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Review of Dora Osborne, *What Remains: The Post-Holocaust Archive in German Memory Culture*

by Annika Wellmann

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DORA OSBORNE, *What Remains: The Post-Holocaust Archive in German Memory Culture, Dialogue and Disjunction: Studies in Jewish German Literature, Culture, and Thought* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2020), 238 pp. ISBN 978 1 640 14052 3. £75.00

Today, around seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, there are few living eyewitnesses left to speak of National Socialism and the Holocaust, and those who remain will not live for much longer. Against this background, Dora Osborne notes an increasing focus on archives in the memory culture of the 'Berlin Republic'—that is, of Germany from the early 1990s onwards—as younger generations rely more and more on externalized, material forms of memory, giving rise to an archival turn.

Osborne uses a broad definition of the archive that includes both 'the material remnants of the past and the structures and spaces that house them'. In her view, the archive in this broad sense serves to bridge the gap between the present day and the Nazi era—though it should be noted that this is true of all historical archives—and 'to materialize, visualize, and narrativize the . . . work of memory' (p. 1).

Osborne's case studies include memorials, documentary films and theatre, and prose texts; however, she does not explain what prompted her to choose the specific artistic and literary works she examines, even though it would add to our understanding of them if we knew whether they were especially controversial or resonant. All the same, Osborne's sharp analysis of different media and genres does allow her to trace the archival turn in memory culture and to tease out its typical features and implications.

The first chapter sets out the theoretical framework underpinning her study. Here, Osborne focuses on the archive both as an immaterial concept and trope and as a physical, material structure in order to explore its significance in the remembrance and commemoration of Nazi violence, especially of the Holocaust. Her 'archivology' (p. 18) draws on the ideas of a range of theorists, including Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann, Jacques Derrida, Achille Mbembe, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Georges Didi-Huberman. Building on these, she

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shows how memory functions are ascribed to the archive. While archives documenting National Socialism and the Holocaust represent an important historical resource, Osborne argues, it is also important not to lose sight of their earlier function as tools and repositories of political power. After all, as physical locations and classifications of material, archives are built in the name of the ruling class, making them instruments of its power and authority. In essence, the information they preserve and pass down tells us *about* people, but is not provided *by* those people themselves. And because the archive is also the a priori structure of a Foucauldian discursive practice, Osborne reasons, it determines how we will speak about the past in future.

In this theoretical first chapter, then, the author establishes her key concept of the 'post-Holocaust archive', although she unfortunately fails to provide a concise definition. Nonetheless, it is clear what the term denotes. Osborne stresses the importance of eyewitness accounts in the post-Holocaust archive, since these offer a counter-narrative to the archives of the governing regime. Yet she focuses on precisely those relics that the victims and survivors of the Holocaust had no influence over, arguing that it is these which shape our knowledge of the Nazi era. At the same time, she notes that the 'archive after Auschwitz' is characterized by exclusion, persecution, and loss, and is also 'haunted by archives of excess preserved in spite of all and after all at the sites of mass destruction' (p. 29). This observation forms the cornerstone of Osborne's study, which 'is concerned with precisely this contradiction and shows how subsequent generations turn to these bureaucratic traces as that which is most readily available, even though the traces can only reinscribe and never compensate for destruction' (p. 33).

Osborne's analysis begins with a number of post-1990 art projects related to memory culture. These include Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock's *Orte des Erinnerns* ('Places of Remembrance'); Jochen Gerz's *2146 Steine – Mahnmal gegen Rassismus* ('2146 Stones – Memorial against Racism'); Horst Hoheisel's *Zermahlene Geschichte* ('Crushed History'); and Sigrid Sigurdsson's *Braunschweig – Eine Stadt in Deutschland erinnert sich* ('Braunschweig – A City in Germany Remembers'). In Osborne's view, what these projects have in common is that they all feature archival elements; however, instead of merely using archives

as resources, the artists and everyone involved in the project face up to and reflect on the gaps in the surviving evidence relating to the Holocaust. Osborne sees this as indicative of ‘a shift from “archive-as-source” to the “archive-as-subject”’ (p. 84).

In the following chapter, Osborne examines how the archival turn is reflected in documentary film-making using the case studies *2 oder 3 Dinge, die ich von ihm weiß* (‘2 or 3 Things I Know About Him’, 2005); *Winterkinder: Die schweigende Generation* (‘Winter Children: The Silent Generation’, 2005); *Menschliches Versagen* (‘Human Failure’, 2008); and the documentary plays *Hans Schleif: Eine Spurensuche* (‘Hans Schleif: A Search for Evidence’) and *Stolpersteine Staatstheater* (‘State Theatre Stumbling Blocks’), both first performed in 2015. She is able to weave synopses into her analysis in such a way that even readers unfamiliar with these works can follow her argument, and she is equally successful in capturing both broad outlines and crucial details.

