

Le musée de l'Holocauste à Washington, créé par l'architecte James Ingo Freed, fut érigé dans l'intention de préserver une mémoire physique qui s'efface lentement. Une fois bâtie, visitée et consommée, il remplacera éventuellement les vrais événements autrement oubliés. Le rôle de l'objet d'art en tant qu'instrument de mémoire a été radicalement altéré avec la venue des technologies de reproduction. Fredric Jameson soutena que due à leurs méthodes de production et dissémination, les images télévisuelles¹ produisent l'oubli, non la mémoire, un courant et non pas l'histoire. Le musée de l'Holocauste, à travers ses références formelles à l'architecture industrielle nazie, crée une architecture qui est plus vraie que la vraie. Le musée agit à la manière d'une image télévisuelle en produisant une simulation de l'événement réel qui précède l'événement, le reléguant à un passé déjà oublié.

on the floor, its wood soaked with the wear and worn of fleeting generations. The air here is still, foreign. Lived in with an alien life of experience. Quiet whispers float on beams of dust in the air.

Air bounces from sky-blue walls, across to one of wood-grained paper, framing another bay window. This is a small room, with a single narrow bed beneath shelves and a chest beneath the window. A deep green spread, corded with fiber stripes, is draped upon the bed. The door hangs lethargically on its black hinge, darkly stained wood, cracked gently with its age. Behind it, a wrinkled poster curls from the wall, a chaotic mass of comical facts about the favorite German vehicle of its day. Colourful and smiling, it is yet hidden from the room by the open



THE RE-CONSTRUCTED MEMORY

Walter Benjamin has argued that the technology of reproduction has altered the role of the art object, and ultimately how we view history. The invention of the printing press, the camera, and the television have drastically altered the way we record events, reproduce images, and constitute our memory. Jean Baudrillard has argued that there exists no "real," only simulation. Architecture, as a discipline which is dependent upon representation, has been challenged by this shift in relationship between reality and simulation. Architecture has traditionally communicated symbolic meaning in the forms it employs: the church spire, a Hindu temple, a broken pediment, are all signifiers associated to a particular meaning within a particular culture. This direct correlation is rendered problematic in contemporary architecture. Postmodern architecture is symptomatic of this crisis of representation, where signifiers are no longer linked to their signifieds, and architectural form is not seen as containing any inherent meaning. Illustrative of these issues is a building which commemorates an historical event which in many ways defies representation: the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, designed by James Ingo Freed. The design deals with the difficult task of "creating a witness," to events that violently ruptured the historical narrative fifty years ago. It is of particular interest because of the ways in which images are manipulated for the purpose of manufacturing historical memory.

Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Fredric Jameson's theory of language, pastiche and schizophrenia, and Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyper-real are central to the discussion of the changing relationship between image and reality. In his seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues that technology and its ability to reproduce art negates authenticity, and the notion of an original artwork.¹ The loss of "aura," is seen in the loss of the ritual significance of an art object, and its introduction into politics and the collective. In representation, the original, the authentic, is superseded by the copy, the simulation.

Jameson describes the newly emergent social order of late capitalism in terms of pastiche and schizophrenia, in order to describe postmodern experiences of space and time, respectively. Pastiche, he claims, differs from parody, in that parody employs unique characteristics of some original, to produce a mimicry of styles or mannerisms. Jameson claims that today, parody is impossible because the idiosyncrasies of the "original" are lost. There is no longer anything "normal," which when compared to the parody, is comic. Pastiche is parody without humour: a signifier without referent. He argues that schizophrenia is a breakdown of the relationship between signifiers, signified and referents, resulting in the impossibility of a temporal understanding, and therefore of history and memory. Jameson claims the present moment suffers from this schizophrenic condition.

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books: New York, 1968).

