

The Guardians of Memory: An Interview with Valentina Pisanty

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Valentina Pisanty is Professor of Semiotics at the Università degli Studi di Bergamo. She is the author of several monographs in Italian on the uses and abuses of Holocaust memory, including *L'irritante questione delle camere a gas: logica del negazionismo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1998 [2nd rev. ed. 2014]) and *Abusi di memoria: negare, sacralizzare, banalizzare la Shoah* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012). She has also published extensively on the racist and antisemitic fascist journal *La difesa della razza*, including *Educare all'odio: La difesa della razza* (Milan: Motta, 2003) and *La difesa della razza: Antologia 1938-1943* (Milan: Bompiani, 2006). Her latest book *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right* (New York: Centro Primo Levi Editions, 2021) is a provocative investigation of the weaknesses of dominant Holocaust memory culture, which often ends up being appropriated by illiberal and xenophobic forces.

As Michael Rothberg states in his Foreword to *The Guardians of Memory*, your book 'is explicitly written to challenge consensus'. It takes the lead from the consideration that far from marking the permanent establishment of a hegemonic liberal paradigm, the years since the end of the Cold War have witnessed the rise of xenophobic and populist far right leaders and movements. You also state that these thirty years have been dominated by the centrality of the Holocaust in memory culture, at least in the Global North. Your claim is that these two phenomena are not entirely unrelated. Can you explain for our readers the gist of your argument and how you came to formulate it?

The job of critical thinking is to defy conventional wisdom and problematise what is often taken as given. Perhaps, what appears *prima facie* obvious is a symptom of unselfconscious acceptance of a certain ideology.

The cultural object discussed in my book is the commemorative rhetoric that has imposed itself as foundational metanarrative of Western liberalism. We have introjected this narrative to the point of feeling surprised whenever we are reminded that the Americanisation and later Europeanisation of Holocaust memory are relatively recent

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phenomena. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the inclusion of former Communist Bloc countries in the NATO sphere of influence, ‘cosmopolitan’ Holocaust memory filled the vacuum left by the collapse of twentieth-century revolutionary ideologies, becoming the hegemonic paradigm compatible with the support of neoliberal market economy and the protection of human rights championed by the theorists of the ‘third way’. In this view, the memory of twentieth-century totalitarian violence illustrates the triumph of liberalism, seen as light at the end of the tunnel and ultimate end of history, after which there is no point asking whether there are alternatives.

From this stems the Never Forget = Never Again mantra, the idea that remembering great historical traumas of the last century is an antidote against the rise of the new racist and xenophobic right. We do not lack evidence of the contrary, with ultranationalist leaders in power, fascist symbols being paraded, symbolic and physical violence, and authoritarian tendencies becoming mainstream. All these phenomena coexist with the consolidation and expansion of memory culture. I am certainly not arguing that the politics of memory are responsible for the rise of the xenophobic right in the Global North. The causes are more complex, multi-layered, and structural. However, my argument is that a complex web of not immediately visible connections unites them. Independently from their promoters’ intentions, current memory regimes operate in the same discursive field as the ultranationalist rhetoric, even if from opposite positions.

I started reflecting on this years ago when I studied the style and rhetoric of Holocaust deniers, whose trajectory in terms of media visibility overlaps with that of memory culture. It is not a coincidence that the Faurisson affair hit France between 1978 and 1979 to coincide with the international success of the *Holocaust* miniseries. By the same token, it is not a coincidence that the peaks of notoriety achieved by deniers coincide with controversies in the broader field of Holocaust memory, allowing them to garner attention beyond their traditional far-right niche.

In my 2012 book *Abusi di memoria* I focused on the ways in which denial, trivialisation, and sacralisation operated as cogs of the same machinery: deniers and trivialisers trigger defensive reactions from the defenders of sacralised memory, who claim an ever-increasingly exclusive monopoly over the legitimate use of memory. The deniers accuse the custodians of sacralised memory of twisting memory to serve their own undisclosed purposes; at the same time, they cling to the simplifications of the trivialisers to question the veracity of the

historical events being remembered. The trivialisers in turn benefit from these controversies, whose visibility allows them to promote increasingly tame mass memory products.

