disClosure Interviews Marianne Hirsch. Intimacy across the Generations: Memory, Postmemory, and Representation

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Intimacy across the Generations: Memory, Postmemory, and Representation

Marianne Hirsch earned her PhD in comparative literature at Brown University. She is currently professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and is part of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. She has published extensively on cultural memory and gender in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. Her work focuses on the representation of the Second World War and the Holocaust in photography and literature. She is currently working on a book with Leo Spitzer entitled Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of a City in Jewish Memory and Postmemory.

Dr. Hirsch visited the University of Kentucky in April 2005 to participate in the Spring Seminar and Lecture Series on Intimacy sponsored by the UK Committee on Social Theory. Her talk, “What’s Wrong with this Picture? Documents from the Family Archive,” centered primarily around her new work on her family’s memory of life in Czemowitz (now Chernivtsi, Ukraine), in the context of the issues she dealt with in her book Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory. Sean Dummitt, John Andrew Moreman, and Larry Erickson, members of the disClosure editorial collective, had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Hirsch and discuss her work. The interview centers, among other things, on the significance of the works of Roland Barthes and Art Spiegelman for understanding her notion of postmemory.

disClosure: Could you explain to our readers the roles which memory and postmemory play in our understanding of intimacy?

Marianne Hirsch: One of the extraordinary things about memory studies, which is really becoming a kind of field—social memory and cultural memory as opposed to history, philosophy, psychoanalysis—is the way it situates itself at the intersection of the public and the private and tries to extrapolate structures of remembrance back from the public to the individual. I think it’s one way to construct an interdisciplinarity, and it’s also a way to find a language, a register, between the public and the private. My work has really been to look at it in relation to generations, and to look at a cultural memory that takes form in a generation that didn’t have the experience that it has nevertheless been shaped by. That’s how I see postmemory. So you can go at that through institutions, but it also makes itself seen in individuals and families. That, then, is the connection with the private and thus intimacy.

What kind of theoretical frames you use to talk about this intimacy is complicated; you build them into these cultural memories. Beginning with Freud, of course, there’s the question of how much you can use psychoanalytic language and, from that, extrapolate or use it as a metaphor for a cultural experience and remembrance. My work has been more on memory of traumatic events and how they have shaped the lives of subsequent generations and what kind of aesthetic structures mediate this transmission. Photography is one such form of mediation, and I am interested in how photographs are then used in such things as public commemorations and artistic work that goes from the private into the public sphere.

dC: How does Lacan’s notion of the gaze work into the intersection of the public and private?

MH: When I first began to talk about photography, I felt that I had to find out how the myth of the family relates to the way an individual subject experienced family life and how the subject in family photography is constructed. Everybody comes across in pretty much the same way in photographs, so there are tremendous limits to what you can say in that medium. It’s extremely circumscribed. And then Lacan’s notion of the gaze became very useful in trying to come up with a notion of how the individual experienced those relationships. The camera is a metaphor for the ways in which you are structured into the photograph and into the life of the family. Now, in terms of the larger questions of cultural memory and historical experience in the twentieth century, the catastrophes I look at, particularly the Holocaust, are narrated through the family. Thus, the myth of the family has had to adapt to these tremendous and sometimes traumatic historical and social changes.

dC: Your book Family Frames draws in part on Roland Barthes’s Camera thresholds
Lucida, in which he likewise reads the meaning of various family photographs. We wonder how you would characterize the significance of Barthes’s project for your own work, and how you would situate your own work in relation to his.

MH: It was a tremendous inspiration, and has been since I was in graduate school, because I came of age in structuralism and his early essays were extremely informative for me. But there’s also something about his writing and the beauty of his writing that appealed to me. So as soon as I had the idea of doing something on photographs, one of the books I turned to was Camera Lucida. And I think it’s particularly important because of the photo that’s not shown—the photo of his mother—and because of the trajectory, really the plot, of the book, because it really is a narrative. His way of telling the story is that you feel a mind working through the question, and [he] is not afraid to show us what he can’t figure out and where the failure of his thought is. The way he goes about writing has been a model for me. In that book in particular I was very struck by his attempt to find a language for what photographs can show and what they can’t show. This centers on the relationship of the spectator to the image and the ways in which, when you look at an image, you’re actually in the image. That insight opened a lot up for me. And I’ve also been caught up in the ways in which the book is about loss and mourning.

