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Hidden Traces. Memory, Family, Photography, and the Holocaust

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Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 320 p.

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Postmemory expresses the experience of those who grew up with the previous generation's narratives of traumatic events, which cannot be understood and cannot be created. Marianne Hirsch analyzes the discourse of postmemory in the works of several artists, be it in narrative, art or photography. The former take centre stage in the understanding of postmemory.

The question "how do we relate to other people's suffering" tends, with Marianne Hirsch, towards the autobiographic and familial, as an attempt to learn how one relates to the past generation's suffering. More than oral or written narratives, photographs are important because they survived massive destruction and return, like ghosts, to ressurect a lost world. The traditional historical archives and methodologies are limited in trying to fathom the bodily, physical or affective impact of the trauma. Thus, a culture of memory and "memory studies" have started to appear and develop increasingly.

Discussions about what Hoffman calls "era of memory" referenced, for Marianne Hirsch, feelings of a personal/ familial nature. The volume inclined towards an ethics and aesthetics of

remembrance in the wake of catastrophe. How do we relate to "others' pain"? What do we owe the victims? How can we carry on their stories, without drawing any attention to ourselves? How are we involved in the murders whose witnesses have not been ourselves?

Marianne Hirsch proposes the term "postmemory" by relating to her own "autobiographical readings" of works by second-generation writers and visual artists, describing, at the same time, her own relationship with her parents' stories of danger and survival, during the Second World War in Romania and the ways in which these impacted her post-bellum childhood Bucharest. By reading and seeing the works of second-generation writers and artists, and also by talking to her peers, the children of survivors, she wanted to see if they shared the same traits and symptoms that would make a postgeneration out of them. Marianne Hirsch analyzes two texts (Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*) which, in her view, reveal the way in which the work of postmemory falls back on familiar. Art Speigelman draws attention to his father's survival story in Auschwitz and the way in which he perceived the story as a child. He relied on his family's visual archives and on the "narrative traditions".

"Generation after" is the carrier of personal, collective and cultural traumas of those before them, remembering images, stories and behaviours: "To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation."

Marianne Hirsch tries to answer several questions regarding the structure of inter-and transgenerational transmission of trauma. Why is the term "memory" so insisted upon? Why is postmemory particularly a traumatic recall? Which aesthetic and institutional structures, what tropes and technologies best mediate the psychology of postmemory, the

continuities and discontinuities between generations, the gaps in knowledge, the fears and terrors that ensue in the aftermath of trauma? What is the part of the visual medium and especially, of photography?

The first part of the book focuses on the way in which family memory functions, its problems and limits. The author argues that postmemorial work tries to re-activate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structure by offering them familiar and individual forms of aesthetic expression. Throughout this part the author answers key-questions: Why memory? Why family? Why photography? In the transmission process, from the injured participants to the subsequent generations, important is the memory that "signals an affective link to the past – a sense, precisely, of a material "living connection" – and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony."

The works of a second-generation, either in the shape of narratives or memoirs, are the long-term effects of the fact that they lived close to pain and next to witnesses who survived historical traumas. The child takes upon himself the responsibility to fix, to compensate loss. Family life, according to Marianne Hirsch, "is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the broader transfer and availability of individual and familial remembrance."

As to photographs, photographic images survived devastation more than oral or written narratives, becoming the proof of destruction processes and thus constituting the cultural work of postmemory. Georges Didi-Huberman (2008) also proves the testimony of the Holocaust can be transferred from texts and fantasias to incontestable images that try to say the unsaid.

Family photos or the familial aspects of postmemory could be considered less credible than public images or the images showing horrors, but Marianne Hirsch claims that when we look at photographic images of a lost world we look not only for information or confirmation, but also for an affective connection that might get the affective quality of events across:

"Photographs thus become screens – spaces of projection and approximation, and of protection. Small, two-dimensional, delimited by their frame, photographs minimize the disaster they depict, and screen their viewers from it. But in seeming to open a window to the past, and materializing the viewer's relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power."