Baudrillard has argued that, not only is the link between signifier and signified problematized, but the referent, real or original, has disappeared all together. There exists no real condition, only simulation.² Baudrillard describes the breakdown of this system of signs: "Representation is based on a principle of equivalence between signs and the real, whereas in simulation signs precede, posit the real."³ In fact, Baudrillard argues that, "the very definition of the real has become: that which is possible to give an equivalent reproduction.... The real is not what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is the hyper-real... which is entirely in simulation."⁴

These theories can be applied to the means by which contemporary society collects and disseminates information and thereby invents reality. Images shown by the news media are accepted as authentic historical events despite the fact that an examination of the news media reveals that not only are these images edited, but more importantly, that the creation of history itself is a "synthetic cultural operation,"⁵ heavily mediated, edited and narrated. On the topic of "Representing Television," Steven Heath describes the dislocation of signs from anything other than the non-origin of their production. "Representation is taken no longer as record or expression of some existing reality but as production of reality, with a consequent suspicion of the term itself insofar as it can not but involve the idea of a distinction between representation and represented with the latter 'outside' of the former."⁶ The representation surpasses the represented: the simulacrum precedes the "real." Susan Buck-Morss stated, "it's not the fact that the Berlin wall fell, but the fact that the television cameras were there and the world was watching."⁷ The "real" event is surpassed by the media footage of the event. The CNN broadcasts of the Persian Gulf war and the landing of US troops in Mogadishu signal an unprecedented state of immersion in images, and the dependence of historical production on images. Jameson describes the postmodern consumer logic of late capitalism as a disappearance of a sense of history. For him, the present is defined by a schizophrenic failure of our social system to retain its own past, and its tendency to live in a "perpetual present, and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve."⁸ Television is a key agent in the process of historical amnesia. The insistent "liveness" of news media perpetuates the need for newness, authenticity, and the production of transmittable and sellable images. The news media constructs our (visible) history, and immediately relegates it to the past, as it continuously rewrites the present. "Television produces forgetfulness, not memory, flow not history."⁹

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983).

³ Hal Foster, *Recodings. Art Spectacle. Cultural Politics* (Bay Press: Seattle, 1985) 90.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

⁵ Fritz Johnson, "Imaginarie Histories." *SubMission XIII* (May 1994) 6.

⁶ Steven Heath, "Representing Television," in *Logics of Television. Essays in Cultural Production*, edited by Patricia Mellencamp (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1990) 273.

⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, from the lecture, "Visualizing Theory," (February 1994).

⁸ Jameson Fredric, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," from *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Bay Press: Seattle, 1983) 125.

⁹ Steven Heath, "Representing Television", 279.



door. Shelves stretch from this to another door, enclosing an angular closet. Within, there are remnants of the previous, and adult, occupant of the room. The child's life has not yet permeated the space. Upon a shelf, a figure of formed black stone looms. A fierce face from the south seas gazes out over the room. Its small bulk unbalanced, it is easily tottered by the soft silent step of a passing cat. The wooden floor echoes with the sharp pain of noise. Ghosts press against a door stepped above the dark floor. Their pressure regularly forces the door to silently swing wide, enclosing space unwantedly, opening a dark and cold space above. The crisp air seems stored from many a New England autumn. The odour of decaying leaves blows around the high space of the room above.

Architecture is also implicated in this system of representation, signification, and historical production, as contemporary architects face the same crisis brought about by the slippage between image and reality. Postmodern architecture has been described by Hal Foster as having two positions in postmodern cultural politics. The neoconservative postmodernism, which advocates a return to narrative, ornament and figure, and the poststructuralist postmodernism, which is a direct critique of representation. Neoconservative postmodern architecture takes the referential status of its images for granted. It assumes and depends on the intact link between historical form and its signification. In neoconservative postmodernism, "the sign, fragmented, fetishized and exhibited as such, is resolved in a signature look, and enclosed within a frame."¹⁰ Historical forms are commodified, appropriated and applied. History is seen as an instrument, for the purpose of informing the present as a function of detail or style. Poststructuralist postmodernism, on the other hand, explores the regimes of meaning and order that these signs support. Jameson describes the poststructuralist aesthetic, "stressing discontinuity, allegory, the mechanical, the gap between the signifier and the signified, the lapse in meaning, the syncope in the experience of the subject."¹¹ Poststructuralist postmodern architecture dislocates the signifier from its historical signified. There is a dislocation or slippage of meaning forcing a reinterpretation of the signifier/signified linkage.

