

Susanne Rohr, *Von Grauen und Glamour: Repräsentationen des Holocaust in den USA und Deutschland*

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Much has already been written on the Holocaust and its history, but the question of how we can cope with it, how we can live with what we know about it, or how we can imagine what has been called “unimaginable” has been haunting several generations of those who collectively inherited either a history of pain and suffering or a history of collective crime. In view of such moral complexities, Susanne Rohr’s study of representations of the Holocaust in the United States and Germany is a remarkable scholarly achievement. It deals with seventy years of artistic and literary documents—memoirs, autobiographies, fictions, films, graphic novels—written by subsequent generations of artists (survivors, the children and grandchildren of survivors, or the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators)—i.e., texts in at least two languages and in the changing historical contexts of at least two cultures and societies. (In addition to American and German documents Rohr occasionally includes Israeli sources.) She is also aware of the changing theoretical frame surrounding these documents—the problems inherent in the concept of a “generation,” of “collective memory,” of “trauma” and the possibility of its generational transmission; of the postmodern or poststructuralist rejection of even the possibility of representation. The questions raised by this book and its author concern the status of the Holocaust in the memory of those who did not experience it, for whom, therefore, it will always be a mediated event—mediated through historiography, literature, and, increasingly, through genres of popular culture (i.e., by films, TV—shows, comic books and graphic novels). But can the Holocaust ever be like any other literary topic? Are its representations in literature and/or popular culture rendered authentic by the enormity of the catastrophe they depict? Can they be read, discussed, and judged in aesthetic terms?

And, if so, doesn't this belittle and trivialize the "event" itself? Doesn't it make all literary dealings with the Holocaust part of an academic chatter about narrative strategies, aesthetic categorization, or evaluation—and doesn't all this play into the hands of those who deny or relativize the Holocaust in the first place, and thus help diminish its relevance the farther away we move from the historical moment of its mind-boggling and horrifying actuality?

The author courageously raises these questions and faces their consequences. The writings of the first generation of survivors (Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Imre Kertész, Jean Améry) was marked by the effort to give proof of the unspeakable horror of the Shoa so that it (and those who died, or suffered and survived) would never be forgotten and its horrors w/could never be repeated. Yet the weight of their testimony also contributed to a rhetoric of uniqueness, even of "sanctification" of the Holocaust which became so much of a burden for the next generation that it rebelled. That happened in Israel—where the Holocaust had been the foundational mark of its national identity—as well as in the United States where the "Americanization" of the Holocaust (as most conspicuously evidenced in the opening of Washington's Holocaust Museum in 1993) ran parallel to its redefinition as the foundational event of a specifically American Jewish identity—replacing, as a mark of distinction, the religious particularity of an up-to-then marginal immigrant community that had become increasingly assimilated into the American middle class. Symptomatic of this shift in the cultural function of the Holocaust and the rebellion against it was, according to Rohr, the "scandalous" exhibition at the New York Jewish Museum in 2002 ("Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art") whose art objects irreverently and satirically linked "Nazi- and Holocaust imagery to pop culture, commercialism, and even pornography." In the manner of an earlier avantgarde, the artists of the exhibition attacked an established rhetoric—its ossifications, its restrictions and taboos, and its compliance with existing social and economic structures and institutions.

Rohr discusses this rebellion in the arts, but most notably in Jewish American novels of the 1990s and in the first decade of the new century—in Melvin Bukiet's *After* (1996), Tova Reich's, *My Holocaust* (2007); Shalom Auslander's, *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012). She analyzes the furious and wildly satirical attack of these novels on a booming Holocaust industry ("there is no business like Shoa business"), the medialization of the Holocaust (from Holocaust to "Hollycaust") in the context of its increasing popularization by TV shows (e.g. the series *Holocaust*), or films like *Schindler's List* (1993). But—thus Rohr argues in her analysis of Bukiet's *After*—"I perceive underneath all this burlesque madness, all that bizarre wild-

ness and all that comic assault on existing taboos a deep sense of mourning” (118). So that it is precisely by satirically attacking or parodically subverting a conventionalized and sanctimonious rhetoric of Jewish victimization that the memory of the Holocaust—the unimaginable horror of crimes committed and suffered—is kept alive, its pain indirectly reasserted in the grim laughter about it.