Throughout the volume the author often references Roland Barthes' punctum theory that lead to the perception of images, of things from the past, as "points of memory" – intersection points between the past and the present, memory and postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall.[1]

Marianne Hirsch proposes to frame postmemory on feminist terms, as well, finding it interesting to look for female first and second generation witnesses in order to find a feminist angle to knowing the past. She underlines the fact that our access to the postmemory of the Holocaust was generally shaped by works by and about men, fathers and sons.

The second part of the book answers the questions like: Why have images become iconic so easily? How do artists of the postgeneration use perpetrator images structured by a genocidal Nazi gaze to memorialize victims? The author references several authors that discussed the issue of images that depict atrocities. Susan Sontag (1977) discusses in the pages of *On Photography* the power and danger of photography to anesthetize the onlooker. Sontag warned about the dangers of photography, for the image pierces and anesthetizes.[2] Photography, in her view, is a medium that flattens, homogenizes all images and the value of all images.

The problem that Marianne Hirsch approaches concerns the fact that in the representation of Holocaust the repetition of the same intense images can be noticed, images that are, in fact, very few, used everywhere iconically and emblematically to recall the event. The fact is all the more intriguing as many more visual documents exist. The Nazis outdid themselves in recording the atrocities they committed, immortalizing both victims and perpetrators. The obsessive repetition of the same few images delimitated and radically reduced the visual archive

of this event, thus risking a distancing and a hackneying of a painful piece of history.

Marianne Hirsch claims that, on the contrary, repetition connects the first generation with the second, so that an inherited traumatic past may be transmitted: "The repeated images of the Holocaust need to be read not so much for what they reveal but for how they reveal it, or fail to do so. As in themselves figures for memory and forgetting, they are part of an intergenerational effort at reconstitution and repair."

When we look at images of the mass graves, a meeting between memory and forgetfulness takes place, so that we see earth, wounds, death, we are overwhelmed by shock and bewilderment, but at the same time the organisms are buries, the traces are hidden, and forgetfulness has begun. The author thinks that each time we look at these images we repeat the meeting between memory and forgetfulness, between shock and self-protection, and the role of the work of postmemory is to unearth the graves, to obliterate the strata of forgetfulness.

Marianne Hirsch also notes, in the second part, an aspect signaled by the theoreticians of photography, who highlight the simultaneous presence of life and death in the photograph: "The indexical quality of the photo intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time, its capacity to signify life. Life is the presence of the object before the camera; death is the "having-been-there" of the object – the radical break, the finality introduced by the past tense." Roland Barthes also claimed that each photograph resembles a living image of a dead thing, an image that produces death while it attempts to safeguard life.

In some images, the camera is in the exact same position as the gun, and the photographer in the same stance as the executioner, who is unseen. Moreover, the viewer's position is identical to that of the gun so that our gaze, just like that of the photographer, takes the executioner's place. Each photograph represents a moment chosen by a photographer and a gaze. That is why there are often tendencies to transform experience in a way of seeing, to make the experience become identical to the process of its being photographed.

NOTES

[1] To Roland , photography is "a certain but fugitive testimony". What Marianne Hirsch wants to express through the concept of postmemory is very accurately found in the experience Roland Barthes describes of "meeting" with his mother's image, of the intersection of the past with the present: "Photography thereby compelled me to perform a painful labor; straining toward the essence of her identity, I was struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false." (66) Unlike oral or written history, in the case of photography, as Roland Barthes notes, we can never deny that *the thing was there* (Barthes 1982).

[2] As Marianne Hirsch remarked, Susan Sontag reconsidered her statements in her following studies. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* she admits, though, that photography can and must depict human suffering, teaches us how to cope with human loss and devastation across global distances. Nevertheless, Sontag claims that, to connect photographs to emotions and to make these emotions raise awareness, viewers must already have a context in which to place them, thus highlighting the fact that familiarity exceeds the value of the feeling. On the other hand, Susan Sontag emphasizes that we live in a post-photographic era, that photography that depicts pain merely captures reality. Photographs don't allow one to imagine, refusing fantasy. The fear, here, is not in aestheticizing the images of atrocities or that these could be altered and thus rendered "unreal", but in they can only be true.

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