

## Brett Ashley Kaplan *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*

Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007 ISBN 978-0252030932  
240pp, h/b, £18.99

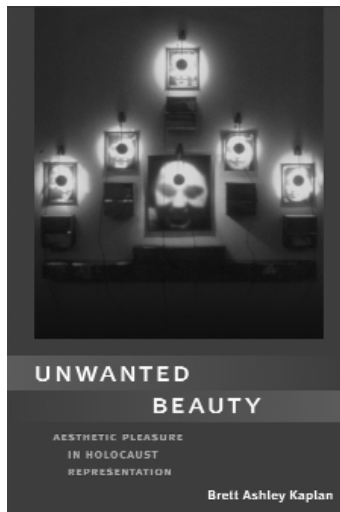
## Mark Godfrey *Abstraction and the Holocaust*

New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007 ISBN 978-0300126761  
304pp, h/b, £35

It is extraordinary that it took so long for the historical meaning of the Holocaust and systematic genocide to have become subjects of critical reflection. It was only in the 1960s that the intellectual silence which shrouded the *disaster* was broken, when earlier accounts from survivors like Primo Levi or German refugees such as Thomas Mann, Hannah Arendt, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer were properly acknowledged. Eléni Varikas has observed that until that moment:

It was as though the fault-line created by the enormity of the event had revealed the dark side of a tradition that thought could not look at directly without calling itself into question, or without questioning the certainties, presuppositions and hopes that had been its foundations for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, concern about the Holocaust and its ramifications is affirmed in many different forms: in testimonies, novels, films and art exhibitions as well as in philosophy, art history, literary criticism, commemorative monuments and museums. In the wake of the plethora of works produced on or about the Holocaust we may wonder now if Adorno was right when he claimed that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Mark Godfrey in *Abstraction and the Holocaust* and Brett Ashley Kaplan in *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* are rightly troubled by Adorno's remark: both authors, quoting Adorno, illuminate the persistent and never to be transcended conundrum that marks the Holocaust and its representations. Each book inevitably gets caught up in what Adorno called the 'cultural industries.' Reading these books we become witnesses to the nuanced 'silences' as responses to the immediate revelations of the



Holocaust to the present day cacophony of the cultural industries. It is clear that representation can no longer pertain in an unproblematic sense, hence the way it structures knowledge and memory is also the subject of their scholarly works – Godfrey's from the perspective of art history and Kaplan's from art and literary criticism.

*Abstraction and the Holocaust* is a scrupulously detailed history of the art and critical discourses that shaped American aesthetic responses to the *disaster*. Godfrey considers, in separate chapters, works by Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, Louis Kahn, Beryl Korot, Mel Bochner, Peter Eisenman, Susan Hiller, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum to describe the prevarications, the silences and the obfuscations that historically shrouded the potentiality of *meaning* in relation to the Holocaust, and the current elaborated attempts to memorialize it. Under the contentious rubric of *Abstraction*, the book charts the resistance to encoded meaning towards an assumed but not uncontested openness to its possibilities. What fascinates is the ways in which Godfrey has prized open the paintings of Newman, the reliefs of Stella, the architecture of Kahn to reveal the latent potentiality, as well as the contingency, of meanings. To give just one instance, in the 1970s Stella refused to speak of the *Polish Village* series (works with an acknowledged debt to the destroyed wooden synagogues of Poland) in symbolic terms. Godfrey maps the multifarious ways in which Stella's works have been interpreted subsequently to conclude 'if Stella's work was about the "destruction of an entire culture", this culture was every bit as much the "culture" of New York modernist theory as the Eastern European culture of the synagogues' (p. 111).

'New York modernist theory' was embodied in the writing of the art critic Clement Greenberg, whose apparent unassailable authority had the effect of policing the boundaries of what constituted the identity of High Art and American identity. In its effect these two identities became synonymous. Godfrey's research shows how Abstraction has been deployed in American art criticism as a moral or an ethical category that perforce has worked to censor art practices and shroud discourse. I read this as a peculiarly Jewish-American dilemma, the guilty yearning for an identity as Jewish survivors coinciding with the desire for an uncategorisable *identity*<sup>2</sup> – the aesthetic response made all the more urgent and poignant through Greenberg's mobilization of the opposition between High art and mass culture<sup>3</sup>.

