

## REVIEW

Jacob Lund: *Erindringens æstetik: Essays*

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Jacob Lund opens his thoughtful and thought-provoking book by quoting from Samuel Beckett's study of Proust from 1931: "The man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything."<sup>1</sup> As Beckett usefully reminds us, the act of remembering (*Erinnerung* in German, *erindring* in Danish) involves a process of selection and prioritization, although we may be more or less conscious of this process. Sometimes we may be able to choose what to remember; at other times we may be haunted by past events we want to forget. What seems certain is that in all cultures the act of remembering is a vital human activity and an essential part of a person's identity. Thus, painful memories can also be important, even though they may constitute a trauma from which the person involved may wish, or need, to distance him- or herself.

The traumatic events of the Holocaust are not only unusually difficult to comprehend, they are also especially important to remember. Moreover, they are events in which the links among history, memory and narrative are particularly strong and insistent. As Dominick LaCapra writes in *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, "the traumatic event has its greatest and most unjustifiable effect on the victim, but in different ways it also affects everyone who comes in contact with it: perpetrator, collaborator, bystander, resister, those born later."<sup>2</sup> There is, notes LaCapra, an "effect of belatedness" linked to the Holocaust. One significant effect of this belatedness is that at a point in time when the last witnesses of this particular historical event are passing away – that is, now, during the first decades of the twenty-first century – there is still too much we do not know.

Jacob Lund is highly conscious of this effect of belatedness. Although we know a lot about the Holocaust, that knowledge varies; and in many countries information about the event is misrepresented or even suspended. Moreover, only recently, after a prolonged period of latency, has it become possible to identify and discuss significant elements of the Holocaust, not least elements pertaining to perpetrators and bystanders, that earlier were too painful to talk about. Thus there is a sense in which the increasing temporal distance from the Holocaust can enable us to talk and write more openly about the event. A similar effect is ob-

servable as regards Holocaust survivors; several of them have started to talk about their experiences in the camps only recently. As Maria Segal, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, puts it: “It took me fifty years before I could start to talk about my experience in the ghetto and my escape.”<sup>3</sup>

It is essential, argues Lund, to consider the Holocaust as a traumatic event that we have an ethical obligation to remember. Yet it is also essential, he claims, not to privilege the traumatic aspect at the expense of others, because a limited focus on suffering, pain and loss tends, in the phrase of Andreas Huyssen, to “deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition. Memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past”.<sup>4</sup> Huyssen’s understanding of “memory” would seem to approximate *erindring* as Lund uses the term: a process of remembering the Holocaust not as a past event that becomes increasingly irrelevant to us as time passes but as a *recent* event (survivors of the Holocaust are still alive) prompting difficult yet necessary questions to be asked *now* – not least by those of us born after the Second World War.

This said, Lund sensibly specifies that he does not want to substitute *erindring* for history. Stressing the continuing importance of standard historical accounts such as Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* I–III and Saul Friedländer’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews* I–II, he also emphasizes the growing need to ask not just: what happened? but also: how did the survivors of the Holocaust experience the event, how can it be remembered, and how can it be passed on to new generations? These questions are all linked to Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory” – a “passed down” memory inherited by those who were born after the events and can have no personal recollection of them.<sup>5</sup> They are also, as Lund notes, linked to questions of pedagogy and dissemination of knowledge, as the Holocaust becomes an institutionalized area of study. For these and related reasons, the relationship between history and *erindring* has changed as a result of the Holocaust. An increasing number of historians now recognize that historical accounts of the Holocaust can be related to, and actually need to be supplemented by, witness accounts told by survivors. As Aleida Assmann has demonstrated and as Lund shows in his book, individuals’ acts of memory are essential contributions not only to the genre of testimony, but also to our understanding of the event of the Holocaust overall.

The issues of Holocaust representation briefly indicated here are carefully set out by Lund in the Introduction and in the chapter entitled “At give erindringen form” (“Giving form to the act of memory”). A key issue

here, and indeed throughout his book, is the interplay of the ethics and aesthetics of Holocaust representation. The issue is elegantly introduced via the example of Primo Levi, whose classic *Se questo è un uomo* is also subjected to further analysis in a later chapter.<sup>6</sup> Levi famously insisted that his witness account was documentary and “scientific”; his main task, and responsibility, as a survivor was to narrate what happened as accurately as possible. Yet as Hayden White and others have demonstrated, Levi’s language is stylized and rhetorically suggestive, and he makes extensive use of poetic devices such as allegory (partly modeling his account on Dante’s *Divina commedia*).<sup>7</sup>

Rather than being sceptical about this feature of Levi’s book, Lund considers the aesthetic dimension of *Se questo è un uomo* as closely related to, in fact inseparable from, its ethical dimension. To put this in another way, the aesthetic features of Levi’s narrative serve to further and accentuate the book’s ethical concerns. Discussing Levi’s classic narrative as well as other accounts and representations of the Holocaust, Lund convincingly argues that in order to come to terms with them we need to not only carefully consider both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions but also study how they interact.

