Tommaso Speccher

The Dead Jew as Eternal Other

Loss and Identification in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin

Introduction

Talking, thinking, and writing about the Holocaust requires careful attention to a vast array of historical events, personal and collective representations, and intellectual debates. The contemporary use of the term “Holocaust” evokes multiple references that extended and almost questioned its original meaning.¹ Depending on “where” this word is pronounced, and by “whom,” the interpretive perspectives change and the sociopolitical nuances multiply. It is clear that the word “Holocaust” has gradually enlarged its explicative capacity to the point of signifying events and memories that exceed the specificity of its historical contingency.² The variety of the contexts in which the term has penetrated everyday language – in schoolbooks, in journalistic debate, in the sites of memorialization of the tragedy – spans the range of theology, history, sociology, philosophy, and politics.

The realm of politics has appropriated the memorialization of the Holocaust as one of the privileged instruments through which the practices and orientations of the European peoples might be shaped.³ Furthermore, almost every European capital hosts a memorial to the Jews who were deported or killed during World War II, and they generally fulfill two functions: to discursively fix the details of a

² According to Naomi Mandel, “the point is that once the unspeakable is constructed as a theological narrative of destruction, sacrifice, and potential redemption by the term ‘Holocaust’, it becomes appropriable as a generic, almost comfortable, appellation for a broad spectrum of disasters: hence the use of ‘Holocaust’ to refer to African American and American Indian histories, the AIDS crisis, and abortion – to limit this appropriation to public discourse in the United States alone.” Mandel, Naomi, Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 43.
precise event, and to symbolically point to a reality more complex than the event in itself. This duplicitous nature characterizes the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe designed by the American architect Peter Eisenman and opened to the public in 2005. On the one hand, this site is an oral and visual history center preserving and displaying thousands of individual experiences; on the other hand, the cryptic layout of the surface lends itself to a multilayered symbolic impact. The Memorial is the result of a decade-long debate on the role of Holocaust memory within German culture, but its physical presence holds significance beyond these debates. More than simply preserving historical memory, it addresses the need to establish a clear procedure for confronting a difficult past.

Through the lens of the Berlin Memorial, this article addresses the center of this difficulty, which is the memory of the unsuturable wound that has befallen German-Jewish culture. My analysis will center on the Memorial’s evocation of the irretrievably lost but desperately present past, a process instigated by the excessive repetition of documentary and personal traces in the learning center (located underneath the Memorial) and by the deliberately out-of-scale symbolism of its surface. I will propose a philosophical reading of the two conflicting experiences that this duality generates: an experience of mimetic identification and the immersion in symbolic loss. Both psychoanalysis and religion inform the notion of death and absence I work with but the main angle of analysis relies on a discussion of ethics.

I will start by analyzing the architectural function fulfilled by the memorial vis-à-vis its topographic position and its political legitimacy within German society. In a second moment I will produce an interpretation of the inexplicability of Holocaust representations as rooted in the unstable relationship between historical events and their representations, a discrepancy observed by, among others, Reinhart Koselleck and Dan Diner, and reified in the Berlin memorial. To contextualize this tension, I will briefly illustrate the generational development in German culture’s reception of the Holocaust legacy. The psychoanalytic argument elaborated by Karl Jaspers in *The Question of Guilt* (1947) will be presented and integrated with A. Dirk Moses’s recent article “Stigma and Sacrifice in the Federal Republic of Germany” (2007). From here I will shift my focus to the epistemological and ethical consequences of the death of the European Jews. Among the many starting points that the history of philosophy offers to remember the Death of the Other, the work of the French-Lithuanian Jew Emmanuel Levinas remains particularly important. His work contains an important suggestion that

can help us understand the dead Jew as the Other that is desired, and that can be listened to. Levinas’s ethics is certainly generated by the Holocaust but it strives to circumvent the catastrophe’s most annihilating aspects by indicating directions for a meaningful exercise of collective memory.

**Berlin and the Space of Memory**

In Europe there are 536 memorials dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust; each European country having at least one. Most of them were officially proclaimed memorials after the fall of the Berlin Wall. These places of memory generally share two common characteristics: the detailed reconstruction of the event which took place at that site—with visual evidence, pictures, interviews, objects—and the presence of an emblematic artifact—a monument, a work of art—whose function it is to represent the crucial events in a metaphorical or allegorical way.

The Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is located near the Brandenburg Gate, right along the traces of the former Berlin Wall. It was designed by the American architect Peter Eisenman and opened in 2005. The nineteen thousand square meters of the site are covered with 2,711 concrete blocks arranged in a grid pattern on a sloping field. The concrete blocks, or stelae, only vary in height. According to Eisenman’s project description, the stelae are designed to produce an uneasy confusing atmosphere while the whole structure represents a supposedly ordered system that has lost touch with human reason.⁵ Underneath the grid-like surface visitors can access a documentation center displaying the names of all known Jewish Holocaust victims, as per lists obtained from the Israeli museum Yad Vashem.

The Berlin monument has been harshly criticized because it only commemorates Jewish victims. The debate around the work has been extensive, and a hefty book titled *Das Denkmal* (The Memorial) gathers about six hundred articles reacting to the project in the years between 1989 and 1999. In 1998, the German novelist Martin Walser had already produced one of the most significant critical statements concerning the Memorial, and its sharpness has not faded. Walser condemned Germany’s “Holocaust industry” and what he called the “ceaseless presentation of our shame.”⁶ Noting that no other city in the world hosted a

---

⁵ At the opening in 2005, the official tourist flyer claimed that the design represented a radical approach to the traditional concept of a memorial, partly because Eisenman did not use any symbolism.

⁶ In: Dankesrede von Martin Walser zur Verleihung des Friedenspreises des deutschen Buchhandels in der Frankfurter Paulskirche am 11 Oktober 1998, (translated
memorial of national disgrace, he declared that “The Holocaust is not an appropriate subject of a memorial and such memorials should not be constructed.”7 Walser’s words eerily echo the unrepresentability spatially symbolized by the Memorial. The lack of any physical, realistic reference to the traumatic event it commemorates, or to the geographical site where it is located, makes it a memorial to nothing, to nothingness, or to absence. This absence is amplified by the fact that nowhere on the Monument can one find an inscription explaining the object of commemoration. This silence has been interpreted as a deliberate attempt to encourage the visitors’ own research, but also as a reference to traditional Jewish cemeteries, and as an allegory of the sense of loss of the Jewish community.

Beyond the cryptic symbolism the central fact remains: the memorial is not erected on the location of a former extermination camp or some other crucial area, and the only connection between the monument and its position is its symbolic occupation of the new capital city of Germany. The Berlin Memorial was built from scratch sixty years after the Holocaust, and it shows all its indebtedness to contemporary architectural trends, particularly to Deconstructivism, and to a general tendency toward abstraction common in recent memorial construction. The act of memory is not produced by the mimetic or aesthetic repetition of the “traumatic incision”⁸ but rather through an apparently empty semantic field whose symbolic openness and indetermination characterize the experience of memory.

The Berlin Memorial should therefore be understood within a wider trend in memorial culture. A new kind of national memorial is in fact being constructed in every capital city of all the old European countries: Instead of an “Arc de Triomphe” or “il monumento alla vittoria,” today you can find a “memorial of the Holocaust.” What is being represented in these places is not the past but a construction of the present, a construction of narratives and perspectives that simultaneously seek an understanding of the past and the present alike. Even within this broader context, the Memorial in Berlin represents a distinctly innovative mode of representation of the Holocaust that does not operate in relation to the historical event but through a mystical sense of the symbolic power of history.

Through the symbolic power of the topographical inscription, the millions of people who walk through the pillars in the memorial in Berlin every year learn a new perspective on history and on the past. However, this monument also invites

---

7 Ibid.
8 This strategy is very common at other Holocaust memorial sites, the Washington Holocaust Museum and Auschwitz the most famous among them.
us to rethink nationalistic rhetoric in the direction of historical responsibility. Once founded on honor and military force, nationalist rhetoric is being transformed by the affective reaction brought about by the reference to a genocide and fostered by the crisis of the nation-state as political actor. In short, I argue that Holocaust memorials gesture in the direction of a post-national entity, namely the European one. In Berlin in particular, where the memorial is within minutes of the renovated parliament house, the site of national self-recognition almost merges into the site of the impossibility of recognition.⁹

**Classic Dilemmas in Holocaust Historiography**

The convergence of discursive, symbolic and experiential elements in the Berlin Memorial enacts the epistemological conditions of historical discourse in contemporary Europe. According to the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, “in every historical event many extra-linguistic factors are produced which are not reducible to representations and description. In a more general sense language and historicity cannot be reduced to each other in a definitive way.”¹⁰ In this light, the critical relationship between historicity and representation seems to undermine the reliability of any representation of events, military actions, persecutions, or massacres. Consequently, historical knowledge itself becomes questionable. This spreading uneasiness hovers over the analysis of Holocaust representations and is precipitated in the Berlin memorial’s ostensible refusal to represent—at least on the surface. It hangs suspended between the exhibition of factual traces and the semantic rupture of their monumental shell.