For obvious reasons, it took German Jewish writers several years longer to apply a comic approach to representations of the Holocaust. The taboos surrounding it were even stricter in the postwar culture of surviving Nazi murderers and their accomplices, and the question whether one was allowed to laugh about matters of the Holocaust was discussed with perhaps even more embittered seriousness than in the US. Who was allowed to laugh and who not? German Jews, perhaps; but what about the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators? Was their laughter not a form of denial? Did it not amount to a highly objectionable irreverence for the millions that their fathers and grandfathers had (or might have) killed? For them, if not for Germans in general, the Holocaust could not, and should never be, a laughing matter—except when the laughter was on them, on their hesitations and ambivalences, their awkward efforts to proclaim an implausible innocence of knowledge, their need to compensate their guilt feelings with their own claims of victimization: after all, “the Jews were not the only ones who suffered.”

Rohr explores these ambivalences in several brilliant close readings of films and literary texts, especially Cornelius Schwalm’s film *Hotel Auschwitz*, which shows the comic-tragic entanglement of its German and Polish Jewish protagonists in issues of guilt, innocence, revenge, self-interest, and a vague hope for redemption. She then offers subtle and intricate interpretations of the novels of three younger German authors: Thomas Lehr’s, *Frühling* (2001), Kevin Vennemann’s, *Nahe Jedem* (2005) and Katja Petrowskaja’s, *Vielleicht Esther* (2014)—the latter narrating the fictional search of a Ukrainian Jew seeking identity through the practice of a new language (German) and through the reconstruction of her family’s history, the few traces left by her Jewish ancestors killed by the Germans in Babyn Yar and/or Auschwitz. The skillful unravelling of these complex (and mainly non-comic) texts—the first two written by non-Jewish authors about Holocaust-related massacres of Jews—form the centerpiece of Rohr’s study and demonstrate the care and subtlety of her textual readings. (Her complex treatment of *Hotel Auschwitz* and *Vielleicht Esther* show in addition that it is possible to gain aesthetic pleasure even from texts dealing with such horrifying topics as the Holocaust.)

In a final shift of genre (from text novel to graphic novel) and as a dialogue between cultures, she discusses, in her concluding chapter, the graphic novels of two German American writers, Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) and Angelika Bammer's *Born After: Reckoning with the German Past* (2019), both trying to come to terms with the German part of their mixed cultural identity—and to what extent that identity was influenced, if not formed, by their grandparents' or parents' knowledge (or denial) of the Holocaust. Whereas, according to Rohr, Petrowskaja—in search of her family's history—could not avoid the discourse of Jewish victimhood (even though she tried to find her own identity beyond it), the two German American texts cannot avoid the weight of the Nazi past—questions of family guilt or complicity and a longing to escape from the *Geiselhaft* of a collective bad conscience. The *Entlastungssehnsucht* (the longing for moral relief) which mark both texts and echo the rhetoric of purification granted by officially documented innocence (“the infamous *Persilschein* of de-nazification”), is symbolically reenacted when the narrator's grandfather is absolved by his son from feeling guilty—and with him the narrator as well. “These pages,” Rohr writes in the last sentence of her book, “invert the question of inherited trauma and guilt into its opposite dynamics. They advance that forgiveness, too, can be granted from one generation to another” (355).

Rohr is of course aware that her study, too, can be seen in the context of an ever-proliferating text production on matters of the Holocaust and its Nazi perpetrators. The fact, that she, as a professor of American Studies, contributes a voluminous book on this topic is itself proof of the “Americanization” of the Holocaust—although she deals with it, in accordance with the present redefinition of the field, in a transdisciplinary and transnational way. Her meticulously researched, yet highly analytical and theoretical approach may also suggest that, although her study may be part of an internationally fashionable trend, it nevertheless aims at staying on top and in control of it. In this she succeeds admirably. The book is indeed richly rewarding—in terms of the wide scope of its primary and secondary material as well as the high level of the author's reflection on it. It is only regrettable that no English translation of it is yet available.

I personally regret that on the book's last pages the author speaks through one of the texts analyzed, i.e., in her interpretive and not her personal voice. Not that Rohr doesn't position herself. She is clearly aware that she, herself, might be caught in German evasions and ambivalences. She frequently emphasizes not only Germany's indubitable guilt and the latent desire to escape from it, but also makes clear that she rejects any evasion of German guilt through the rhetoric

of German victimization. It would have been interesting to know what impulse made her engage in this complex and difficult endeavor in the first place—an impulse to establish her own professional authority (in this, she impressively and convincingly succeeds); or from the desire, characteristic of the second or third generation of Germans, to cope with the guilt of a previous generation. If so, one may suspect that Krug's and Bammer's graphic fictions are closer to her than she would care to admit, so that the voice she gives, in her book's last sentence, to Bammer's text may, after all, be her own.

About the Author

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