The other thing that I find very generative is the kind of situatedness about his way of arguing, so that when you flip ahead in the book and look at the pictures you haven’t read about yet, you try to figure out what is going to be the punctum: it’s very hard to know because he relates to the picture privately, from his own particular location. But something that I want to think about more and I haven’t figured out yet is ways in which that individual response is perhaps also, at the same time, culturally coded.

That way of arguing from a particular individual stance is very important to me. I try to use Barthes in another piece to think more about memory, about cultural memory, to think about objects and images that have been passed down through generations and about the kinds of meanings they carry. Trying to read them by way of his notion of the punctum, as “points of memory,” has been very powerful for me, and I find that one can apply Barthes to memory studies. So, as you see, I’m still working on much of this.

dC: You brought up the absent photo of Barthes’s mother. So much of your book, Family Frames, is autobiographical. Could you have written that book without writing about your family?

MH: That’s a good question. I don’t think so. I realized right away that if I was going to write about family photography, I would have to account for the power these little pieces of cardboard have for people. It would be difficult to account for that without writing about my own family photographs. The method of the book really came out of that. But also, while I was writing, I was in a few seminars on personal writing. You know, it’s actually very difficult to find the right balance, because people always want to know more—or less. Personal writing is about finding just enough to say but not too much. It’s actually very difficult. And the personal turn was really controversial and seen by some as a little self-indulgent, and difficult to bring in line with scholarship.

But when I started working on Family Frames, it was also at the end of identity politics; at the end of the eighties, people felt you had to situate yourself in some category. And those categories all became, for me, frustratingly meaningless, because they were much, much too general. So I found that, by making it into more of a story, you could get that situatedness without the categorization. I think of personal writing as participating in that dialogue as well as contributing to scholarship. Precisely for the topic of photography, I just couldn’t see any other way to do it.

dC: Can you give us a history of your relationship with Spiegelman’s Maus, and its presence in the text? Is Spiegelman’s choice of a representation an attempt to depict the Holocaust in a more intimate manner than just the graphic photographs of concentration camps, and what do you think are the implications of that genre for the depiction of things like the Holocaust, or perhaps 9/11?

MH: For me it was, again, a very generative work. I was working on the Holocaust, as I have been since I first saw Shoah—and I sat by the door because I wasn’t sure if I was going to stay and watch it or get up and leave—and got completely caught up in it. And even though they are completely different works, they have a couple of different things in common: In Shoah, there are the voices of survivors, they’re in the present within the landscapes that are in the present, so that’s all you see. Shoah is motivated by the curiosity and inquiry of somebody who doesn’t really know or understand, also situated very much in the present. Maus I came out at about the same time as Shoah, and same thing—it’s situated in the present, it’s mediated—his drawings are modeled on actual photographs from the past, and each frame took a great amount of research—but it’s situated in the present, very consciously in the mind of Art Spiegelman, and it has the voice of the survivor, his father, telling these stories on tape. Maus is really
the work of that next generation, and Spiegelman brought that sense of utter suspicion from his generation, to be able to face such issues, into that story. I find it very interesting for me that I got into the medium of comics, and I still feel like I don’t appreciate it as much as I could, because there’s a history of the genre that I don’t know that much about, except that it has the kinds of features like this ability to face such complex and layered visual-verbal issues. The first thing that I noticed was the way Spiegelman used photographs, and particularly the positioning of the real photograph, the one of his mother. It’s interesting to put that up against Barthes, because you get to see Spiegelman’s mother. I don’t think you could really read that book without thinking about the question of representation. Comics in relation to such events as the Holocaust and 9/11 is bound to be extremely provocative. In fact, *Maus* was never translated into Hebrew, and some Israelis who have read it were very offended by its representation of Jews as mice. For them it sort of recaptured some of the shock value it had when it first came out. It can still do so because there is not [a] real tradition of comics in Israeli culture. I think the important thing about the medium, however, is precisely that it forces you to foreground the question of representation.

