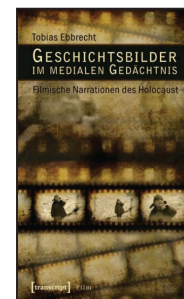


EBBRECHT, T. *Geschichtsbilder im medialen Gedächtnis. Filmische Narrationen des Holocaust*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011, 351 pàg. ISBN: 978-3-8376-1671-2

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Media Representations of the Holocaust: Effect without confrontation

The representation of the past is a central component of our media landscape. History is the subject matter of documentaries, television fiction, or motion pictures. Advertisement is infused with bygone images. Even reality formats on television deal with historical issues. This fact has been long debated among scholars, among which we can distinguish two groups (see e.g. Baer 2001): On the one hand, the optimists, those who highlight the general constructedness of historical accounts and see media representations of history as a way to retrieve the past back for reflection. On the other hand, the pessimists, with their most important agents among scholars of the Frankfurt School, who hold that media representations of history prevent any critical confrontation with the past. The “paradigmatic example of limitations and imperatives to representational practice” (ibid., p. 491) is the representation of the Holocaust. It “has become a contemporary battlefield regarding the legitimacy and propriety of mass media products” (ibid.).

The reviewed book “Geschichtsbilder im medialen Gedächtnis. Filmische Narrationen des Holocaust”¹, written by the film history scholar Tobias Ebbrecht and recently (February 2011) published in the German publication ‘Transcript’, is well informed by this discussion. However, its author, a research associate at the Bauhaus-University of Weimar and postdoctoral student on the Graduate Research Program “Media Historiographies”, goes one step further. On the basis of the observation that media representations long since include the Holocaust (p. 17), he focuses on the characteristics of existing representations in film and television and their impact on our understanding of history.

Ebbrecht’s main thesis is that contemporary representations of the Holocaust in film and television refer increasingly less to the ‘historical truth’ (p. 12). As he states in a recent article, “historical images we derived from the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath are continuously dissociated from their historical origins” (Ebbrecht 2010, p. 86). Hence a dominant strand

in recent German film production decontextualizes the fund of images and narratives in order to depict Germans as victims of the Nazis and the war (p. 19) – a development which Ebbrecht also sees reflected in the transgenerational transmission of memory in Germany (p. 21).

The author investigates this matter of fact in seven comprehensive chapters. The first two chapters are therefore dedicated to the theoretical foundation. Three aspects should be highlighted here: First, writings on the transgenerational exchange of memory in the form of closed narrations (pp. 68 ff.); second, concepts of stereotypes in film (see e.g. Schweinitz 2006, p. 80); and third, Hirsch’s concept of postmemory – an approach which addresses spectators as “witnesses by adoption” (Hartman in Hirsch 2001, p. 221) and which opens up a perspective of possible ‘transmissions’ of memory (pp. 75 ff.). The depth of Ebbrecht’s work emerges from a combination of these concepts, which serves him not only as a basis in order to analyze the canon of repeating and migrating images of the Holocaust but also to delimit issues of cultural memory.

Put into practice, the following chapters present a detailed investigation of the modes of representation. Hence a first part on *Monumente der Erinnerung* [Monuments of Memory] highlights photographs and films from the time of National Socialism and the liberation of the concentration camps as the corpus of images which is supposed to have migrated in later media representations of the Holocaust (p. 88). Current migration processes are in the centre of the second part of the analysis, consisting of three chapters on contemporary feature films and television movies about the Holocaust and focusing on the layers of narration, visual structure and characters. In each chapter, Ebbrecht discovers the general characteristics and follows the traces of visual and narrative predecessors. A corresponding case study transfers this to the German context.

One of Ebbrecht’s central examples regarding the international perspective, also a ‘classical’ one within the scientific discourse in general, is the film *Schindler’s List* (1993). As the author shows, the film combines various references such as

those to historical photographs up to Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) or Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) (pp. 183 ff.). However, claims Ebbrecht, in presenting its intertextual structure in a closed narration, the film 'transfers *Erinnerungsbilder* [images of remembrance] into stereotyped *Geschichtsbilder* [images of history]' (p. 189). Its constructiveness remains hidden behind its form (p. 136).

Recent German productions such as *Das Wunder von Bern* (2003) or *Dresden* (2006) are investigated against the background of these observations. In so doing, Ebbrecht is able to demonstrate that falling back on similar strategies, this strand of films, in contrast to other likewise recent German productions such as *Die Fälscher* (2007) or *Am Ende kommen Touristen* (2007), reinterprets and decontextualizes representations and iconic images of the Holocaust in order to construct histories which harmonize generational conflicts, victimize the Germans and highlight German ordeal (p. 161 ff.). As he puts it in another recent article on the topic: "The universalized iconography and language of Holocaust representation and commemoration enable German post-war culture to merge the two fundamentally different perspectives of Jews in the Holocaust and Germans in the war" (Ebbrecht 2010, p. 98).

A concluding chapter shows that these observations are not only relevant in a German context. According to the author, similar changes of perspective can be observed at a European level – namely in the form of a development that Ebbrecht describes as the 'harmonization of opposing memories' (p. 318). Apart from that, Ebbrecht goes beyond the scope of his study, showing that iconic images of the Holocaust have long since migrated into other contexts such as the representation of contemporary conflicts (p. 322) (for further reading on this subject, see also Ebbrecht 2010).

An analysis such as the one by Ebbrecht does not prevent such developments but, instead of falling prey to pessimism, breaks the cycle of those repeating images which remain hidden behind closed forms, opening this up to critical reflection, and widening the perspectives for future investigations. To sum up, and as demonstrated, "Geschichtsbilder im medialen Gedächtnis. Filmische Narrationen des Holocaust" offers a comprehensive study of the characteristics of media representations of the Holocaust and their impact on collective memories in a German context and beyond. With an impressive archaeological thoroughness, the author explains the origins of the factual images and traces back intertextual references in contemporary films. By combining different approaches, Ebbrecht's study gains a great density of analytical insights and is able to extend perspectives. In so doing, the book is recommendable both for those who have only recently started to deal with the subject and for those who want to extend their depth of knowledge. The publication may be an inspiration for subsequent investigations in the field, for instance within the context of Spanish contemporary history.

Notes

1. "Images of history in media memory. Narratives of the Holocaust in Film" [Author's translation].

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