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Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. vi + 206 pp. Photos, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN978-0-85745-883-4.

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Max Silverman's *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* constitutes a significant contribution to the growing list of works dealing with literary and cinematic representations of traumatic historical memories that cast these memories as essentially interconnected and potentially mutually enriching and enlightening. The major work which, to the best of my knowledge, launched this trend is Michael Rothberg's outstanding *Multidirectional Memory* published in 2009. In 2010 Rothberg, Silverman, and Debarati Sanyal co-edited an issue of *Yale French Studies* dealing with this (or a closely related) perspective on memory and its representations entitled *Noeuds de Mémoire* [1], the knots in question being another variation on this model, but emphasizing "a conceptualization of collective or cultural memory beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state" (p. 7).

By and large, this approach to memory is an Anglo-American phenomenon, and runs counter to a fairly widespread tendency in France, especially among historians, which holds that the emergence of different traumatic (and ethnic) memories results not in a form of consonance or symbiosis but rather in competition, in competing and often antagonistic claims for recognition and commemoration. This approach is best exemplified in works by historians like Jean-Pierre Rioux in his book *La France perd la mémoire* (2006) and by Olivier Wieviorka in his recent *La mémoire désunie* (translated into English as *Divided Memory*) which deals with political efforts to come to terms with the Dark Years since the Liberation.[2] Wieviorka uses the felicitous expression "the balkanization of memory" to evoke the competition of particular, and particularizing, narratives that in his view unravel the national fabric of memory rather than reinforce it. According to some, the so-called *guerre de mémoires* also results in a dangerous conflation of memories that ultimately distorts the historical record and, to the degree this competition also encourages an unhealthy fixation on the past, leads to what Pascal Bruckner has labeled *la tyrannie de la pénitence*.

In literature and film studies in French universities as well, the capacity of artistic works to evoke or allude to multiple memories and explore connections between them is usually de-emphasized in favor of a more "literary historical" or "generational" approach. Thus critics like Marc Dambre, in examining the recent literary works evoking multiple tasks, focuses primarily on generational issues: where *mode rétro* writers like Patrick Modiano are "second generation" writers—the "postmemory" generation for Marianne Hirsch—, younger writers like Yannick Haenel, author of the controversial *Jan Karshi*, represent the "third generation." [3] While Silverman repeatedly acknowledges his indebtedness to Rothberg and his notion of multidirectional memory, that is, memory as "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing: as productive and not privative" (p. 3), he prefers to describe memory functioning in this fashion as "palimpsestic" perhaps a more literary term and one which recalls the critical work of Gérard Genette and his work on figures like Stendhal and, of course, Freud. Silverman explains his choice of the figure of palimpsest in the following terms: "I have chosen

the term “palimpsestic memory” to discuss this hybrid form because, of all the figures which connect disparate elements through a play of similarity and difference (analogy, metaphor, allegory, montage, and so on), the palimpsest captures more completely the superposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialization of time central to the work of memory I wish to highlight” (p. 4). And, he adds, the choice of the figure of the palimpsest is not only an analytical or descriptive device, it has political implications as well: “I argue that palimpsestic memory offers a non-foundational approach to the human in keeping with Derrida’s ‘cosmopolitical’ vision of the ‘democracy-to-come.’ It would be a dynamic and open space composed of interconnecting traces of different voices, sites and times, and it would hold out the prospect of new solidarities across the lines of race and nation” (p. 8).

In his initial chapter Silverman traces the theoretical foundations of his approach and discusses some of the early postwar works that raise directly or indirectly, the issue of comparative (and competitive) memory, and specifically the memories and evocations of the traumas of the Holocaust and colonialism. These include Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and David Rousset’s *L’Univers concentrationnaire*.^[4]

In chapter two, Silverman turns to “Concentrationary Memory” and examines three important films in detail, Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) and Resnais’s *Muriel ou le temps d’un retour* (1963). In Silverman’s reading, *Nuit et Brouillard*, despite its focus on Auschwitz-Birkenau, ultimately proposes a model of concentrationary memory that is not the same as “Holocaust memory”: it is not limited in its scope to the genocide of the Jews and refuses in fact any such “ethnocultural or religious particularization” (p. 48). Close readings of the latter two films reveal memories of both Algeria and World War II in palimpsestic juxtaposition. In *La Jetée*, the ruined city of Paris is evocative of Hiroshima, whereas the depiction of torture in the film clearly recalls French army methods in Algeria.