Rupture, withdrawal, and willful indeterminacy resonate with the “ungraspability” of historical facts as articulated by Marc Bloch in the 1940s,¹¹ and as reelaborated in the 1970s as the problem of “historical writing.” In the case of

---

⁹ “We suggest that shared memories of the Holocaust, the term used to describe the destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945, a formative event of the twentieth century, provide the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory, a memory transcending ethnic and national boundaries.” Levy, Daniel and Sznaider, Natan, “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 88.


¹¹ “The knowledge of the fragments, studied by turns, each for its own sake, will never produce the knowledge of the whole; it will not even produce that of the fragments themselves.” Bloch, Marc, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Burke, P. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992 (1942), 128.
the Holocaust, the tension between events and language reaches extremes that have led thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno to aver the end of all possibility of saying any word from on high.¹² Adorno’s reflection adumbrates what Koselleck describes as the withdrawal of facts vis-à-vis their own representability, a withdrawal that leaves room, almost paradoxically, for an excess of signification. In the case of the Holocaust, this empty space has been filled by an ever-growing body of cultural products. It is a fact that the memorialization of the Holocaust is an operation of unprecedented proportions through which original or fantasized experiences have been reconfigured and fixated in a widely spread collective memory. The memory of the catastrophe has far exceeded the boundaries of its original subjects—victims, perpetrators and bystanders alike. This abundance was preceded by what Jan Assmann has defined as the phase of “communicative memory.” Different from collective memory, communicative memory is produced within a community in the arc of three generations from a given historical event.¹³ Today that arc has almost come to a close and the spectacularization of the Holocaust lives on an almost self-sustaining productivity. The “Holocaust” has enlarged its scope to include social groups who use its emblematic core to renegotiate their own identities.¹⁴ The “qualitative and quantitative uniqueness of the Holocaust”¹⁵ has almost morphed into perfect transferability.

Postmodernity has taught us to perceive, as a counterpoint of excessive signification, an inevitable fragmentation of the signifier. Or better, figures like Adorno, Lyotard, and especially Derrida have conspicuously emphasized a deferral of the possibility of signification.¹⁶ The negative force of the empirical Holo-

---

¹² “All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. After Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it underwent a transformation.” Adorno, Theodor W., Negative Dialectics, trans. Ashton, E.B. (London: Routledge, 1990 (1966), 364–65.


¹⁴ For the relationship between historical and personal experience in a concentration camp, see Young, James E., Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation; Friedländer, Saul, Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993.


¹⁶ “The Problem of the unrepresentable Holocaust will not go away. These eloquent gestures toward the limits of thought reverberate in contemporary critical theory and philosophy’s explorations of language, history, community, and ethics, realms in which the Holocaust maintains a formidable presence. For Lyotard, Agamben, Blanchot and Derrida the Holocaust—
caust, a force of destruction and death that points to a metaphysical void, permanently defers our attempts to signify it: nonetheless, the nature of memorials, and of the Berlin memorial in particular, is to counter this void.

The “Information Center,” which occupies the underground part of the site, absorbs the functions of preserving, organizing, and reconstructing the traces of the survivors in a coherent discourse. The colossal quantity of data, the extensiveness of the archive, and the meticulousness of the display are exceptional. Despite the great effort undertaken by fleeing Nazis to erase evidence, the open archive parades a multitude of surviving documents, originating from Port-Bou to the Ukraine, which were indelibly marked by the Shoah. In the documentation center, people and places, personal histories and legal documents, faces and numbers inhabit the apparent astonishment that accompanies the history of Nazi exterminations.¹⁷

Rather than unspeakable, the Holocaust is too tightly marked by the overwhelming traces that have been unearthed, like a book whose print is almost too compact for the naked eye to see, and is therefore dismissed as unreadable. The crisis of representation does not obliterate meaning, although it makes access to meaning so painstaking and daunting as to threaten a potential disjunction in the epistemological path. Quite dramatically, Eisenman himself describes his work as a monument where “there is no goal, no end, no working one’s way in or out.” He continues:

