

## Looking Medusa in the Eye

Helena Duffy

REVIEW OF: *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), 393 pp. ISBN: 978-1-0320-8579-1.

The presence of Perpetrator Studies as an academic field in its own right has been manifest in an increasing number of conferences and publications on the topic, in the founding of the Perpetrator Studies Network at Utrecht University, and in the 2017 launch of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research*.<sup>1</sup> *The Routledge Handbook of Perpetrator Studies* institutionalises the nascent field of scholarship by defining its object of inquiry, key concerns, and boundaries. The contributions to this landmark volume respond to questions regarding the perpetrators' making, identity, motivations, taxonomies, traumatisation, unmaking, and rehabilitation. They ponder the possible risks and benefits – both cognitive and practical – of studying mass murderers, the ethical challenges involved in teaching about perpetrators, and the existing theorisations and cultural representations of evildoers. The volume also stresses the field's emblematic interdisciplinarity; indeed, the crosspollination characterising Perpetrator Studies makes *The Handbook* an invaluable resource to scholars in areas such as Law, Genocide Studies, Psychology, Literary Studies, Gender Studies, and Memory Studies.

If Perpetrator Studies drew impetus from the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, as publicised by the Nuremberg (1945-1946) and Eichmann (1961-1962) trials, the field's development has since been spurred on by efforts to understand more recent instances of mass violence. These include the genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the unlawful killings committed by soldiers in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and the extra-judicial incarceration and torture at the Guantanamo Bay prison. That the Nazi Judeocide nevertheless remains the central reference point for Perpetrator Studies is evidenced by the fact that several contributions either focus on Nazi criminals or posit them as paradigmatic perpetrators. This renewed interest in Nazi criminals, who constituted the main concern of Holocaust research

1 See 'Annotated Perpetrator Studies Bibliography,' *Perpetrator Studies Network*, <<https://perpetratorstudies.sites.uu.nl/bibliography/>> [accessed 1 October 2021].

during the first two decades after the war, but who became displaced as the object of study by the victims in the wake of Eichmann's trial, signifies a significant turn. *The Handbook* therefore contributes to a more comprehensive approach to the Nazi genocide, especially given the assertion of some contributors that preoccupation with the Holocaust's architects, organisers, and executors does not amount to forgetting the victims.

Apart from broadening the scope of the inquiry into mass violence, *The Handbook* has other goals. Firstly, it aims 'to give an overview of the field, its history and its essential and foundational concepts and approaches'.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, in order 'to generate new perspectives, insights and questions',<sup>3</sup> it engages Perpetrators Studies in a dialogue with other fields such as Environmental Humanities, Animal Studies, and Gender Studies. Thirdly, it pledges 'to explore future avenues of research at the frontiers of Perpetrators Studies'.<sup>4</sup>

*The Handbook* is composed of two parts: 'Core Concepts', which outlines the terminology, main concerns, and key debates of the field, and 'Intersections', which explores interdisciplinary approaches to perpetrators.

Part I is divided into three sections. 'Definitions and Terminology' contains Uğur Ümit Üngör's and Kjell Anderson's discussion of the shift from *perpetrators* to *perpetration* as the object of study, a shift allowing to address the complexity of the process of perpetration and the development of its understanding over time (Chapter 1).

'Group Dynamics and Moral Psychology' opens with Mary Fulbrook's endeavour to destabilise the popular and simplistic perception of Holocaust perpetrators as either the genocide's architects or front-line executors (Chapter 2). Stopping short of concurring with Michael Rothberg's conceptualisation of the implicated subject as someone who 'inhabit[s], inherit[s], or benefit[s] from regimes of domination but [does] not originate or control such regimes',<sup>5</sup> Fulbrook expands the perpetrator category to include those who were the genocide's knowing accomplices, facilitators or beneficiaries, as well as those who failed to prevent it. Stefan Kühl exposes the shortcomings of the sociological systems approach to perpetrator studies, which emerged under the influence of Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1976) [Economy and Society], Zygmunt Bauman's

2 Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–4 (p. 4).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 1.

*Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), and Hannah Arendt's and Martin Heidegger's theorisations of the Holocaust (Chapter 3).<sup>6</sup> By 'over-emphasising the goal-oriented rationality of organisations',<sup>7</sup> this approach ignores bottom-up initiatives, makes it difficult to reconstruct the rules of legitimacy prevalent at the time, and deflects attention from victims. Stephen Gibson revisits Stanley Milgram's influential (albeit controversial) 'obedience experiments' at Yale University (1961–1962), later reactions to them, and attempts to re-engage with the study of destructive obedience (Chapter 4). Gibson questions the very essence of Milgram's experiments, which, rather than obedience to authority, demonstrated that perpetrators are 'part of a wider system' and that, 'if that system "works", no direct orders are needed.'<sup>8</sup> Zachary Goldberg challenges the assumption that one needs to study evil only in relation to victims, since 'there are no psychological facts unique to acts of evil' and 'the motivations behind evil acts can be behind non-evil acts as well'<sup>9</sup> (Chapter 6). He mobilises Kantian theory to question the dominant 'situationist' approach, which casts perpetrators as ordinary humans, who, under propitious circumstances, commit evil acts. More specifically, Goldberg invokes our freedom to choose between 'satisfaction of our sensuous desires' (which can be cloaked as outwardly good actions) and morality. He proposes we seek the origins of evil in the perpetrators' moral psychology, which can prevent (or at least decrease) future instances of atrocities and make perpetrators responsible for their acts. The section's last two essays broach the relatively recent emergence of Islamic terrorism. While Jessica Wolfendale examines the post-9/11 development of torture culture in democratic contexts, where the 'ticking bomb scenario' has been used to legitimise practices at odds with democracy's programmatic commitment to human rights (Chapter 7), Teun van Dongen postulates that drawing up perpetrator typologies

6 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1976).

7 Stefan Kühl, 'Ordinary Organizations: A Systems Theory Approach to Perpetrator Studies', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg, pp. 37–45 (p. 38).

8 Stephen Gibson, 'Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg, pp. 46–60 (p. 56).

9 Zachary J. Goldberg, 'What's Moral Character Got to Do with It?: Perpetrators and the Nature of Moral Evil', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg, pp. 74–83 (p. 76).

may help us to make informed guesses about the kind of attack jihadists will commit (Chapter 8).

'Perpetrators and the Law' begins with Hilary Earl's questioning of the usefulness of perpetrators' courtroom testimonies in establishing historical truth about genocidal violence (Chapter 9). These testimonies can make Nazi criminals appear as 'victims of German society' or 'puppets of Hitler', or even justify their conduct by invoking insanity, sadism, or superior orders. Since 'legal truth and historical accuracy are not one and the same',<sup>10</sup> historians must study testimony in its context and in conjunction with documents. Likewise, illustrating his argument with the trial of Issa Sesay (senior leader of the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone), Mark Drumbl analyses the working of criminal law, where prosecution inflates agency, while defence strives to minimise it. Drumbl also probes the motivations for inflicting punishment, including rectification of moral balance, dissuasion of potential evildoers, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and reconciliation (Chapter 10). By examining the limited success of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which offered perpetrators amnesty in exchange for a truthful confession of the atrocities they committed during the apartheid era, Leigh Payne contests the notion that perpetrators' acknowledgment of responsibility can lead to reconciliation (Chapter 11). Finally, David Mendelhoff interrogates the capacity of wartime (as opposed to postwar) prosecution of atrocities by the International Criminal Court for coercing perpetrators into restraining their abusive behaviour (Chapter 12). Mendelhoff moots the possibility that the pursuit of criminal accountability in active conflicts, which is a recent phenomenon, exacerbates or has no effect on the ongoing violence, before ultimately calling for further research into the effectiveness of prosecutorial action.

Split into four sections, Part II explores a wide range of junctures between Perpetrator Studies and other disciplines. 'Perpetrators: New Theoretical Approaches' proposes intersections with Gender Studies (Chapter 13), Posthumanism (Chapter 14), Postcolonialism (Chapter 15), Animal Studies (Chapter 16), Musicology (Chapter 17), Information Technology (Chapter 18) and Ecocriticism (Chapter 19). Claire Bielby observes that the implicit gendering of 'victims' and 'perpetrators' has left little scope for a discussion of female perpetration, a situation exacerbated by feminists' focus on female victims of male violence,

<sup>10</sup> Hilary Earl, 'Nazi Perpetrators and the Law: Postwar Trials, Courtroom Testimony, and Debates about the Motives of Nazi Criminals', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg, pp. 109–119 (p. 112).

assumption that women are the ‘better part of the human race’, and consequent reluctance to address women’s commission of evil acts. Bielby comments on the belated extension of the gendered approach to the terrorism of the 1970s and 1980s, to National Socialism and the Holocaust, and to 9/11 terrorism. She urges Perpetrator Studies to adopt a self-critical position and to continue to interrogate the gendered politics of representation of perpetration. Continuing the work of Agamben, Derrida and others, Kári Driscoll exposes the fallacy of the nature/culture and human/nonhuman binaries, which become enlisted in contesting the analogy between man’s abuse of animals and genocidal violence, although it is precisely these binaries that undergirded and legitimised the Holocaust, colonialism, slavery, and ‘scientific’ racism. Driscoll demands that Perpetrator Studies move beyond their dominant unexamined anthropocentrism; firstly, they should recognise the rootedness of our violence towards non-humans in the same disingenuous constructs that have been behind genocides, and, secondly, consider both animal agency and animals’ implication in human-perpetrated violence illustrated by concentration camp guard dogs.