Chapters three, four, five and six follow through, in essence, on the groundwork laid in the first two chapters by examining in roughly chronological order essays, memoirs, novels, and films that offer creatively divergent examples of (or meditations on) palimpsestic memory and focus on connections between the Holocaust (and World War II) and the abuses of colonialism. The iconic works treated in these chapters include Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*; Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer?*; Assia Djébar’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*; Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après*; Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*; Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*; Haneke’s *Caché* (2005); and finally autobiographical works by Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Patrick Chamoiseau and Rodolphe Hammadi.

In my view, the most successful and original of these discussions is Silverman’s reading of Haneke’s *Caché*, a film which has had its fair share of critical attention because of its problematic, but obliquely original presentation of the brutal suppression of Algerian protesters in the streets of Paris by Maurice Papon’s police on the night of October 17, 1961. In his reading of *Caché* Silverman combines astute analysis of Haneke’s technique and editing with theoretical observations by Jacques Rancière and others to offer a powerful demonstration of palimpsestic memory at its richest and most provocative. *Caché* is a deeply unsettling film and Silverman’s discussion cast in relief its sharp political edges. Here palimpsestic memory’s political implications are skillfully exposed, but not in relation to a “democracy-to-come,” but rather with reference to hidden divisions of the past erupting into the present.

In his final chapter, Silverman concludes with a strong claim for palimpsestic memory’s capacity to overcome both the inherent competitiveness of traumatic memories along with their claims to a special or privileged status, and the danger that in contemporary culture all such memories lose their power in a hypermediatized, “presentist” world. In its openness, receptivity to change and revision, and creativity, palimpsestic memory can Silverman believes forward the claims of a “democracy-to-come.” What this “democracy-to-come” precisely entails is yet to be fully defined and is, under any circumstances, beyond the scope of Silverman’s study.

Palimpsestic Memory is an extremely erudite book. Approximately one-fourth of its content consists of footnotes in small print which amplify the text or in which the author delineates his views in detail from those of other critics. Moreover, the book reflects an extraordinarily rich knowledge of postwar French fiction and film, film theory, theory broadly defined, Holocaust studies, and “memory theory” over the last three decades. Silverman’s text itself fairly bristles with references to works in these areas, which means that the reader’s own experience is somewhat “palimpsestic,” moving from Silverman’s arguments to observations that parallel, enhance, or inspire his readings. While in most of the discussions this approach works quite well, it does on occasion make for heavy going for the reader, who is obliged to work through the thicket of Silverman’s critical references to follow his argument and get to his point of view.

For all of its erudition, *Palimpsestic Memory* does suffer from some *lacunae*. In his discussion of palimpsestic memory in Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* Silverman does refer to works of other critics of the novel with whom he disagrees (the author of this review included) but he does not acknowledge that an entire issue of the *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Literature* was devoted to *Dora Bruder*, co-edited by Lynn Higgins and myself, and appeared in Summer 2007.^[5] Several essays in that issue deal precisely with Modiano as a palimpsestic writer, and it would have been nice to have Silverman’s views on how his reading differs from theirs.

In his introduction, Silverman also observes that “[i]n more recent decades...histories of extreme violence have tended to compartmentalize memory on ethno-cultural lines and hence blinker the attempt to see multiple connections across space and time” (p. 4). Although Silverman does not develop the point, it seems somewhat untimely given the recent success of books like Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*, which examines the multi-national trauma of World War II in the east, not from a national or ethnic perspective, but precisely from a transnational, transcultural one.

All in all, this is an important contribution to the study of memory’s multidirectionality, its capacity through its artistic representations to juxtapose the memories of traumatic pasts in fruitful and imaginative ways. For those skeptical of this approach to memory, *Palimpsestic Memory* is largely persuasive.

NOTES

[1] Rothberg, Silverman, and Debarati Sanyal, eds., “Noeds de Mémoire: Multidirectionaly Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture,” *Yale French Studies* (special edition), 118-119(November 2010).

[2] Jean-Pierre Rioux, *La France perd la mémoire: Comment un pays démissionne de son histoire* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 2006); Olivier Wieviorka, *La mémoire désunie: Le souvenir politique des années sombres, de la Libération à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2010).

[3] Yannick Haenel, *Jan Kariski* (Paris: Folio, 2011).

[4] Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme, suivi de : Discours sur la Négritude* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2000), Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951; third edition, 1973); and David Rousset, *L’Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Fayard/Pluriel, 2011).

[5] Lynn A. Higgins and Richard J. Golsan, eds., “Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*,” *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Literature* (special edition), 31/2(Summer 2007).

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