Both positions deal with history as problematic, and although their specific attitudes towards history are different, both practices reflect its breakdown. The Holocaust museum in Washington DC operates in this post-historicist context, replacing the "real," with a simulation, and therefore serving as a mechanism of historical amnesia.

The Holocaust is a unique event in terms of the physical loss, the scope and impact of the Nazi project, and the traumatic void that it created in history. The Holocaust is described as an unimaginable event: defying representation. Aharon Appelfled, a survivor of the Holocaust writes, "Everything in [the Holocaust], already seems so thoroughly unreal, as if it no longer belongs to the experience of our generation, but to mythology."¹² Andrew Benjamin writes:

"The Holocaust brings with it the question of the burden of history as well as the possibility of memory... The Holocaust refuses representation. That which has been destroyed cannot be represented as such... Remembrance will be the position of the witness, vigilant in relation to what defines or precludes its own absolute representation... The Holocaust is not an event in history... it called into question the very process, that is the making of History ..."¹³

The attempt to memorialize the Holocaust contains an inherent paradox. "The Holocaust is fundamentally unrepresentable, indeed unimaginable, and [that] no human language can adequately convey the enormity of the horror it comprises."¹⁴ On the other hand, any memorial devoted to the

¹⁰ Hal Foster, recordings: *Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 131.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1979) 20.

¹² Aharon Appelfeld, testimony from *Holocaust Testimonies, The Ruins of Memory*, edited by Lawrence L Langer (Yale University Press: New Haven 1991).

¹³ Andrew Benjamin, "Berlin Holocaust Memorial: Probing the Limits of Architectural Representation," *Cornell Journal of Architecture* 5, 1994.

¹⁴ Werner Goehner, "Berlin Holocaust Memorial: Probing the Limits of Architectural Representation," *Cornell Journal of Architecture* 5, 1994.

Holocaust is founded on the notion that the tragedy must be remembered, in order to prevent it from ever recurring. How can we remember or witness an event that can not be represented?

There is a sense of urgency in the need to create an adequate receptacle for the real, or physical memory of the event, now disappearing as the survivors of the Holocaust pass away. "The generation's memory - along with whatever objects and images and cautionary knowledge may be salvaged- needs to find permanent residence. Or else it will be lost."¹⁵ The decision to build the museum, and its prominent siting on the Washington Mall, reflects an imperative to remember the event.

Society constitutes its collective memory through mnemonic devices: texts, films, and architecture. We fabricate images to inscribe the past in the collective memory. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, contains the words "memorial" and "museum." The word memorial has a clear relationship to memory, and remembrance. The public memorial serves a traditional role, which is to "provide us with the catalyst for the collective process of remembrance and healing."¹⁶ The museum, on the other hand, is a building typology, largely accepted as a legitimating receptacle of culture.

The construction of the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, raises questions concerning representation, history, and memory production. At a recent lecture Freed described the difficulty he had in designing the museum, "the subject, too sensitive, and its message too dire to risk trivializing the event."¹⁷ After a visit to several camps, Freed designed a structure which he hoped would "provoke a visceral reaction." Freed stated his desire to create a building that would evoke a feeling of uneasiness, suspense, or terror. The building integrates many material, structural and symbolic allusions to the camps, ghettos, and industrial architecture of the Holocaust. The museum may evoke a sense of discomfort or anxiety, as visitors move under the imagined gaze of the watch towers, down narrow corridors, and into cramped elevators. The brick and iron-work are meant to evoke the ovens used by the Nazis to burn bodies. The elevators recall gas chambers; the light fixtures, hand rails and steel trusses reflect the industrial architecture of modernism and "progress" - applied to the industry of annihilation.