You can see *Maus* as a watershed moment in many different ways; one is the way that it captures the voice of the survivor. His father dies, and in the second book, *Maus II*, he links that to his own fears and guilt feelings. The elaborate mediation of the artist of the next generation really has had an enormous and broad influence and effect. There has practically been an explosion of books on this topic by second-generation writers, scholars, and artists, and there’s hardly one that doesn’t mention *Maus* or is [not] indebted to it.

In *Maus*, we have the father’s memories and they’re very much his, and then we have the son intruding on that, and coming close to appropriating some of the stories, and there’s the ethical questioning of how to do that and what should go into the book and not go into the book. He takes the father’s testimony and puts it into these caption bubbles, so, by necessity, you don’t get the whole story; you only get the son’s own selection. Here the family narrative becomes fair game, and the Holocaust survivor is someone you can argue with. It’s an irreverent book and that also has become a watershed. So, this is how he represents the aftermath of the Holocaust within the family in this narrative.

To move on to the representation of 9/11, Spiegelman has done a 9/11 book, called *In the Shadow of No Towers*. He was asked by the German newspaper *Die Zeit* right after 9/11—after he did that cover for the *New Yorker*, the week of 9/11, that black-on-black cover with the shadows of the towers—after that, *Die Zeit* said he could have a page every week, or as often as he liked, to do what he wanted. He drew ten pages over a period of a couple of years called “In the Shadow of No Towers,” and they’re very elaborate, very layered and complex, visually and conceptually. They were published in the book that came out last year, with numbers of pages from the early years of newspaper comics, and some of those early characters from the comics appear on the *No Towers* pages. But it wasn’t until later that he was able to get them published in this country.

*dC*: In your essay “We Would Not Have Come Without You: Generations of Nostalgia,” you and Leo Spitzer explain that your parents would have never returned to their former home of Czernowitz were it not for you—that you, as a second-generation Holocaust survivor, had desired to have your postmemory of their experience guided by a “collaborative” return to the site of your family’s former home. What do you take to be the spatial and political-geographical implications of postmemory vis-à-vis emigration, return, and globalization?

*MH*: I want to begin by saying that I don’t like that term “second-generation survivor,” just because I don’t think the second-generation subject is a “survivor.” Our parents are, and I guess we are survivors only in the sense that we would not have been born had they not survived.

Your question about geography and globalization has a lot to do with how one transports one’s home from one place to the next and what one carries along, what kinds of things become important in the family about the places, objects, and values they left behind. I think maybe we can take that notion of postmemory and apply it to many kinds of refugees throughout history and to their children’s ideas of “home” that are now mediated by a break, and a displacement, an inability to return or reclaim.

The specific kind of return we were engaged in by going to Czernowitz is really sort of rare, to go back there together and collect the narrative from my parents. But we did encounter some groups who were also doing that. Among Israelis, it was kind of a necessary trip to pass on that memory from one generation to the next, so you often have cases of the second generation now teaching the grandchildren. But in terms of the people I know here in the United States, many of them are trying to do this work of memory without their parents, because their parents are dead, and maybe for a long time they wouldn’t have been allowed to go back to Eastern Europe even if they had wanted to. They have to rely on very different kinds of evidence, and that can be problematic. Sometimes, and I’ve seen it, when they do finally go, they can’t find the house, the street; the traces are erased.

But the structure of desire may be quite similar. That striving and in-
quiry in looking for traces of the family in the archives may be quite similar too. I think another thing we were trying to point out in the paper was that these memories—theirs and our mediated ones, positive memories of before and negative memories of the war—needed to be defined and assembled. It’s a very different story, but in the beginning of the novel Beloved, Sethe sits down trying to think about the landscape of Sweethome and how beautiful the trees were, and about how difficult it was for her to remember the boys hanging from the trees. Every time she would try to remember the boys hanging from the trees, the trees themselves were all she could remember, and she felt an incredible amount of guilt about it. So that’s one lesson for me about memory, the difficulty of negotiating nostalgia and negative remembrance, the difficulty memory has to deal with ambivalence.