The duration of an individual’s experience of it grants no further understanding, since understanding is impossible. The time of the monument, its duration from top surface to ground, is disjoined from the time of experience. In this context, there is no nostalgia, no memory of the past, only the living memory of the individual experience. Here we can only know the past through its manifestation of the present.¹⁸

Observing the groups of visitors, at first compact and focused while waiting to enter the documentation center and then quickly dispersed into a myriad of

---

¹⁷ “Like any word and any name Auschwitz both signifies and effaces, refers and defers. To be ‘after Auschwitz’ is to be in the spectral presence of the people who survived it. It is to be forced to confront this deaths, this presence, and the disquieting effacement that ‘after Auschwitz’ performs on both. The more we speak about Auschwitz, it seems, the more prevalent and compelling the gestures toward the limits of speech, thought, knowledge, and world.” Mandel, Against the Unspeakable, 31.

lonely wanderers who drift among the stelae looking for references which are nowhere to be found, the detachment between historical and experiential time becomes palpable. In the undulating paths threading the surface along an impeccable grid, the Holocaust is a thrashed sign transfixed with tomb-like presences revealing itself in its wounded historical essence.

German-Jewish Culture: Guilt, Stigma, Inscription

The representation of the Holocaust deployed in the memorial is the result of a decade-long debate in Germany dealing with the attempt to confront German culture with the Shoah. This confrontation was complicated by the high level of integration of Jewish communities in Germany as a nation and the intertwining of German and Jewish culture.¹⁹ German-Jewish culture was exceptional in the European context; for centuries it was a religious minority that finally managed to thread itself successfully into the German fabric. Unlike in many other parts of Europe, German-Jewish people and culture were accepted even into the sacred hearth of the State through a process of assimilation, which reached its emblematic high-water mark in 1848.²⁰ This inextricable history makes the extermination of European Jews particularly unique in Germany, and it inflected the political experience of post-World War II Germany toward a certain fundamental ahistoricity. This ahistoricity manifested itself along two conceptual lines. On the one hand, in 1947 Karl Jaspers analyzed it as an “unsustainable guilt;”²¹ on the other hand, Hannah Arendt defined the German-Jewish relationship, in a letter to Jaspers, as a “negative symbiosis.”²² These two concepts and their filiations have run through the political and social debate in the German Federal Republic and in unified Germany. The psychoanalytical binary of guilt/shame has been used to read the attitude of the generation who came of age during Nazi Germany. As A. Dirk Moses has recently articulated, the sense of guilt for the Holocaust

---


²⁰ 1848 is the year in which nine representatives of the Jewish community were members of the first freely elected parliament in German-speaking Europe, the national assembly in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main.

²¹ Jaspers, The Question of German Guilt, 81.

has generated paradoxical reactions, ranging from identification with the victim to refusal of one’s German ethnic and religious identity: “there is no doubt that many German children felt polluted and even saw themselves as victim of their parents: a number of Germans described themselves as the Jew of [the] family.”²³

The political activism of those who lived this social history still resonated quite vocally in the public debate that surrounded the realization of the Berlin memorial; although these voices may eventually be filed away as the necessary but passing confrontation that always accompanies such an endeavor, they remain eloquent at least so far. The discussion between four German students, three Jews, and a Christian in *Der Spiegel* from 1998 is exemplary.²⁴ While the Jewish students – Mark Jaffé, Hilda Joffe, and Igor Gulko – supported the intrinsic necessity of the “injunction to seeing” that the memorial would represent for Germans, the Christian, Kathi Gesa Klafke, strongly contested this view by clearly stating that:

> The Holocaust should be confined to History with the extermination of the Indians, the slave trade, serfdom, the Gulag, colonization, the persecution of the Christians, the Inquisition, the Crusades ... so that everyone can learn from them.²⁵

What emerges from this quote is an obvious replacement of the idiom of guilt and shame with an equalization of historical crimes. Klafke attempts to destigmatize German culture. The hampering force of insuperable guilt has been explained by A. Dirk Moses through the notion of stigma and sacrifice. According to Moses, insisting on the allocation of guilt has stigmatized the entirety of German culture:

> In accusing Germans of seeking to ignore the stain of the Nazi past, commentators are blind to their own participation in the construction of the stain. For this reason it is useful to think of postwar Germans / Germany in terms of stigma.²⁶

Although this analysis is persuasive, it overrelies on a psychological model that postulates the existence of national cultural units that are impermeable to each other.