The essays gathered in ‘Aftermaths, Responsibility, Trauma and Memory’ address perpetrator accountability for evil (Chapters 20 and 21), perpetrator trauma (Chapter 22), and the role of intergenerational transmission of victim trauma in creating future perpetrators (Chapter 23). Pursuing her ground-breaking work on posttraumatic perpetrators,<sup>11</sup> Saira Mohamed upholds the view that, however controversial, research into the mental injury of evildoers can contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of trauma and of perpetrators and their choices.

‘Perpetrators and Representation’ starts with Stephanie Bird’s examination of perpetrator fiction, a nascent strand theorised by Joanne Pettitt, Erin McGlothlin, and Sue Vice and Jenni Adams (Chapter 25).<sup>12</sup> Drawing on texts created across national contexts, Bird flags the concern that giving the perpetrator a voice encourages readerly empathy and results in uncritical exculpation. Bird is also sensitive to the misgivings about aestheticization of perpetration and the pleasure readers take in it, but believes perpetrator fiction can

11 Saira Mohamed, ‘On Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity’, *Columbia Law Review*, 115 (2015), 1157–216.

12 Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave, 2017); Erin McGlothlin, *Second Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), pp. 143–227; Jenni Adams and Sue Vice (eds), *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (London: Vallentine Mitchel, 2013).

enhance and complicate our understanding of mass murderers. While Robert Skloot probes the depiction of perpetrators by theatre (Chapter 26), Diana Popescu scrutinises their presence in visual art (Chapter 27). Unlike these forms of representation that involve only passive witnessing of violence, Holger Pötzsch and Emil Lundedal Hammar argue that video games allow players to become immersed in simulated environments that require evaluation of complex settings and decision making (Chapter 29). Rebecca Jinks then showcases the persistence of cultural codes elaborated in representations of the Holocaust in cinema and literature, which address other instances of genocidal violence, including those – like the Armenian genocide – that predate the ‘Final Solution’ (Chapter 28). Rather than overtly equating other genocides with the Holocaust, these cultural artefacts ‘are interested in creative transfers, non-competitive interconnections, and structural echoes that can point to deeper, shared conceptions of violence and atrocity within societies’.<sup>13</sup>

‘Teaching and Perpetrators’ is composed of four short chapters that raise vital questions surrounding teaching about evildoers, whether it is in schools or universities (Chapters 30–34). One of these questions regards the danger that students who, as Erin McGlothlin notes in her meditation on lecturing perpetrator literature, are prone to dichotomous thinking and may fall prey to the perpetrator’s first-person self-exonerating and seductive account.

That this concern could well be extended to Perpetrator Studies as a discipline is implied by *The Handbook’s* Foreword. Andrew Hinton engages the mythological figure of Medusa to signal the perils posed by looking the ‘terrifying and uncanny’ perpetrator in the eye, which is precisely *The Handbook’s* aim.<sup>14</sup> Hinton also uses the myth to warn against easy dichotomies which loom over Perpetrator Studies, and which neatly separate innocent victims from evil victimisers, and sadistic savages from ordinary (wo)men corrupted by unfortunate circumstances. Hinton rightly reminds us that, before petrifying people, Medusa was victim to sexual violence, and that Perseus escapes the Gorgon’s castrating gaze by becoming a perpetrator himself. Perpetrator Studies must therefore maintain the (self-)critical approach manifest in the *Handbook*, while being aware of the historical, cultural, and legal

13 Rebecca Jinks, ‘Cultural Codes; Holocaust Resonances in Representations of Genocide Perpetrators’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg, pp. 332–342 (p. 333).

14 Alexander Hinton, ‘Foreword: Critical Perpetrator Studies’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Knittel and Goldberg, pp. xvi–xix (p. xvi).

contingency of the term ‘perpetrator’. As intimated by Zachary Goldberg’s and Susanne Knittel’s introduction and some of the chapters, future generations may regard today’s advocates of fossil-fuelled capitalism as perpetrators. By the same token, those passively watching global warming and mistreatment of animals in ‘factory farming, slaughtering, experimentation, captivity in zoos, and hunting for “sport”’ are likely to be regarded in future as complicitous in inadmissible mass violence.<sup>15</sup>

15 Dominick LaCapra, *Understanding Others: Peoples, Animals, Pasts* (Ithaca, NT: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 62.

**Helena Duffy** is Collegium Researcher at the Turku Institute of Advanced Studies (Finland). Her publications include *World War II in Andreï Makine’s Historiographic Metafiction* (Brill, 2018) and *The Holocaust in Postmodern French Fiction* (forthcoming, Legenda). Her current research adopts a transcultural perspective to investigate literary representations of Jewish mothers under Nazi persecution.