

Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity. Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 341.

by Martina Mengoni

“What are the risks and benefits of invoking the memory of one historical atrocity in relation to another?”<sup>1</sup> Since “memory is the present past,” as stated by Richard Terdiman,<sup>2</sup> past and present by definition are bound together tightly throughout memory. Any testimony of a traumatic historical event demands specificity; nevertheless, the memory of such events permits different histories to be brought together (within their disparate times, subjects and bodies), on the ground of shared experiences: trauma, violence, shame, melancholy and complicity.

This phenomenon happens mostly within literature and movies. Why? “What are the political stakes of bringing together seemingly disparate memories of violence within an artwork?”<sup>3</sup> In *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance*, Debarati Sanyal tries to explore and answer these ambitious and inconvenient questions with great awareness of the ongoing philosophical debates. The book is shaped by case studies: each chapter concentrates on specific literary and cinematic works as powerful vehicles of this back-and-forth use of memory. It becomes clear that confluences of memories can be dangerous as well as productive of new meanings.

Sanyal’s main thesis is that “aesthetic figures such as allegory [...] and irony function as ‘vectors of memory’”<sup>4</sup> (borrowing this concept from Nancy Wood’s book of the same name<sup>5</sup>). Moving from these premises, Sanyal explores the distinguishing use of Holocaust memory in French and Francophone postwar culture, “a significant locus for the exploration of complicitous memory.”<sup>6</sup> Complicity is indeed the second main focus of the book. While, as Sanyal herself

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<sup>1</sup> Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 10.

states, the emergence of Holocaust specificity encouraged our collective tendency to identify with the victims' trauma, the book aims to prove that, especially within literature, "a sustained reflection on complicity"<sup>7</sup> opens up to a new ethical engagement. Here Sanyal addresses two complementary questions: "how does complicity, rather than affect-based discourse of trauma, shame and melancholy, open a critical engagement with the violence of history?"<sup>8</sup> On the other side, "what does it mean to invoke such forms of complicity in the realm of memory, where harm has occurred in the past and can no longer be repaired?"<sup>9</sup>

Chapter one especially defines the conceptual boundaries of Sanyal's research, starting with a critique of Giorgio Agamben's work. According to Sanyal, Agamben's appropriation of Levi's grey zone is the best example of "a broader tendency to freeze the energy of figures into fixed paradigms"<sup>10</sup>: when Agamben claims that Auschwitz "has never ceased to take place," or that Auschwitz "is always repeating itself,"<sup>11</sup> he is, in fact, derealising the historical fact, treating it as a paradigm, as an "emblem for a recurrent, unlocatable and transhistorical violence"<sup>12</sup>. In a very persuasive way, Sanyal illustrates the ethical and philosophical consequences of this process: the idea of the impossibility of representing a historical trauma; the blurring of the subject position; a fetishism of trauma and complicity – all of them impressively represented by the exhibit *Mirroring Evil* that took place after September 11 at the Jewish Museum of New York.<sup>13</sup>

Sanyal claims that literature and art represent a powerful alternative to Agamben's approach: rather than being used as a static paradigm, the Holocaust – as well as other historical traumas – should be deployed as a *figure*: "Figures need not immobilize or dematerialize – they need not freeze into paradigm or convert suffering into beauty. Instead, figures and the aesthetic realm more generally produce mobile and asymmetrical proximities between events, subjects and histories. Not only do such proximities enable comparative analysis of violence and the political work of memory, but they can also foster non-

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 101.

<sup>12</sup> Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. Norman K. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

redemptive forms of connection, solidarity and consolation.”<sup>14</sup> The ambiguity, indeterminacy and therefore adaptability of figures prevents a total identification between disparate historical events.