If Godfrey's book reveals an intensely American problem with the particular identity of modernism this is not, as Kaplan reveals, a dilemma shared by European artists. European post-war art deploys metaphor or metonymy that American aesthetic theory sought to expunge.

Kaplan's *Unwanted Beauty* considers the first generation European survivors, Paul Celan, Charlotte Delbo and Jorge Semprun, through to second and third generations of Holocaust 'postmemory' (p. 108), Edmond Jabès, Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski, Peter Eisenman with Richard Serra, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz and the architect of the United States Holocaust Museum, James Ingo Freed.

The book is organised around five interpretative themes – 'Survival', 'Memory', 'Allusion', 'Mourning' and finally, 'Pollution'. The author's concern is with the 'guilty pleasures' afforded by art's (and consequently

our own) encounter with the Holocaust. She argues that a surplus of beauty, a category discussed in its own right in the introduction to the book, was the very means of survival for the first generation. She frames her enquiry with the questions: 'how do we balance aesthetics and history, how do we understand the unwanted beauty of much Holocaust art, and is there something indecent or unethical about this beauty?' (p. 147)

Kaplan points to the tensions between historical accuracy and the Holocaust *effect*, a term she borrows from Ernst van Alphen in *Caught by History*.<sup>4</sup> She argues that Keifer's *Margarete* (1981), *Sulamith*, 1983, *Lilith's Daughter's* (one of a series, 1990) and *Banner*, 1990, exemplify the 'problematics of unwanted beauty' (p. 125). Each image courts remembrance of the Holocaust but uncritically merges symbols of persecution with symbols of Nazism. Boltanski's *Le Lycée Chases*, 1987, and *Canada*, 1988, she argues, while encouraging us to mourn, display scant regard for historical specificity and by so doing generalize genocide (p. 145). Her ambivalent response to these works emphatically reminds us of the difficulty occasioned by the respectful connecting of experience to history and not assimilating it to effects.

Kaplan also tackles the association of the Monument with Fascist art and architecture. Reminding us of Walter Benjamin's contention that fascism aestheticizes politics, and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean-Luc Nancy's judgement that the Final Solution was an aesthetic resolution, Kaplan counters these notions to suggest that the fear of contamination must be overcome to maintain the pedagogic aims of Holocaust memorials (p. 164). Reminded of the precarious vicissitudes of representation, I found myself recalling a sudden nightmare question that had occurred to me as I viewed the 'Holocaust Exhibition' in the Imperial War Museum, London, and one which I tried at the time to ignore: would this exhibition have looked any different if Hitler had not been defeated?<sup>5</sup>

What can this possibly mean? An eerie and terrifying sense that the very documentation itself – the quotations from Hitler, the escalating inevitability of systematic genocide, would have been the same path that a triumphant Nazi museum of a disappeared world, such as the one they intended for Prague, would also have taken. Of course the 'end' is different, 'liberation' followed, but memory remains ensnared. Hitler's additional great crime has been to contaminate the imagination, perhaps forever. I would

nevertheless and in good faith recommend that everyone visits such uncertain and disturbing sites of remembrance and would agree with Kaplan that risks need to be taken as well as limits to be drawn. The process of 'coming to terms' has entailed, and continues to entail, constant revision.

Confronted with the enormity of the questions posed by the Holocaust it is inevitable that we experience the difficulty of understanding. Quoting Jorge Semprun's account of the reactions of two women seeing Buchenwald immediately after the war, 'I don't know if they understood, but as far as seeing goes, they saw,' (p. 147), Kaplan confronts the inevitable difficulty of understanding and reminds us that should we ever cease trying, then indeed we would be lost.<sup>6</sup> Not being able to know imposes an important limit – a critical *experience* of a limit. This perhaps is the ethical meaning of these two books which seek to face up to the burdens of memory and the risks posed by the dilemmas of representation.

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