

Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship. By Martin Harries. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. x + 155 pp. \$70.00 cloth, \$24.00 paper.

At one point in *Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship*, Martin Harries refers to the “traumatized pages” of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (17), written in exile in the U.S. during the Second World War. If a direct comparison of Adorno’s and Harries’s situations would be untoward, the insistent traces of a traumatic history nonetheless mark the volume. For although Harries reserves explicit discussion of his experience as a witness to the collapse of the World Trade Center for the end of this moving and rigorous work—or perhaps because he does so—the volume’s revelation of the key role played by the figure of Lot’s wife in twentieth-century art and aesthetics provides a critical and illuminating context for current considerations of the politics of memory. For as the embodiment of the “notion that the sight of historical catastrophe can destroy the spectator” (1), images of Lot’s wife expose the ambivalence inscribed in the act of historical witness. The modern preoccupation with Lot’s wife may therefore tell us as much

about the ways we might join her in seeking to bear ethical witness to disaster as about the ways she might be forgotten in the attempt to transform destruction into a pleasurable or comforting spectacle.

Lot's wife, Harries demonstrates in the suggestive close readings that animate this volume, is a compelling figure precisely as she reflects a series of related antinomies in which "modernity encounters a particular aspect of itself" (20): the imperative of remembering and of forgetting; the simultaneous distance and proximity of a spectator to a spectacle or to a work of art; or the "myth of the body's absolute responsiveness to historical catastrophe" (21), which stakes unmediated or authentic access to history on the destruction of the witness. Following a nuanced reading of the biblical story of Lot's wife in a brief preface, the introduction explores the conflicting meanings ascribed to this figure. On the one hand, her retrospective gaze represents an ethical response to the victims of disaster. Turning into the pillar of salt, she gives her entire self over to the project of memory, becoming herself a memorial to the destruction. On the other hand, she is associated with the transgressions of Sodom and Gomorrah. She looks back, in this light, out of desire for the sexual pleasures of the condemned cities and for the pleasurable spectacle of their destruction. Punished for these transgressive desires, her petrification also represents, Harries argues, a form of masochistic self-destruction. The convergence of these perspectives raises the book's crucial question: "What happens when retrospection begins to look like, and to feel like, masochism, a choice to damage the self?" (20-21).

While the work offers an admittedly "fragmentary history" (1) of images of Lot's wife in twentieth-century art and literature, with occasional excursions into earlier periods, its scope and ambition are remarkable. A series of linked readings of a poem by A. E. Housman, paintings by Gentileschi and Corot, and Beckett's *Happy Days* in the introduction locates the book's theory of spectatorship at the nexus of a range of disciplines and theoretical approaches in art history, theater and film studies, psychoanalysis, and critical theory.

This pattern of surprising juxtapositions and broad interdisciplinary and theoretical relevance continues in the three main chapters. Readers concerned with the legacy of Marxist and post-Marxist theories of culture, and more generally with modernist debates on the relationship of politics and aesthetics, will be particularly interested in the first and second chapters, where Lot's wife's petrification is identified as a key emblem of cultural reification. The chapter on Artaud anchors the book's principle theoretical insights in interwar modernism. Beginning with a reference Artaud makes to Lucas van Leyden's painting *Lot and his Daughters*, Harries traces a series of allusions to the story of Lot's wife in Artaud's essays on theater from the 1930s, *The Theater and Its Double*, as well as, strikingly, in a 1946 draw-

ing by Artaud, *Le théâtre de la cruauté*. Arguing that Lot's wife represents for Artaud "the ambivalence that marks the ideal spectator" (28), Harries elaborates a theory of modernist spectatorship revolving around the idea of a work of art that destroys its spectators even as it seeks to transform them. The image of the petrified spectator appears, from one perspective, as the symptom of a cultural crisis, variously identified with mass culture and commodification, with fascism (as in Benjamin's diagnosis of fascism as the aestheticization of political life), and with a decline of the sacred—that is, with "a general petrification of the human in the West" (29). But the story of Lot's wife also figures the fantasy of a work of art that could itself attack the corruption of culture, demolishing the subject as "the last available form of resistance to history" (32). The second chapter, "Hollywood Sodom," which focuses on Watson and Webber's avant-garde *Lot in Sodom* (1933), Hal Wallis's film noir *The Strange Love of Martha Evers*, and two films by Robert Aldrich, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1963), extends these theoretical insights, raising a rich set of questions concerning film, mass culture, same-sex desire, and the cultural imagination of the city. Pursuing the self-reflexive logic embodied in the figure of Lot's wife, Harries observes that if Hollywood shapes "what Susan Sontag calls 'the imagination of disaster' in the post-Christian world" (42), it does so significantly by imagining its own destruction.

The reading of Anselm Kiefer's 1989 painting *Lot's Frau* that forms the focal point of the third chapter offers a study in attentive exegesis. To mention but one detail, the painting's title, which is inscribed on the canvas, prompts a reflection on German translations of the Bible, leading to a compelling analysis of the ways religious anti-Judaism and Nazism are at issue in the painting. This chapter also makes explicit the important intervention this book makes in the study of trauma and witnessing, as it insists upon and develops the often overlooked link between the theory of trauma and modernist art and aesthetics. Harries reads Kiefer's painting as an interrogation of the common notion that traumatic spectacles paralyze the witness, what Inga Clendinnen has called "the Gorgon effect." Further exploration of this notion may be warranted. How does the "Gorgon effect," for instance, relate to this same image in the writings of Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben, and how, more broadly, are the figures of the Medusa and Lot's wife related? The compelling argument of Harries's reading of Kiefer, however, is that the petrification of the spectator, often attributed to something like the raw power of traumatic history, derives from a number of intersecting cultural legacies: the biblical ban on images and its modern counterpart, the ban on images of the Shoah often associated with Adorno and Claude Lanzmann; the history and theory of political subject formation; and modernist pictorial aesthetics revolving around formal questions of perspective and figuration, minimalism and abstraction. The modernist

fantasy of “an artwork that might destroy its audience” (97-98) is thus shown to be crucially intertwined with post-Holocaust witnessing: “The placement of the spectator as Lot’s wife puts the spectator in the position of the figure who must transgress and look back at disaster: a certain willingness to do oneself damage, if not masochism, becomes the task of the spectator. And yet the painting also recapitulates the prohibition: there is a line past which one cannot see” (99).

The book’s coda, on September 11 and its aftermath, validates Adorno’s suggestion in *Minima Moralia* that “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass” (50). Echoes of the story of Lot’s wife allow Harries to identify the ways that September 11 has become, for some, “another chapter in a sacred history in which Sodom continues to be destroyed” (20), while others may draw a falsely “reassuring image of everyday life” (109) by, for instance, attaching memorial significance to a J. Seward Johnson sculpture installed near the World Trade Center well before 2001—that is, by seeing this sculpture as a version of Lot’s wife. Harries does not exclude himself from the charge of deploying Lot’s wife to construct the past as spectacle: “What seemed to me, on September 11, an uncanny confirmation of the structure I was inclined to use to understand my own experience of horrific spectatorship seems to me now a trace of my own frantic desire to produce meaning” (113). This recognition, this turning back of the volume on itself, honors Lot’s nameless wife as it repeats her gesture without claiming to grasp its meaning. Along with its persuasive identification of Lot’s wife as a key figure for modern art and aesthetics, *Forgetting Lot’s Wife* may also offer a model for a mode of critical practice that seeks not to fix or sacralize the past, but rather to enable a necessary critical engagement with the politics and culture of memory.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2006.

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