---

In its Greek origins *stigma* meant a bodily sign of inferior social status, a brand on a criminal or outcast. It is logically and causally prior to pollution because the stigmatized group self-pollutes its members’ generation after the crime.²⁷

Seen through the Berlin Memorial, the stigma is not exclusive anymore: Instead of reproducing itself through generations of Germans it remains architecturally etched into the ground. The territory made “significant” and the repository of the legacy is national but also European. The stigma – the branding – is transferred to the national earth like a seed that burgeons into an offering to the international community. The stigma is a source of historical experience as well as an ongoing embodied reflection on individual responsibility. From this perspective, the subject of the Memorial is neither German society nor the Jewish victims but rather contemporary historical subjectivity.

The evolution from interior guilt to exterior stigma signals the emergence of the Berlin Memorial as a memory site for the interrupted narrative of European-Jewish culture. While objectifying the German burden of responsibility without erasing it, the Memorial hints at the capillary distribution of guilt on a European scale and therefore adumbrates the thorny issue of collaboration. The capacity for sensorial experience of these multilayered resonances in the Memorial stimulates an ethical movement of relationship with the Other and the Elsewhere. The Other and the Elsewhere are the motor of ethics, as already enacted in some ancient rites of passage. As one Italian scholar has observed:

...the original rites of passage sanction a change of status within a community. They intervene and regulate the main moments of danger, tension and social crisis. This dimension of myth, far from being extinct or obsolete, reoccurs today not only as a cultural backdrop but also as an ever-present, permanent possibility.²⁸

The surface of the memorial invites visitors to find their own path and to lose their way; the regular repetition of obstacles and the embodied rituality of being always at the edge, around the corner, in between, pushes the walker to the threshold of a historical memory. The converging descent of the ground at the base of the columns, the increasing obscurity and the deadening of the urban soundscape immerse the visitor in the rarefied and mythical atmosphere that characterizes the relationship between past and present. If myth is “the tale of an obscure place, ancient and missing,” that obscure place is also the site of a

²⁷ Ibid.
conversation with the missing Other, that Other that in rites of passage the Self is encountering within the liminal space between Self and Other:

Rites of passage: this is what the ceremonies connected to death, birth, weddings, puberty, etc. are called in folklore. In modern life, these passages have become more and more unrecognizable and imperceptible. We have become deprived of threshold experiences. The only one left to us perhaps is that of falling asleep. The Threshold is a zone. The word ‘schwellen’ [to swell] includes change, passage, and tides, meanings that must not go unnoticed by etymology. Oneiric architecture (W. Benjamin)

Rites of passage mark the renewal and revitalization of the relationships between the individual and the social body. The reconfiguration of the social episteme operates within a linguistic and logical proximity: individuals are led to the threshold of their zoé (“naked life”) to redefine both their bios (“life within culture, individuality”) and ethos (“moral attitude”). In this confrontational space, individuals discover their own nakedness as nonidentical to themselves in that it is also the nakedness of the Other, of the one that is not. Rites de passage are exercises in moral transformation from Self to Other. As Emmanuel Levinas has often tried to highlight, the prominence of the Other implies a calling to the other side as platic Epekenia tes ousia:²⁹

The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak. It does not envisage the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality. The first ‘vision’ of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is the breach of the totality, the possibility of a signification without a context. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision – it consummates this vision; ethic is an optics.³⁰

The Exposed Dead Jew of Europe and the Subject

According to the reading produced so far, the Berlin Memorial gives prominence to an exposed subjectivity that seeks and mirrors itself in the absence of an interlocutor, who is, nonetheless evoked through traces, images, and histories. The entire inscription of the Memorial is the sign of an experience that does not allow

²⁹ Epekenia tes ousia (beyond being,), indicating a transcendent and ethical relationship with the Other, and is a reference to Plato’s Republic (509b, 508c, 517bd, 518d).
itself to be reduced to one single concept but which opens up as ethical calling.³¹
The ethical interpellation of the visitor happens in the lower part of the site and is divided into three steps – the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the symbolic moment.

