



## ***The Long Shadow of the Past: Contemporary Austrian Literature, Film and Culture.***

***Katya Krylova***

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**Review by Nicole Calian**

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Accounting for and acknowledging one's national history in crimes committed against humanity is a process often thwarted by resistance from politically and socially influential institutions. Such was, until recently, the case in Austria, a country that had held on to an idea of itself as first victim of the Nazi regime. This notion was radically altered by events following the Waldheim Affair of 1986-1988. Former Austrian president and UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim, had repeatedly lied about his Nazi past and then – once revealed as a former member of the SA, – excused his involvement in the Nazi party as having only answered "the call to duty". The subsequent process of acknowledging "Mitschuld", i.e. complicity (7), in the Holocaust is painstakingly slow, subversive and on-going as it colors political, cultural and social negotiations in Austria to this day.

Katya Krylova's new book, *The Long Shadow of the Past: Contemporary Austrian Literature, Film and Culture* sheds light on the films, memorials and literary works produced by contemporary Austrian artists whose work confronts the fall-out of an unfinished national engagement with Austrian Nazi history and anti-Semitism. Krylova draws a connection between the very recent and indeed, current, political situation in Austria, which saw repeated shifts towards extremist right-wing parties (FPÖ) and leadership (among them Joseph Haider; Norbert Hofer), and its correlation to

the events preceding WWII, and the events following the Waldheim Affair thirty years ago. Krylova argues that a focus on visual works of art, among them memorials and memorial projects, showcases a particularly dynamic field of cultural production, and one that has been neglected. In her analysis, Krylova peruses theories of memory-studies, as well as melancholy- and nostalgia-studies to show that in the context of a changed topography confrontations with the past by Austrian artists of the second and third generation of survivors often bear the stamp of an "imaginative investment...to reconstruct and forge a connection to an irretrievable family past" (19).

Chapter 1, *Melancholy journeys to the Past: The Films of Ruth Beckermann*, as well as chapter 2, *Reconstructing a Home: Nostalgia in Anna Mitgutsch's Haus der Kindheit*, focuses on a sense of a family past from which one has been severed. Krylova argues that Beckermann's use of black and white photographs in her film, *Wien retour*, are exemplary of the power of nostalgia which lies in "its doubling up of two different times, an inadequate present and an idealized past." (19) The photographs feature spaces and places almost exclusively from the pre-war years in Vienna; they are juxtaposed with images of the places and spaces where political developments of the years prior to the annexation took place. This type of nostalgia, which is critical and reflective, acknowledges the longing for a

past not as it was but as it “could have been” (34). Similarly, Mitgutsch’s novel features a protagonist, Max, who, growing up in New York, is transfixed by a photograph of the lost family home in Vienna. Once possession of the house is regained, a shift from restorative to reflective nostalgia takes place in Max: He learns that a sense of home cannot be created if the “point of origin” (62) is lost. The actions of featured protagonists of the films and novel are interpreted in the vein of psychoanalytical terminology, and this reviewer wonders whether the fine line between re-victimizing by way of psychologizing is at times crossed.

Chapter 3 assuages such concerns in that it veers from the personal attempts at retrieving family history by focusing on the unresolved nature of mass extermination in March of 1945, of Jewish slave laborers near the Austrian-Hungarian border in Rechnitz. The documentary, *The Wall of Silence*, by M. Heinrich and E. Erne as well as the play, *Rechnitz: The Exterminating Angel*, by E. Jelinek are read side-to-side for their genre-defying confrontations with present-day negotiations of the massacre. Krylova highlights the filmic and literary techniques that make these works so effective: the documentary lacks an all-knowing narrator, and does not present an analytical argument to underscore the on-going but ultimately thwarted efforts in bringing truth to the events of 1945. Jelinek’s play peruses the power of language itself, rather than plot or protagonists, and thus makes her audience an active and participatory witness in the continued national effort towards “obfuscation, repression and falsity which characterize the discourse” about the Nazi past. (73)

In chapter 4, Krylova draws the attention to an aesthetic treatment of the Waldheim affair in R. Schindel’s novel, *Der Kalte*. She shows that Schindel re-inscribes the politically charged negotiations of the affair into the staging of his novel while at the same time permitting poetic license to envision an altered, idealized ending to an on-going, flawed national reckoning with this history. In Chapter 5, Krylova advocates for a nuanced analysis of what constitutes a memorial, a counter-

memorial, a combimemorial and a “mnemorial” (101) in the context of the victims of the Holocaust, in the context of a persistent myth of national victimhood, and in the context of modern-day political sentiment. On-going memorial projects in Vienna draw on new media, international involvement and the repurposing of public space with an emphasis on disrupting the quotidian. Krylova makes explicit the interconnectedness of aesthetic production, social and political dynamics, and psychopathological repression on a national level. At times her readings of these interactive memorial projects and their intent can sound slightly too optimistic (examples: 114, 122, 132) given the national and international unwillingness to confront pain and disruption.

Conclusion: Krylova’s book is a timely and welcome addition to various fields of study, among them, memory studies, Holocaust studies and Austrian cultural studies. Krylova’s analyses demonstrate what happens when trauma and repressed national history continue unresolved. One wishes that, in her next book, Krylova will follow up on the question she raises in her introduction: Most of the artists of her study are Jewish Austrian, which begs the question: “Who is carrying out the task of working through Austria’s past in contemporary Austria?” (p. 21) This is a politically charged question, but one that deserves answers.

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