The underlying question is whether denial and trivialisation are aberrations from a fundamentally healthy memory standard, or whether each particular memory becomes inherently abusive whenever it purports to become universal. It is in the tension between *particular* and *universal* that many of the aporias of cosmopolitan memory emerge. In *The Guardians of Memory* I tried to understand how xenophobes exploit some contradictions of memory culture to promote themselves. For example, in the last twenty years many xenophobic leaders have gone to Yad Vashem or other trauma sites to 'cleanse' themselves, only to go back to their home countries and discriminate whichever minority they wish to scapegoat, using the homage paid to the Shoah as a shield against charges of racism. Paying homage to commemorative rhetoric also acts as a protective screen from coming to terms with past national crimes, from the pogroms in Eastern Europe to Fascism in Italy, to colonial violence to the war in the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, hollow Holocaust memory can be appropriated to represent the history of one's group in terms of victimhood. There are many examples, and in the book I discuss Poland and the former Yugoslavia, but the dynamics do not change: the hegemonic Holocaust narrative is hollowed out of any historically specific content to adapt it to the needs of self-confirming national narratives, in some cases acquiring xenophobic and/or antisemitic tones. Far from uniting the world under the Never Again message, victim-centred national memories fuel conflicts and divisions.

Finally, a word about the anti-denial laws introduced in many European countries. They are not only toothless, but they exacerbate the tension within liberal democracies between the theorisation of freedom of speech on the one hand, and its practical violation on the other. These fractures provide fertile ground for xenophobic movements and parties.

You argue that Holocaust memory is policed by what you define as the 'guardians of memory' responsible for ensuring that 'appropriate commemorative practices' are observed. You note that the regime informing Holocaust memory can be quite prescriptive, and that it ultimately harbours identity politics, the cultivation of victimhood as political capital, and support for illiberal legislation – all aspects embraced by the populist right in recent years. With regards to some of these 'guardians of memory', you discuss figures like Elie

Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann who were quite extreme in their views of how, and by whom, the Holocaust could be talked about. It is a strong argument, but I wonder what is in your view the place for the many forms of Holocaust memory that are not exclusionary and infused with identity politics, be they 'multidirectional' (Rothberg), 'palimpsestic' (Silverman), or 'prosthetic' (Landsberg)?

I am surprised you define as extreme the positions put forward by Wiesel and Lanzmann, as they were for many years the canon in Holocaust memory to which all needed to conform. Having said that, I would differentiate between Memory Studies and the actual politics of memory. Let's start from the latter.

Mainstream commemorative practices of the last thirty years have dovetailed with identity politics. It was not always like that: each cultural memory has its own life cycle. In general terms, in the first phase the memories of survivors congeal around a shared narrative core and they seek recognition with the broader public beyond the community of rememberers. In its more institutional phase, memory strives to become hegemonic and is promoted by 'guardians' who act as gatekeepers against perceived misuses. Finally, hegemonic memories are contested by other emerging memories, as it happened in Italy with the memory of the Resistance being supplanted by that of the Holocaust – the same could happen to the latter should new framework-narratives emerge with sufficient force.

Behind every paradigm shift is the issue of power. The conflict among particular memories is always present, especially when what is at stake is the universal recognition of the particular experience of those who 'were there'. On the one hand, only those who were there know what it was like, and this experience is only 'mine/ours'. On the other hand, everyone must feel what we felt, and this experience is for all. The result is the non sequitur 'only I lived through this experience and it is therefore valid universally'. The only way to get through the contradiction is to suspend critical judgment, not unlike when we follow a ritual. I acknowledge the existence of many excellent attempts to foster more multidirectional and inclusive forms of Holocaust memory that escape the constraints of rigid ritual. However, my focus is on institutionalised memory, the contested symbolic capital around which the competitive processes that Rothberg rightly defines as zero-sum-games are played out. That is why I focus almost exclusively on negative examples.

