



Memory and Complicity. Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance

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BOOK REVIEW

Memory and Complicity. Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance, by Debarati Sanyal, New York, Fordham University Press, 2015, 336 pp., £23.99, pbk, ISBN: 978-0-82-326548-0

If complicity usually designates participation in wrongdoing, Debarati Sanyal's rich, vibrant and provocative book about French literary and cinematic echoes of Holocaust memory from the post-war period to contemporary times, extends and problematises its meaning so that it encompasses collusion, collaboration, understanding, intimacy or, finally, 'folding together' (from the Latin root *complicare*). It is the latter meaning that best captures Sanyal's ambition to connect unrelated memories and histories across time, space and cultures, thus exploring the potentially unlikely (and hazardous!) intersections between the Holocaust, colonialism and terrorism. In doing so, Sanyal's project is indebted to Françoise Vergès's concept of intersectional memory ('mémoires croisées'), Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory or Max Silverman's palimpsestic memory, and builds upon Michael Rothberg's study of multidirectional orientation of collective remembrance since the Second World War. If the choice of the Holocaust as the reference point is dictated by its status as a paradigm for genocide, trauma and collective memory, Sanyal's interest in France proceeds from its ambivalence towards the Occupation, Vichy and the deportation of some 75,000 Jews. Vacillating between the resistanthist myth and the Vichy syndrome, French Holocaust memory has also undergone a restructuring; following Eichmann's 1961 heavily mediated trial, cultural representations of the Shoah moved away from its comparative and metaphoric uses towards the conception of Auschwitz as an incomparable, unspeakable and quasi-sacred event. To reconnect the Nazi genocide to traumas such as the Algerian War, 9/11 or Guantánamo Bay, the book's six chapters offer highly original and engaging readings of French and Francophone texts, including canonical works of Camus, Sartre and Primo Levi, Alain Resnais's documentary *Nuit et brouillard*, Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* or Assia Djebar's and Boualem Sansal's fiction. Sanyal's analyses of these films and novels share the objective of challenging the established tradition of remembrance and appropriation of memory where trauma and affect have been the privileged way of dealing with the past. They also explore the notion of complicity, firstly, as empathy with the victim, often seen as the only legitimate witness, and, secondly, as cross-cultural and trans-generational identification with the perpetrator, the rejection of which, illustrated by Zola's refusal to be the anti-Dreyfusards' passive accomplice, Sanyal views as political engagement. Finally, complicity is understood as the moral ambiguity characterising Primo Levi's 'grey zone', a term referring to the blurring of difference between victims, executioners and witnesses. By addressing a wide breadth of apparently disparate works, tackling a vertiginous number of ontological, epistemological and moral issues, and asking more questions than it is prepared to answer as it endeavours to uproot the Holocaust from its singular position and reposition its memory in the postmodern context of media-fuelled globalisation, *Memory and Complicity* may seem both intellectually and ethically risky. However, Sanyal's manifest awareness of the potential dangers and political stakes of relating the Shoah to other atrocities is reassuring. And, even if the benefits of dialogues between and the consequent cross-pollination of different legacies of remembrance fail to outweigh these dangers, Sanyal's intellectual rigour, astounding erudition and at once novel and ethically sensitive analyses make her book a very enriching, inspiring and thought-provoking experience.

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