

Brad Prager, *After the Fact: The Holocaust in Twenty-First Century Documentary Film*

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There are for me always ambiguous feelings aroused by watching Holocaust documentaries and reading their interpretations. In the case of the book *After the Fact*, there is the sheer pleasure derived from reading a well argued, thoroughly researched and engagingly written text. But such a study also stirs conflicting feelings of frustration, even anger that documentaries about the Holocaust are still being made, interpreted, reinterpreted and institutionalised as an academic study in University Departments. We know well the rhetoric – we should remember lest not we forget. But this simple binary is perfidious.

The increasing predisposition in contemporary societies towards cultural memory is related to an obsession with forgetting. We are, Paul Connerton argues in *How Modernity Forgets*, subjects of ‘structural forgetting’. Citing Eric Hobsbawm, he also suggests, ‘Most young men and women... grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live.’¹ Accordingly, historical awareness is nowadays, pitiful. Memory is being turned into a cultural industry.

‘Remembering’ the Holocaust takes many forms, documentaries, feature films, novels, historical objects, public monuments, and museums which abound. Over the last two decades there has been an explosion of Holocaust museums from Argentina to Australia, Bulgaria and Belarus, Italy, Macedonia, South Africa and Germany – the list goes on to include in the USA, museums in New York, Washington DC and Los Angeles amongst many others. In London, the exhibition in the Imperial War Museum was opened in 2000; then there are feature films, such as *The Reader* (2008), *Sarah’s Key* (2010), and more recently, *Ida* (2013). *Schindler’s List* (1993) is discussed extensively by Prager and described as an ‘event’ in the history of Holocaust films which destabilises the binary of fact and fiction.² According to Philippe Mesnard, cited by Prager, there are 1,194 films dealing with the Holocaust in the decade (1985–1995) that followed Claude Lanzman’s *Shoah*.³

Well aware of the difficulties occasioned by the respectful memorialisation of the catastrophe, Prager’s analysis is sensitive to the vicissitudes of time and of memory.

Prager chooses ten documentaries that are marked by reflexivity – in the sense that they are self-consciously aware of the problematics of representation of the Holocaust, memory and the cultural industries. These concerns are inscribed within their language, subjects and historical understandings of the genre. He writes:

To judge from the changing subject of Holocaust documentaries, the question of whether the commodification of Holocaust cultural memory is problematic, repugnant, or simply inevitable has become an important one for contemporary filmmakers.⁴

He traces the history of Holocaust documentaries from *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945) to *Branko: Return to Auschwitz* (2013). It is Alain Renais’ *Night and Fog* (1955) and Lanzman’s *Shoah*, (1985) that weave in and out of his analysis to provide crucial, critical benchmarks. Indeed

Prager contends they are ‘essential for studying the Holocaust documentary today’.⁵ His analysis is always informed by respect for the specificity of cinematic narratives.

He identifies key themes in Post-millennial films including: camp tourism; intergenerational and familial conflict; guilt and responsibility; forgiveness. Prager describes new techniques of incorporating archival footage; the work of art in the age of Facebook; the use of survivor testimony; readings of post-Holocaust debates in which he confronts ethical questions posed by the ‘unrepresentability’ of the disaster; and the inexorable volatility and challenges of historical truth. For Prager, documentaries are ‘works in dialogue and must aim to avoid falsifying history’.⁶

We do not live in history, we live in the imaginary but history returns brutally, knocks on the door when we neither want nor perhaps expect it.

The recent news photographs and testimonies of refugees have prompted memories of the Holocaust. Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs reminds us of the Evian Conference (July 1938) in which representatives of thirty-two countries met to discuss the disaster that they knew was about to befall the Jews of Europe. The suggestion of offering safe havens was to no avail, country after country failed to open doors to the refugees.⁷ Today, razor wire fences are being built, more borders are closing. In ‘Europe’s War Against Immigrants’, Matthew Carr describes the unrelenting battle against immigrants that he suggests, calls to mind some of the bleakest periods of European history.⁸

Violence and ambivalence towards refugees are endemic. Innocuous yet inflammatory words and phrases abound to describe them: they are ‘migrant hordes’. On 30 July David Cameron, fuelled by populist political rhetoric, warned of a ‘swarm of people wanting to cross the Mediterranean wanting to come to Britain’. Daily we see pictures of people, at best trekking across Europe with their meagre belongings, or trying to climb over fences, or trapped in railway stations or again, detained in camps. ‘Camps’, Zygmund Bauman has argued, ‘ooze finality’. ‘Not’, he continues, ‘the finality of destination, [though], but of the state of transition petrified into the state of permanence’; or finally, at worst we see images of the dead in the sea and on the beaches.⁹

These are always images of individuals with names. Carr explains that the people he talks to have different reasons for crossing Europe’s borders – some seeking work, others, from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, fleeing the ‘War on Terror’. Now there are the refugees escaping the civil war in Syria. Are, Carr asks, the punitive measures against refugees and immigrants, laying the foundations of ‘a new kind of barbarism?’

It seems as if we are immersed in a world that does not realise its own contradictions. Can we free ourselves from melancholy to discover insights that push us to think about these displaced people in a transnational Europe that defends peoples’ rights to travel and enables them to escape the horrors that have become their lives?

Following Walter Benjamin’s suggestion, the writing of history is already bestowed with the eyes of the present. If I have digressed, it is a measure of the fact that *After the Fact* offers a way of thinking about the present, as well as the past. Prager’s analysis of the documentaries of the twenty first century shows how the past is framed through the exigencies of the present. My doubt about reading this book was fuelled by the urgency of the current crisis, however Prager’s work counters

that ambivalence by taking on a resonance other than the one already bestowed upon its subjects and history.

¹ Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp 2–3

² Brad Prager, *After the Fact: The Holocaust in Twenty-First Century Documentary Film*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015, p 150
~~Brad Prager, London, 2015, p 150~~

³ Phillippe Mesnard, ‘La mémoire cinématographique de la Shoah’, in Catherine Coquito, ed, *Parler des camps, penser les génocide*, Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 1999, pp 473 –490

⁴ Prager, op cit, p 29

⁵ Prager, op cit, p 3

⁶ Prager, op cit, p 25

⁷ Jonathan Sacks, who was Chief Rabbi (1991–2013) in, ‘Love the stranger because you were once strangers’ is reminded thus. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/06/refugee-crisis-jonathan-sacks-humanitarian-generosity>, accessed 17 September 2015.

⁸ Matthew Carr, ‘Europe’s War Against Immigrants’, in *The New York Times*, republished in *The Observer*, 7 November 2010, p 2

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Wasted Lives: Modernity’s Collateral Casualties’, in Juliet Steyn and Nadja Stamselberg, eds, *Breaching Borders: Art, Migrants and Metaphors of Waste*, IB Taurus, 2014, p 28

Juliet Steyn is co-editor of ‘Breaching Borders: Art, Migrants and the Metaphor of Waste’, 2015. She has published widely on art and cultural criticism focusing on the politics of memory and identity and the language of display in museums and galleries. Brad Prager’s *After the Fact: The Holocaust in Twenty-First Century Documentary Film* was published by Bloomsbury, 2015