The multidirectional, palimpsestic, prosthetic models of Holocaust memory have in common the rejection of the 'uniqueness' argument and the will to open up Holocaust memory to progressive politics. I can only agree with this antidogmatic take. The other common denominator between these theories is their inclination to be prescriptive, at least to some extent. Not only do they describe/analyse the phenomena they study, but they also try to shape them. The counter-hegemonic examples of Du Bois, Resnais, or Spiegelman discussed by Rothberg, Silverman, and Hirsh respectively aim to show that confronting different historical experiences can result in mutual understanding and solidarity between different communities.¹ Rothberg's argument about multidirectional memory is convincing as long as we are clear about its effective relevance. These models are useful to describe emerging memories linked to grassroots activism of groups that are not yet at the centre of public memory. But this multidimensional way of conceptualising public memory is less effective when applied to more hegemonic and institutionalised memory. At the end of the day, there will always be someone who decides which comparisons can be accepted or are to be rejected, which commemorative practices are to be promoted or not, who can take part in debates and who is to be left out of the 'ring of fire' (to use Lanzmann's Wagnerian expression). The more central a memory, the harsher the conflicts among aspiring guardians, the more political and cultural agents interfere to direct them towards ends that are not always transparent.

Can scholars take part in these conflicts and propose more open and democratic alternative models? I think they can, but I am a little uncertain about the role of embedded critical work done to analyse a phenomenon while at the same time trying to transform it. As Max Weber explained, intellectual and political work follow different principles and values, and should be kept separated. Mixing the scientific/descriptive role with the political/prescriptive one runs the risk of making both less effective.

The concept of prosthetic memory deserves additional attention because here my scepticism is much more radical. Landsberg's point of departure is that because 'prosthetic memories permit people to have a personal connection to an event they did not live through, to

1 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2013); Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory', *Discourse* 15:2 (1992-1993): 3-29.

see through another's eyes, they have the capacity to make possible alliances across racial, class and other chasms of difference.² The aim is to produce in non-witnesses experiences that are phenomenologically equivalent to the lived experience of those who *were there*. The special effects theorised by Landsberg, and implemented in many museums and trauma sites, especially in the US, administer surrogate stimuli aimed at leading recipients to adopt the suffering of others as if it was their own. Prosthetic memory seems to take seriously Woody Allen's quip about feeling the compulsion to invade Poland every time he listens to Wagner. The expectation is to neutralise the representation level to re-present the experience-in-itself, and activate the same feelings and emotions experienced by real individuals during the events. Only by doing this, the thinking goes, one can achieve a deep understanding of what happened and be ready to act accordingly in the future. But is it really possible to reproduce the experience of internees during a museum visit or by watching a film? And even if it was at all possible, would it be desirable? Where does this quest for surrogate stimuli (what Gary Weissman calls 'the Holocaust experience') originate from?³ How far do vicarious experiences help understand the condition of real victims? What guarantees do we have that these fantasies of witnessing make people more receptive towards the historical victims they identify themselves with, as well as other past, present, and future victims? What is problematic is the ambition to work directly on the level of neural circuits losing track of the necessary cultural work required to achieve those effects, and expect that 'make-believe' will promote critical thinking. Prosthetic memory is the exact opposite of what Aleida Assmann calls critical memory.⁴

Your key claim is that the Holocaust memory paradigm, so central to 'Western' culture, was very much focused on the position of the victim (and later of the survivor), with very clear-cut distinctions between perpetrator, victim, bystander, and rescuer. You say that this victim-centred paradigm is showing signs of aging because at

2 Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture', in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. by Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 144-161 (p. 156).

