionings”, understood as rereadings that alter the alleged model, “the old image”, radically, not only in relation to myths and stories but also in relation to actual historical events?

MIEKE BAL. Yes, emphatically, something did take place. That is not the question. The question is what did take place and what did it mean to whom? The historical truth of the Holocaust is not enough to keep its memory alive. On the contrary, on the basis of its undeniable truth it is exploited to erase other memories, other unethical acts. To say, for example, that Israel has the right to treat Palestinians the way it does because of the Holocaust is an unacceptable abuse of historical truth, which, moreover, is close to denial because such lame apologies fail to take Israel seriously as a nation. This example, in all its painful actuality, demonstrates that establishing historical truth is useless if there is no “preposterous” ethical accounting attached to that truth.

JACOB LUND. Do you think Aristotle’s distinction between history and poetry might be of any relevance here? According to Aristotle, the historian tells what happened and gives particular facts while the poet tells what might happen. Poetic insight does not regard any particular event but its universal form, and poetic representation – consisting in the concatenation of events into a fable, a narrative – is the imitation of this universal form.<sup>39</sup> It is a universalisation of the singular, and it is in a certain sense through such universal forms we become able to communicate and share our experiences of past events.

MIEKE BAL. Sorry, I cannot argue by means of universals. I think this distinction has run its course and remains locked up in binary opposition.

JACOB LUND. Many theorists have understood trauma as the central category when addressing the larger memory discourse. You seem to have avoided the temptation to see trauma as the hidden core of all memory, to

collapse memory into trauma and thus to mark memory too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering, and loss.<sup>40</sup> You do, however, incorporate theories of trauma in your work on cultural memory. How do you see the relationship between memory and trauma, what is the role of trauma in your theory of cultural memory? Do you see a particular potential in art and the aesthetic when it comes to communicating, and perhaps healing, traumatic experiences?

MIEKE BAL. Healing; no. Art cannot heal. At most, it can create the conditions under which healing can begin to take place. One of those conditions is an openness to the value of the imagination. Along with its major theorists, I consider trauma the impossibility of memory. As I wrote in the introduction to *Acts of Memory*, trauma is formally similar to theater; a theater without director and where the actors are automatons. Memory, in contrast, is narrative, and thus allows for the embedding necessary to take agency over what is being narrated. But in the larger field of culture, trauma must be recognized and remembered.

JACOB LUND. With reference to Derrida's analyses of how any speech act – or any communicative act in general, for that matter – is enabled by an iterability or repeatability, you claim that the Deleuzian lesson “repetition is difference” is an indispensable insight for a theory of cultural memory.<sup>41</sup> Could you explain the importance of this insight for a theory of cultural memory?

MIEKE BAL. Without repetition, memory cannot be shaped, performed. Without differences, memories become ideologies; weapons in political strife and oppression. See the example of Israel.

JACOB LUND. In relation to Milton's *Paradise Lost* you propose to examine “how ethical *nonindifference*, far from being indifferent to aesthetics, informs the novel's artistic merit on its – the novel's – own aesthetic terms”.<sup>42</sup> Could this be said to pertain to all memorial art?

MIEKE BAL. As my answers and examples above have suggested, memory is subject to ethical directives. With art being a public endeavor, it is an ideal site for the cultural embedding of the ethical issues involved in memory. In this sense, which for me is fundamental, I'd say yes, memorial art is subject to a stringent ethical imperative that prescribes, so to speak, ethical nonindifference.

### Notes

1. Mieke Bal, Johnathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), vii.

2. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 3 and 261 n.

3. Mieke Bal, *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 79.

4. Bal, *Loving Yusuf*, 99.

5. Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

7. On affect, and specifically the need for affect to be untied from meaning, see Van Alphen 2008. For a positive view of metaphor in postcolonial discourse, see Aroch 2010.

8. Maria Hirvi, ed., *Eija-Liisa Ahtila* (Helsinki: Crystal Eye, 2002), 222.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951).

10. For the term “Holocaust effect,” see Van Alphen 1997. Here, slavery is not a theme or topic but the content of an allusion. More than “little” – subliminal, or “merely” allusive – the allusion is structural and “preposterously” historical; the ongoing complicity between philosophy and slavery long after abolition makes the topic contemporary. See Buck-Morss 2000.

11. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 62–65.

12. Arendt relates the refugee to the colonial subject in ambivalent, indeed, contradictory ways (1951). As Michael Rothberg explains, Arendt’s vision of the links between the Holocaust and colonialism is illuminating, certainly for its time, yet caught in the contradictions of her own concepts, and between universalism and “competitive memory” (2009, 33–65). On Arendt’s partial view of imperialism, see Grosse 2006. On Arendt’s analysis of the refugee, see also Agamben 2000. An excellent discussion is also offered in the Introduction of King and Stone 2007. For a feminist analysis of Arendt’s take on imperialism, see Honig 1995.

13. Bal, *Loving Yusuf*, 5.

14. Cf. e.g. James E. Young, “Between History and Memory: The Voice of the Eyewitness”, in *Witness & Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*, ed. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, 275–83 (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 278.

15. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 3.
16. Ernst van Alphen, "Geschiedfilosofie zonder subject", *Forum der Letteren* 33, no. 2 (1992): 83.
17. Hayden White, "Writing in the Middle Voice", *Stanford Literature Review* 9, no. 2 (1992).
18. For an analysis of Torfs' work, see my contribution to the catalogue, "Intertwined Dualities" (2010).
19. One of many examples is Mary Ann Doane's deployment of Peirce to characterize major issues in early cinema, all concerning the presumed indexicality of film (2002).
20. White, *Metahistory*, 6–7.
21. White, *Metahistory*, 2; emphasis in text.
22. There is no clearer programmatic statement on form's importance thinkable than White's 1987 volume *The Content of the Form*.
23. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domńska, and Hans Kellner, *Refiguring Hayden White* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
24. Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 24.
25. Frank Ankersmit, *De navel van de geschiedenis: Over interpretatie, representatie en historische realiteit* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1990), 31.
26. Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
27. I am not judging the validity of aesthetic views of history or the category of "historical experience." I only wish to point out that both scholars assume a position that rejects "truth" in favor of something else. This is the choice White skillfully bypasses.
28. Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea", in *The Wild Man Within: an Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), 3–38: 7.
29. White, *Metahistory*, 2, 4.
30. *Ibid.*, 5.
31. White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea", 7.
32. Bal, *Loving Yusuf*, 25.
33. *Ibid.*, 21.
34. *Ibid.*, 27f.
35. Mieke Bal. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
36. *Ibid.*, 1.



37. Cf. also Bal, *Loving Yusuf*, 13.

38. *Ibid.*, 27.

39. Cf. Christoph Menke, "Not Yet: The Philosophical Significance of Aesthetics", *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 39 (2010), 34–47.

40. Cf. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.

41. Bal, *Loving Yusuf*, 216.

42. *Ibid.*, 193.

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