Freed employs a symbolic strategy similar to that of neoconservative postmodernism. In order to achieve a symbolic image of the Holocaust, he employs deliberate and legible formal references. "He sought nothing less than to use the very fabric of a building to convey the criminality of systematic, industrialized extermination of some six million Jews."¹⁸ The Holocaust museum relies on our recognition of the architectural symbolism. In our collective memory, there exists a latent notion of what the Holocaust "looked like." These representations of



¹⁵ Lance Morrow, "Never Forget," *Time*, (April 26) 1993.

¹⁶ Ken Johnson, "Art and Memory," *Art in America* (November 1993) 95.

¹⁷ James Ingo Freed, lecture at Cornell University (Spring 1994).

¹⁸ "Permanent Witness", *Architectural Record*, 54.



The stairs are worn and unfinished. The wall has a crisp dry yellow-brown paper here, which does not continue into the room, as if it was an unwelcome embellishment of the life below. The static space belies the somehow always moving air. Three windows directed to cardinal points terminate in dormers. Above the bare trees outside, these allow a crisp light to fix the air. The sloping ceiling gives off the silvery light of exposed insulation placed between rough unfinished beams. Paneling around the edges of the room provides a mysterious and dusty black crawl space. Like the secrets of memory, images frozen in time are tucked into the tight spaces around the room. Behind a small door, fading to invisibility with the same surrounding wood paneling and fixed with a black metal latch, clicking into place, the shadowy shapes of trunks compartmentalize the history of those who have come before, the detritus of life no descendent dare dispose of, a sacredness of a genetic memory shared by the very nails of the house. The alcove to the southeast permits a gray-white illumination of ancient books carried down from many generations. A tall oak bookcase holds court over the empty black space of storage. Ornate carved wood cornice atop it, carved dentition running along its edge, it echoes the mantle controlling the dark room far below. Here, though, it is dusty and neglected, desiccated and remote. Its dusty glass doors hide small collected knowledge between organic covers decaying in the dark. Inviting exploration of unknown history, this space is a sanctuary from the life rushing noisily below. The floor here, alternately covered and bare, is made up of thick boards, loosely fitted together giving

the Holocaust are produced by the mass mediated mechanisms discussed earlier (the movie, *Schindler's List*, comes to mind). Freed's architecture relies upon the legibility of its referents, but the museum is also a powerful and instrumental element in their formulation.

The Holocaust Museum represents the Holocaust with such a degree of "reality," that it replaces the "real" Holocaust. In Baudrillard's terms, the museum is a simulation, it recreates the real to such a degree that it replaces - precedes the real. The museum is constructed out of the need to preserve a waning memory. There is a discrepancy between the architecture of the Holocaust, and the architecture that represents it. The architecture of Auschwitz can not be compared to the monumental, and somewhat heroic architecture created by James Freed. The two architectures are antithetical on almost all terms. The symbolic link that Freed employs is problematized because the referent that The Holocaust Museum refers to is a chimerical referent: the *image* of the Holocaust. What is problematic is the acceptance of the image of the Holocaust for the real event. I am not lamenting a lost authenticity, or advocating a return to some supposed reality. It is naïve to claim that there is a realm outside of representation. It is however critical to recognize the imaging role that the museum plays and the role of architecture as mediator in the production of mass memory. The Holocaust Museum is a simulacrum *par excellence*: it is more real than the real. In the process of architectural production, the Holocaust museum has replaced the "real" event with its image: re-constructed, modified and framed for consumption. The imaging function of the Holocaust Museum is to help us forget, not remember; it serves as the agent and mechanism of our postmodern historical amnesia. The Holocaust is relegated to an always already forgotten past.