3 Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

4 Aleida Assmann, 'Transformations of Holocaust Memory: Frames of Transmission and Mediation', in *Holocaust Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Memory, Images and the Ethics of Representation*, ed. by Oleksandr Kobrynsky and Gerd Bayer (London: Wallflower Press, 2015), pp. 23-40 (30).

odds with the current ‘new world disorder’ and is being replaced by what you define as a *Game of Thrones*-like amoral *bellum omnium contra omnes* in which the distinctions between perpetrator and victim are more blurred. You claim the clarity of the victim paradigm has lost appeal, and a new ethical paradigm has yet to emerge. Is this limbo the fertile ground in which the populist right thrives?

While working on this book between 2015–2020, I spent an inordinate number of hours watching TV series of the last generation: *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *Peaky Blinders* and many others. With all their differences, they all put on stage hypercompetitive environments in which the social contract is suspended and the surest way to succumb is by following conventional moral norms. In these dystopian worlds marked by Social Darwinism, which can be defined as metaphors for neoliberalism, there are no good and evil, but only winners and losers. The characters we are invited to identify with are ruthless and amoral (anti)heroes, high-functioning sociopaths gifted with exceptional survival skills, opportunism, single-mindedness, and the ability to lie and manipulate others: incidentally, all important values in the business world. Judging from the success these series garner among viewers of very different ideological orientation, one can infer that the way in which they recodify reality mirrors to some extent the way in which many people perceive their own real lives.

From there, I started reflecting on the figure of the Survivor as hero of our times. Perhaps due to the Americanisation of memory, in Europe, too the figure of the witness has changed dramatically in the last few decades, with the ‘Victim’ being superseded by the ‘Survivor’. How did this shift happen? In the immediate postwar period, camp survivors had to deal with the shame of having been victims and the prejudice of those who suspected them of having committed deplorable deeds to survive. From the 1960s onwards, with the reappraisal of the figure of the victim, the question survivors were asked was ‘what did they do to you?’, the message being that it was everyone’s responsibility to reintegrate traumatised survivors within society. More recently, my impression is that the key question has moved from ‘what did they do to you?’ to ‘how did you do it?’ How did you manage to survive? How did you find the resilience and the strength to escape the hell of the camps? Hence the inclination to see survival itself as a merit rather than an accident of fate, and to look at former deportees as models to imitate to better cope with today’s ‘slings and arrows of outrageous

fortune'. See for example the short-circuit between surviving Covid and surviving the Holocaust: why else interviewing Holocaust survivors about their lockdown experience?⁵

The idea emerging from many 'inspirational' discourses about memory is that the survival of the 'fittest' (as Primo Levi defined them) is an inevitable and to some degree appropriate outcome, in the absence of alternative ethical systems to the 'whatever it takes' in which everyone fights for their survival by any means necessary. It goes without saying that Social Darwinism is not compatible with the values of antiracism. Besides mirroring neoliberal values, these pseudo-meritocratic fantasies facilitate the work of the xenophobic right and its rhetoric constantly straddling victimism and supremacism.

Let us now talk more explicitly about the issue of perpetration. The points we have just discussed share some assonance with Raya Morag's argument that we are now in the 'era of the perpetrator'. You both see a rupture in the upheavals of this first part of the century. In your discussion of *Im Labyrinth des Schweigens (Labyrinth of Lies, Giulio Ricciarelli, 2014)* and *The Eichmann Show (Paul Andrew Williams, 2015)*, you bemoan the fact that, in your view, the dominant Holocaust paradigm does not allow us to fully explore the issue of perpetration, at least in popular public memory. Why is that the case in your view, and what would you see as the solution? What would be the ideal place of Holocaust perpetrators in our memory culture?