Chapters two, three and four focus on specific uses of Holocaust allegories in postwar French literature and cinema, and trace the way they mobilise the memory of the Holocaust in relation to the war of Algerian independence. Sanyal argues that the figural register of the plague, the camp, the intersection, the gray zone, the cry in Albert Camus’ novels (especially *The Plague* and *The Fall*), as well as in Alain Resnais’s documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), is used to intersect two histories of persecution (Auschwitz and Algeria). It improves cross-memorial migrations and creates a *noeud de mémoire* (an expression that relies on Paul Gilroy conception of “knotted intersections of histories,”<sup>15</sup> both meaningful and dangerous). Specifically within Camus’ work, the tendency to give mutually exclusive readings (that is reading the allegories throughout the Holocaust or colonialism) should be replaced by the awareness that allegories are by definition flexible, they allude “to multiple – if not contradictory – legacies of violence,”<sup>16</sup> especially in the realm of complicity. In *Night and Fog*, the juxtaposition of silent different scenes – such as the sequences that show the sections of tattooed human skin, stripped from Auschwitz victims and displayed as artifacts, in silence, with no explanation – forces the viewer to find himself an accomplice in an *aesthetic of horror* that embraces present times: the result is “one of the earliest intellectual mobilizations against the Algerian war.”<sup>17</sup> This narrative displacement allows explicit reprises in colonial counter-memories such as *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène. Of course, the allegory’s potentially limitless correspondences can be problematic, as demonstrated by Sanyal’s analysis of *The Fall*, and by her comparison between *Night and Fog* and the imagery of the documentary *The Road of Guantanamo* (2006) by Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross. While she succeeds in the first, she is less convincing in the second.

Chapter four presents a new set of problems, since it deals with the displacement of allegory and figures related to torture. Torture is the locus of a contradiction: from one side “there exists a disquieting kinship or complicity between torture

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<sup>14</sup> Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>16</sup> Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

and allegory, for if torture [...] is a process that twists and turns the body and the psyche of its victims into signification, allegory is a rhetorical figure that similarly distorts or twists bodies and objects into emblems”<sup>18</sup>; at the same time, “yet ‘speaking otherwise’ about torture may be the only way to speak of it at all under regimes of censorship.”<sup>19</sup> Figurative displacement is also a way to make torture communicable, legible. Here Sanyal moves from Jean Paul Sartre’s *The Condemned of Altona* tropology of torture, and relates it to contemporaneous reflections on the relation between the Nazi genocide and torture in late colonial France.

Chapters five and six explore the shift in memory and the representations of the Holocaust that became dominant since the 1980s. Sanyal enucleates four major differences between postwar and contemporary culture: (1) the specificity of the Holocaust; (2) the ethical and historical centrality of victims; (3) the privilege of memory over history; (4) the emergence of *trauma* as “a platform for political claims”<sup>20</sup> in the social domain. While, in postwar France, philosophers, writers and directors focused on readers as “potential agents of [...] future-oriented changes,”<sup>21</sup> thus addressing them with ambiguous allegories, the collective *devoir de mémoire* that followed the *era of the witness* (particularly spread in the last three decades) entailed a rigid identification with the victims’ history.

In such climate, Sanyal tries to demonstrate that Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, throughout its protagonist Maximilien Aue, “is the first novel to engage the Nazi genocide in a non-allegorical mode.”<sup>22</sup> It rather uses *irony* (in Paul De Man’s definition as “the reversed mirror-image” of allegorical form<sup>23</sup>), as a specific reading contract: since the very incipit (“Oh my human brother, let me tell you what happened”<sup>24</sup>), the attitude towards the reader oscillates between proximity and difference. Sanyal calls it ‘ironic complicity,’ which is a key concept for the entire book: “a strategy that simultaneously beckons and suspends our identification (whether textual, visual, or cinematic) with the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 225–26.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 3.

violence that we, as readers, viewers, and secondary witnesses, are called to witness.”<sup>25</sup>

What is at stake in Sanyal’s whole argument is indeed the attitude of the literary author and the movie director towards the reader/viewer: if being complicit is, by definition, sharing an awareness, being involved, being ethically attuned, then allegory (in postwar Europe) and irony (in present times) are the rhetorical means by which the reader is able to reimagine, and politically reactivate, memory. This can happen even when Holocaust memory is connected to a problematic ideological field, as the analysis (in chapter six) of the novel *The German Mujihad* by Boualem Sansal proves.

*Memory and Complicity* is a must-read for Holocaust scholars. It provides literary criticism and comparative studies with some key concepts – not only *ironic complicity*, but also a new and illuminating definition of allegory and metaphor in relation to representations of mass violence – that can have a broad and useful implementation. For instance, a book like *The Holocaust in Italian Culture* by Robert S. C. Gordon could have a significant dialogue with Sanyal’s theoretical framework. At the same time, Sanyal’s claim that “aesthetic form becomes a laboratory for experimenting with practices of memories and representations”<sup>26</sup> should encourage contemporary historians to use these itineraries of imagination as tools, proofs and case studies for their own research.

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<sup>25</sup> Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.