Rather than giving a systematic analysis of the aesthetics of memory, Lund structures his book as a series of essays that approach the issue from various angles, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of the Holocaust as a singular historical event while at the same time demonstrating that as such an event it is bound to be re-presented differently by different people. That these include Holocaust survivors does not in the least diminish their importance as witnesses; on the contrary, Lund has enormous respect for those who, against all odds, have survived the Holocaust and have the strength to tell about it. Following the Introduction and the perceptive notes on the formation of memory, the second and third essays discuss a range of issues linked to, and prompted by, the South African artist William Kentridge’s multimedia installation *Black Box Chambre Noire* from 2005 and Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *In the Shadow of the Two Towers* from 2004. Inspired by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, Lund in chapter four considers Nancy’s assertion that the most serious testimony of the modern world is that of the collapse or destruction of community. Nancy’s term for this kind of radical collapse is *conflagration*, which etymologically means “intense fire” and which is often associated with apocalyptic descriptions of the end of the world. The Holocaust would seem to represent the conflagration of community,<sup>8</sup> but what kind of testimony does this kind of traumatic event give? In

common with Giorgio Agamben, Lund sensibly links this perhaps too general question to the challenge facing a Holocaust survivor: how can he or she testify about something that defies verbal description? For Agamben as for Lund, the Holocaust questions and problematizes the border between the human on the one hand and the inhuman or barbaric on the other – and this form of questioning also concerns the status of the human subject. In the documentary film which the BBC made about the liberation of Bergen Belsen by Allied forces in the spring of 1945, the female Nazi guards are referred to as “things”. Understandable as the use of this particular word is in the context of the film, it is inadequate: what is deeply disturbing is exactly that the guards in the camps, male and female, were not “things” but human beings engaged in barbaric acts.

Discussing Maurice Blanchot’s apparently autobiographical *L’instance de ma mort* (My moment of death) in chapter five, Lund interestingly relates his observations on Blanchot’s short text to Derrida’s understanding of testimony as the repetition of something that was close to the witness, something that the witness was exposed to and confronted with, and as a generalization of the individual’s unique experience. A key point argued in this chapter is that our understanding of the ethics of memory (*erindring*) can be aided by Derrida’s notion of testimony as an utterance or a statement that structurally involves the possibility of fiction and literature (a testimony that is false is necessarily fictitious). The two following chapters deal with significant aspects of the works of Primo Levi and Jorge Semprún respectively. The discussion of Levi includes perceptive observations on the theatre adaptation of Levi’s *If This is a Man* at the Royal Danish Theatre in 2010. Playing the role of Levi, the Danish actor Jens Albinus had to carefully negotiate between the demanding task of providing reliable information about Levi’s experience in Auschwitz on the one hand and the aesthetic challenge of passing on this experience to the theatre audience on the other. This theatre performance in Copenhagen in 2010 illustrates significant aspects of *erindring* as Lund understands the term, since it was based not only on the historical event of the Holocaust but also on Levi’s experience of, and narration about, the event. Exploring ways of narrating about the Holocaust is also the main issue around which Lund’s discussion of Semprún revolves. Very interestingly, Semprún, inspired by Proust in particular, uses a number of aesthetic and literary devices when describing his journey to and stay in the concentration camp Buchenwald. Cumulatively, the importance of these devices is so striking, and so decisive for the impact of the text and the way it communicates, that *Le Grand Voyage* (1963) is commonly referred to as a novel.

Discussing “The Aesthetics of Postmemory”, the last essay of the book is focused on the American architect Peter Eisenman’s *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*. Lund considers this monument, consisting of 2711 blocks of concrete and situated next to Brandenburger Tor in Berlin, as a contribution to postmemory. The monument invites us to remember the Holocaust (both as an event and as a horrendous crime the last survivors of which are now passing away) by being cognizant of the increasing distance in time, by recognizing the importance of experience, and by allowing for active participation through the spectator’s ability to imagine – or attempt to imagine – aspects of the Holocaust as presented and re-presented to him or her.

There are several reasons why, as stated in the first sentence of this review, *Erindringens æstetik* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book. Lund highlights and explores one of the most important issues in cultural and literary studies: the interplay of aesthetics and ethics in acts of memory – here mostly represented by memoirs, novels, photographs and monuments – linked to the historical event of the Holocaust. His discussion is well informed and nuanced, prompting further reflection on the part of the reader. Moreover, the timing of the book is excellent: as Lund writes, we have now entered the period of transition during which the last survivors of the Holocaust are passing away. We do not know what this loss will mean, but Lund is right to note that the disappearance of the last survivors will make it more, not less, important to remember the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup> He is also right to note that, in this attempt, literature and other art forms are a great resource, interlinking the texts’ aesthetic and ethical elements and thus, as in case of Levi or Semprún or Imre Kertész, strengthening both. Although partly based on previously published essays, the book’s chapters are closely linked. Sometimes Lund could have been clearer when it comes to stating his own position on the issues considered – his discussion can sometimes approximate to survey or paraphrase. Yet this weakness is also a strength, because observations that can seem somewhat tentative repeatedly blend into, and thus form the basis for, concluding points that are intelligent, convincing and critically rewarding.

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### Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), p. 29.
2. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 8–9.

3. Personal communication, Santa Barbara, California, 9 May 2011.
4. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 8.
5. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
6. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (1947; rpt. Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1958). *Survival in Auschwitz [If This Is a Man]*. New York: Collier Books, 1969.
7. Hayden White, "Figural Realism in Witness Literature", *Parallax* 10 (2004), no 1, 113–24.
8. Cf. J. Hillis Miller, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
9. Cf. *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*, eds. Jakob Lothe, Susan R. Suleiman and James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).