Notwithstanding the similarities with Raya Morag's argument that the twenty-first century marks the end of the witness, I am not entirely sold on the use of the term Era of the Perpetrator. The term perpetrator inherently activates the judicial paradigm underpinning the whole distinction victim-perpetrator, albeit with more emphasis on the second term rather than the first one. I am not sure this framing is the most

5 Toby Levy, 'The Holocaust Stole My Youth. Covid-19 Is Stealing My Last Years', *New York Times*, 3 January 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/03/opinion/holocaust-covid-lockdown-pandemic.html>> [accessed 1 Sept. 2021]; Caryn Lieberman, 'It's Not As Bad': Holocaust Survivor Compares the Pandemic Lockdown to One that Was Far Worse', *Global News*, 27 January 2021 <<https://globalnews.ca/news/7601876/holocaust-survivor-lockdown-coronavirus>> [accessed 1 Sept. 2021]; Myra Giberovitch, 'Holocaust Survivors Share 15 Life Lessons We Can Apply to Covid-19', *Holocaust Survivor Initiative*, 7 April 2021, <<https://holocaustsurvivorcare.org/resource-hub/blog/holocaust-survivors-share-15-life-lessons-we-can-apply-to-the-covid-19-pandemic>> [accessed 1 Sept. 2021].

suitable to understand the range of traumatic events we are currently facing. But perhaps the disagreement is simply about terminology.

In general terms, the victim-centred paradigm is showing signs of obsolescence because it is not suited to explain the multilateral nature of current conflicts, in which the perpetrator role is spread among a plurality of subjects, often fighting each other, none of which sufficiently in control of the situation to be deemed entirely responsible for events. The question then is: given the complex and systemic nature of current social phenomena and the polycentric and amoral structure of emerging narratives, what type of agency can be ascribed to subjects involved in current economic, political, environmental, and humanitarian crises? It is not so much a matter of asking 'who is to blame?', but 'how does it work?' In terms of semiotics, we need to investigate the rhetorical devices that prop up the 'new world disorder', which despite appearances is a form of order, but which we have not yet been able to describe in full.

Over the past two decades or so there has been a lot of work on and cultural representations of complicity/implication/participation in violence, often in ways that go beyond the traditional Hilberg-inspired tripartition perpetrators-victims-bystanders. For example, since the publication of the original version of your book, Michael Rothberg has articulated the position of the implicated subject. How can this work (and these cultural representations) be related to your argument?

The notion of implicated subject is extremely helpful to go beyond some of the aporias of memory discussed here. In line with Primo Levi's thinking about the grey zone and with the redefinition of an enlarged agency, Rothberg invites us to analyse the different ways in which we collaborate, often unconsciously, with the same dynamics we see ourselves as victims of. A current example outside the field of Memory Studies is our daily implication with the same economic 'system' that is taking away from us jobs and resources, including the way we increase the profits of the web giants every time we give away our personal data while browsing the Internet. Our participation in historical processes is even more noticeable when they involve difficult ethical questions, as it happened to Italians during Fascism. You do not simply have perpetrators, victims, bystanders and rescuers, but all intermediate shades, the whole gamut of macro- and micro-decisions made for a host of reasons depicting all types of ambiguities. A full

engagement with the range of possible conducts is a good way to rediscover a more mature notion of agency, including in the present. In history there are often alternatives, if one can see them.

In conclusion, you have dedicated a large part of your career to the study of the rhetorical devices adopted by the far right, in particular with reference to Holocaust denial; how has your research inspired you to reflect on current developments? Conversely, how does your reading of the present affect your thinking about the memory culture of past perpetration? Finally, based on your expertise, what would you see as the best way of countering the slide from ‘never again’ to ‘it’s happening here’?

I suspect there are no guarantees that something will never happen again in history, but that does not mean that we are powerless, either. The contribution of scholars is to explain processes, study their interconnections and disclose their hidden logics, and in thus doing divulge critical awareness. Understanding how racist prevarication works is a necessary albeit not sufficient starting point. However, I doubt that the critique of ideology alone can be effective, unless politics starts taking as its guiding star the reduction of inequality and structural injustice upon which intolerance feeds itself.

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