Osborne identifies a few shared perspectives among dramatists and film-makers alike. First, both groups take as their subject matter the entanglements between the families of perpetrators and the Nazi era, which extend even up to the present day. The documentaries follow their protagonists as they use archives to research their ancestors’ Nazi past, but also show their access to those archives to be highly restricted, leading Osborne to conclude that ‘the patriarchal logic of the archive constrains what can be said in the name of the (grand)father’ (p. 127). Second, a number of documentaries focus on official persecution of the Jewish population, and in view of the Nazi policies of Aryanization and *Gleichschaltung* (the Nazi term for the coordinated establishment of totalitarian control over German society), Osborne argues, they reveal that violence is inscribed in the archives. As such, they also question the prominence of the received history of National Socialism in contemporary memory culture.

In the last chapter of her book, Osborne offers against-the-grain readings of four very different prose works published during the 2010s. While Ursula Krechel’s *Landgericht* (‘District Court’) combines documentary material with fiction and Iris Hanika’s *Das Eigentliche* (‘The Actual’) is a fictional satire, Katja Petrowskaja’s *Vielleicht Esther* (‘Maybe Esther’) and Per Leo’s *Flut und Boden* (‘Flood and Soil’) investigate the histories of the authors’ own families. Over the course

of her analysis, Osborne establishes that all four authors explicitly refer to archives as material spaces, structures, and repositories of knowledge and reflect on how they relate ethically and politically to memory culture. However, each individual author ascribes a different set of functions and implications to the archive. Krechel sees working in and with archives as a gesture of remembrance, but also views archives themselves as places of power; Hanika conceives of archival work as symptomatic of a pathological attachment to the Nazi era; Petrowskaja contemplates the ways in which her narrative is shaped by the availability or absence of archival resources; while Leo shows that Nazi archives and oversimplified historiography—including family history—are unable to deliver new insights, resulting in a need to bring in other sources.

Unfortunately, Osborne does not clearly outline the analytical methodology she applies to her heterogeneous source material; however, we can see the general shape of her approach from her reading of the artist Gunter Demnig's *Stolpersteine* ('Stumbling Blocks') project, which she examines in particular detail. These square brass memorial panels, which Demnig has been installing in pavements across Europe since the 1990s, serve to decentralize remembrance and focus it on the fates of individuals. Osborne documents the project's development over the decades, showing us that initially there was no research involved; after a time, however, individuals and groups arranging for *Stolpersteine* to be laid began to undertake independent archival research, and also to go beyond conventional archives by involving Holocaust survivors and people who had come into contact with the victims in question. Nor does Osborne neglect to point out the ambivalent aspects of the project, noting that in many cases, researchers came to identify with the people whose lives they were investigating. She also claims that amateur researchers failed to critically interrogate the sources they used, thereby unthinkingly reproducing the bureaucratic structures used by the Nazis to persecute and murder people—although she does not provide any evidence to support this assertion. Osborne rightly criticizes the way that complex life stories are compressed into the predefined format of the *Stolperstein*, thus reducing them to restricted narratives of victimhood. And she goes on to apply the same critical attitude to

the public reception of the *Stolpersteine* project, which has often taken on a voyeuristic aspect characterized by a sense of taking pleasure in new discoveries. The *Stolpersteine* project enjoys a great deal of public recognition in Germany and has assumed a degree of authority that Osborne attributes in part to the archival work underpinning it, which lends authenticity to the individual memorials and offers proof of the 'remembrance work' undertaken for the project.

The example of the *Stolpersteine* is typical of Osborne's detailed analysis of structures, contexts, and content throughout the book. Furthermore, her chapters on art projects, prose, and documentary film and theatre begin not only with theoretical reflections on the relevant media and genres, but also with brief outlines of their predecessors in (Federal) German memory culture, thus satisfying historians seeking to learn more about the broader historical contexts of these cultural productions.

As Osborne herself concludes (drawing on Michel Foucault, one of the book's diverse and credibly compiled list of theoretical reference points), the archive is the a priori structure of a discursive practice, in that it determines how we eventually come to speak about the past. This is true of the archive in both the broader sense of discourse theory and in the narrower institutional sense. And especially with regard to the latter, this observation has profound consequences for the memory culture and politics of the future. When there are no longer any eyewitnesses left to tell us of their experiences under National Socialism and during the Holocaust, it will fall to those who are active in the field of memory culture to engage more sensitively and circumspectly than ever with 'what remains' and to search for archival material that documents the recollections of those eyewitnesses, given that such material has certainly been preserved by archives and other cultural institutions. And as a means of increasing the sensitivity of one's own engagement, this volume makes for worthwhile reading.

ANNIKA WELLMANN is a historian and curator. She obtained a Ph.D. from the University of Zurich in 2012 with a thesis published as *Beziehungssex: Medien und Beratung im 20. Jahrhundert* and has since worked for the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden, among other institutions. As well as gender and body history, her research also focuses on the theory and history of archiving and collecting. Her publications in this area include 'Theorie der Archive – Archive der Macht: Aktuelle Tendenzen der Archivgeschichte', *Neue Politische Literatur*, 57/3 (2012), 385–402.