

NOIT BANAI AND SABETH BUCHMANN

CINEMA WITH/IN HISTORY

Techniques of Affect, Strategies of Mediality, and Processes of Multidirectional Memory in Contemporary Art

Multidirectional memory, the historian Michael Rothberg has argued, is an affective process of collective remembering, over which no homogeneous community exercises sole ownership. Polyvalent and empathetic perspectives on perpetrator–victim relations then supplant the futile battles for discursive hegemony. The problem of the representability of the Holocaust thus appears as being, in part, a matter of whether alternative narratives about it are conceivable: a question concerning the improbable, the imaginative, that retrospectively endows what went unrepresented with possibility. Discussing films by Dani Gal, Keren Cytter, and Roei Rosen, the art historians Noit Banai and Sabeth Buchmann show how ties of solidarity between diverse forms of trauma and recollection necessitate intersections between different histories.

1. The artistic confrontations with historical and contemporary forms of anti-Semitism examined in the present essay refer to cinematic modes of perception that link the aesthetics of memory associated with the Shoah to broadened conditions of aesthetic reception and to possibilities of participation in cinematic representations. In doing so, they are reminiscent of Adorno's verdict, which identifies a turning point for modern aesthetic discourses. Formulated in 1949, and still highly controversial, it asserts that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"¹. However, the reassessment of poetry, which Adorno demanded two years later in his 1951 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society," was not intended as a plea for its abolition. Moreover, it addressed in a fundamental sense every form of thought, that is, "also the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today [after Auschwitz]."² Against this background, our examination of exemplary works is guided by the assumption of an

II.

In his film trilogy *Night and Fog* (2011), *As from Afar* (2013), and *White City* (2018), Dani Gal imagines what might have happened in the pivotal “blind spots” of history and suggests that articulating them aesthetically can lead to a “comparative imagining” that is at the basis of what historian Michael Rothberg has termed “multidirectional memory.”¹⁵ This intercultural model counters public articulations of collective memory that are premised on an already-established public sphere and competitive or “zero-sum struggle for pre-eminence.”¹⁶ As an affective process of recollection that moves away from unique ownership toward a transversal, collective process, multidirectional memory “...is subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as active and not private.”¹⁷ Coming into being through dialogical interactions between diverse times and places, which are often imaginatively and creatively linked, it is thus perpetually open

to reconstruction. In the trilogy, Gal gives form to unlikely historical episodes that have become the basis for the production of multidirectional memory, including Adolf Eichmann's cremation and the scattering of his ashes at sea; a meeting between Holocaust survivor and Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal and Nazi architect Albert Speer; and an exchange between the German eugenicist Hans F. K. Günther and Zionist leader, sociologist, and founder of Jewish settlement Arthur Ruppin. In these constellations, Gal suggests a reciprocal relation connecting the structural and affective legacy of the Holocaust, Palestinian traditions of remembrance surrounding the Nakba, and similar historical traumas and tragedies whose memories pervade the present.

Gal's interest in ambiguous perspectives on perpetrator-victim relationships is evident. In the initial scene of his *Night and Fog* (*Nacht und Nebel*),¹⁸ for example, we see actors who portray the Israeli police officers in charge of clearing Eichmann's ashes in front of a crematorium oven – a scene that recalls Jean-Luc Godard's not unproblematic claim that the perspective of the perpetrator is a prerequisite for the "only true," but "never filmed, because the film about the concentration camps is intolerable."¹⁹ Gal's film lets us imagine exactly this unimaginable perspective, but from the point of view of Israeli police officers whose job it is to collect Eichmann's ashes. By way of high-angle shots at the beginning of his film, which correspond to the views from the camp commanders' watchtowers, this appears as a counterpart to the panoptic perspective, and its fragmentary character is revealed in a subsequent, horizontal camera shot of the same scene. The manner in which Gal allows us to take the perpetrator's perspective of the depicted scene, as it were, does

not speak of a revisionist relativization, but rather of the replacement of conventional perpetrator-victim relationships by positioning their gaze and the memories attributed to them. The shift in perspective carried out by Gal is based on the disposal of Eichmann's ashes, an event that went undocumented until 2011 and is only corroborated by Michael Goldman, a Holocaust survivor and former Israeli police officer. In the scenographic enactment of the historical and publicly unknown events of the "night and fog action" described by Goldman, an action that the Israeli government under Ben-Gurion undertook in order to rid itself of the remains of one of the worst "criminals against humanity" (Hannah Arendt), one is reminded of Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964), which reports how Adolf Eichmann's trial took place in a theater.²⁰ According to Arendt, it was the stated desire of the first Israeli Prime Minister to allow the public to witness a historic event in which the victims were provided with the opportunity to testify for the first time. As we can read from the opening credits of Gal's film, the trial judges ordered the footage taken by Resnais in the camps and the documentary recordings made by the British Army to be shown with no sound – that is, without Jean Cayrol's commentary, – and be projected onto the back wall of the courtroom. Resnais's *Night and Fog* thus appeared as a silent film with the testimonies of the victims called up as witnesses as a voice-over.²¹

The entanglement of the court, theater, and cinema hall, and consequently of dispositives of testimony and fiction, thus appears in Gal's re-enactment as a condition of empathetic yet cinematically fragmented memories of what is not depicted, made possible by the "re-enacted"

perspective of the perpetrator. Gal's re-enactment therefore implies multiple perspectives, given that it involves a cross-fading of court-documented pictorial and oral evidence. This corresponds to the insurmountable impossibility, according to Godard, of portraying the perpetrator's perspective – an impossibility that Gal confronts with the memory of Goldman as one of former victims: if the non-representability of the perpetrator's perspective is based on the ban imposed by the Nazi criminals on documenting everyday camp life, and consequently the bureaucratic-industrial murder of victims and the dematerialization of their corpses, as Godard claims, this structurally impossible perspective is imaginable in Gal's film by virtue of the Holocaust survivor's testimony to "Eichmann's Auschwitz" (Gal), inaccessible to the collective memory, that tells of the removal of Eichmann's ashes, transported in a milk jug to the Mediterranean beyond Israeli waters.

The way in which Gal portrays the silent, stealthy boat trip, by night and in the fog, bathes the sea in black light. Moreover, this depiction is reminiscent of the topos of the "black milk" associated with Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" (1944/48), representing a metaphor for the murderous horror in the concentration camps. The motif of the milk jug also suggests the container that likely held the camera used to clandestinely take the Auschwitz-Birkenau photos later analyzed by Didi-Huberman. Additionally, the jug is a reference to a famous archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, created by a group led by the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum and code-named *Oyneyg Shabos* (Joy of the Sabbath) whose documents were hidden in milk jugs.

The motif of the milk jug as a multidirectional signifier, on the one hand, invokes the

notoriously undervalued Jewish resistance. On the other hand, it reveals a "monument" that has been withdrawn from official memory: Once serving as an urn, it now enters cinematic memory as a prop that shifts the focus of attention from the "leading figure" of Eichmann, immortalized not only through Arendt's report, to "supporting actors" heard and seen for the first time in *Nacht und Nebel*. Take, for example, the Palestinian fishermen who come into the picture for a brief moment, as accidental witnesses of the secret operation, and who make reference to the Arab-Jewish constitution of Israel. The concept of (com)passion corresponds to a dialogical montage that, in contrast to either identificational or provocative rhetoric, pursues a multi-perspective expansion of conflicts of representation by confronting divergent perceptions.