The cognitive moment takes place in the Room of Dimensions. In this space the visitor is presented with an extremely detailed timeline elucidating the timing, the places, and the methods of the processes of persecution, ghettoization, concentration, and extermination. The inclusion of audio-visual material facilitates apprehension of the vast mass of historical research, familiarizes the viewer with real documents, and structures the rest of the visit. The recurrence of some photographs – also on display in the Washington Holocaust Museum and in Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem – constitutes a so-called “stipulated memory,” the allusion to a set of references shared at a transnational level.³²

The aesthetic moment is progressively realized in the Room of Families and then in the Room of Names: It consists of the exhibition of the naked victims, their faces, their shattered lives, their familial relations and, finally, their names. The Room of Families, with its large pictures of complete households whose lives and names we come to learn in detail, produces an important emotional response in the viewers. Unlike the “historical” pictures of destruction from the Room of Dimensions, these family photos show no overt violence.³³ The beholder is soothed by the vision of family and friendly relations, by the sense of life that follows the sense of death but the pathos of identification is undermined by the awareness that destruction awaits. The following step, the Room of Names, is a cathartic moment that focuses on the names of the Holocaust victims. Every 60 seconds one name from the three and a half million victims listed at the Yad Vashem Archive is projected and followed by a sound recording containing the basic information defining the destiny of that person. The names bounce on the four walls, surrounding the viewer. The fade-out of every name alludes to the

³¹ Ibid.
³² “Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas ‘memories,’ and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory. But there is collective instruction. All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings.” Sontag, Susan, Regarding the Pain of Others, New York: Picador, 2003, 68.
³³ “Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalist.” Ibid., 18.
ephemerality that threatens memory and to the ephemerality of individual life. Yet the regularity and the precision of the list project the names and life histories into the future, defying the invisibility of those individual deaths.

The symbolic moment takes place on the surface of the Memorial when the visitors emerge to natural light after having toured the subterranean archive. Disoriented by the lack of references, by the extensiveness of the grid and by the slight irregularities of the terrain, the viewer is quickly transferred from the conditions of recognition and catharsis to the impossibility of knowledge. However, when the visitor is immersed bodily in the surface grid, a grid designed and built to accommodate the bodies that move through it, one question remains: Who is at the center of the Holocaust Memorial? In our reconstruction, the exposed subject is the contemporary subject as visitor, consumer, tourist – called upon to embody the definition and construction of a history – a history which he simultaneously takes in as constituted by individuals. The dead Jew is the irreducible limit of that experience, the paradox of an ethics that can do nothing but listen attentively and expose the self to the Other.

The immersion in the furrowed surface of the Memorial wraps the visitor in uneasiness and solitude, a fabricated disorientation that invites the subject to synthesize uncannily the biographies, lives, and silenced voices experienced below ground. All that remains of the Holocaust – coeval traces as well as contemporary resonances – acquires collective meaning through individual subjects who are symbolically made to go through an embodied loss of all received meaning. The memory of the Holocaust today distances itself from stigmatizing a country, a nation, or a social body. It initiates rather a new ethical practice that begins with the memory of the dead Jew as an internalized eternal Other and works toward the creation of a new, integrated self where the horrors of the past are apprehended through sympathy rather than defensive guilt.

Consciousness then does not consist in equaling being with representation, in tending to the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, but rather in overflowing this play of lights – this phenomenology – and in accomplishing events whose ultimate signification does not lie in disclosing. Philosophy does indeed dis-cover the signification of these events, but they are produced without discovery (or truth) being their destiny. The relation between the same and the other is not always reducible to knowledge of the other by the same. What counts

---

34 “The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the word which can be common to us. ... Speech proceeds from absolute difference.” Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, 194.
is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives.³⁵

**Conclusion**

The hermeneutic and ethical core of the Holocaust in relation to contemporary memorial representations in Europe, and in Berlin in particular, attempts to suspend a univocal and totalizing discourse and to encourage the emergence of a subjective interrogation that debunks essentialist identity narratives. In this new imaginary, the post-Holocaust subject strives to achieve recognition while alleviating the paralyzing self-referentiality of guilt generated by a vision of the dead Jew as the victim of a terror apprehended with horror and self-horror.

The apperception of Otherness as liberated from the weight of the “intentional offense to the ontological dignity of the victim”³⁶ can offer a model for relating to the dead Jews of Europe, without rejecting responsibility for and implication in that loss. In this new territory, the spatial stigma is transformed into a site of encounter where the Other is potentially received and met.

**Works cited**


³⁵ Ibid., 28.


