

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Six, Number Two

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin: The ‘Spectacular [A]ffect’ of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

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The debate about a German *Leitkultur* (leading culture), as it attempts to address issues around the integration of immigrants, contributes to the discourse of “normalization”ⁱ that began in the early 1980s. With an attack on the *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance), conservatives aimed to reestablish a ‘normal’ German national consciousness within a European context. However, forty years after the end of WWII, President Richard Weizäcker reminded the public that the traumatic Nazi past should be in the memory of every Germanⁱⁱ. Within *Leitkultur* narratives, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) raises further questions about what constitutes a contemporary German identity, particularly as Germany becomes increasingly dynamic within global political and cultural spheres.

The collapse of the Berlin wall and subsequent influx of a large numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers led to one of the greatest challenges Germany faces today: how to reconcile the different ethical and historically inflected dispositions of its increasingly diverse migrant populations. Ensuing power struggles and negotiations around increased cultural, ethnic, and racial differences, particularly since 9/11, have furthermore intensified questions about what constitutes a contemporary German identity in all its pluralities. Because mass-mediated modes of representations of the past offer new venues to produce historical knowledge, as well as assert empathic engagements with the past that inform present debates

around multiculturalism, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*ⁱⁱⁱ is a necessary movement towards a contemporary understanding of *Deutschsein*^{iv}.

Questions about German identity have been perplexing and continue to challenge Germans and foreign observers. Who is German? And what qualities characterize *Deutschsein*? Indeed, these questions are still present in post-Wende disputes over the constitution of contemporary German identity. This article examines two cultural artifacts: *The Memorial for the Murdered Jews in Europe*^v in Berlin, Germany, and a recent documentary about the site entitled, *Steles in the Heart of Berlin: Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe*^{vi}. These cultural artifacts engage in a dialectical conversation about what constitutes a 'normal' German consciousness and highlight the ways in which contemporary representations of history work to depict and explore the juxtaposition of disturbing memory with a more comforting memory to disrupt everyday settings. I argue that both of these representations of the Holocaust exemplify what Žižek (Žižek 2002:11) calls the "passion for the Real"—culminating not in a remembrance of the actual bodies and lives that perished in the Holocaust, but rather offering, instead, a "*spectacular [a]ffect*" through contemporary representations of history that, while functioning on one level to assuage a lingering guilt about the Holocaust, also produce an affective engagement with the past through a Lacanian gap or absence.

Media and cultural representations deliver not only a version about the past, but also offer perceptions and interpretations that elicit [a]ffects of the historical events in the moment they take place. According to Žižek, "we are immersed in 'reality' (structured and supported by the fantasy), and this immersion is disturbed by symptoms which bear witness to the fact that another, repressed, level of our psyche resists this immersion" (Žižek 2002: 17). Coming in contact with Germany's most traumatic historical event through such cultural mediations offers an immersion in a Holocaust past that, while perhaps resisted on the level of an overall national psyche in its movement towards normalization, nevertheless leads to a direct confrontation with the Holocaust. As Žižek argues, we have:

[...] an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real,' to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'. The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic / excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition* (Žižek 2002:19, italics in original).

In the case of these cultural artifacts, the spectacular [a]ffect that allows us to empathetically engage with the trauma of the past is not in the delivery of the literal truth—or attempts to represent literal truths—but rather within the paradoxical absence of these perished bodies. It is precisely the *absence* or lack of bodies or any direct and literal attempt to represent them that exemplifies Žižek’s Real, as the stelae from the memorial site create a sort of mysterious, indefinable quality that captivate us and produces a dramatically silent [a]ffect of truth that is independent of literal truth (Žižek 2002: 2).

According to Andreas Huyssen, the ways in which countries throughout the world represent the Holocaust vary significantly (Huyssen 1995). The past, he insists, does not merely exist within memory, but rather “must be articulated to become memory” (Huyssen 1995: 3). The gap that occurs—between the experience of an event and the remembrance of it—is unavoidable. Therefore, rather than either mourning this gap or ignoring its existence, this fissure is best understood, Huyssen insists, as a “powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” (Huyssen 1995: 3). The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, Germany, provides such a space, as the memorial itself provokes reflections and paradoxes of the “passion for the Real” and produces a kind of knowledge around sensory intensities of the body through an engagement with the layout of the memorial site (Žižek 2002: 7).

After a seventeen year-long debate over the construction and its design, the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, Germany, was officially inaugurated on May 10, 2005. The memorial site is designed as an open-air field of 2,711 dark gray smooth concrete blocks that are lined up in precise parallel rows with the same dimension—2.38 centimeters in depth and 95 centimeters in width—but with varying height, towering up to 4.7 meters tall. Visitors of the memorial site are left to their own devices, as the stelae themselves have no inscriptions, no plaques or narrative explanations. There exists no audio tour, no attempt to literally represent those who perished, as many other Holocaust memorials seek to do, for example, through photographs of the deceased or the display of personal belongings from those that lost their lives—such as old suitcases or shoes.

Intentionally designed to occupy an entire block in the center of Berlin, as it sits on an uneven, sloping field within a short walk from the *Reichstagsgebäude*^{vii}, the landscape of gray, concrete blocks are purposefully designed to be disorienting, abstract, and avoid a tendency towards historical nostalgia, providing, instead, as the architect of the memorial, Peter Eisenman, declares, an attempt to “keep this memory as open question in the present, to represent a spatial experience” that works towards analogizing the “rupture in German history to this alien rupture in the city of Berlin” (Eisenman 1998: 88). The memorial, Eisenman asserts, is

“a rigid grid—reason gone mad. Its warning is against too much belief in reason and the system” (Eisenman 1998: 92). And the few existing ‘rules of engagement’ that do exist are placated on the short outer periphery of the site. The memorial has no secured boundaries and is freely accessible to the public, day and night. The site provides its visitors with a collective (and yet highly individual) opportunity to have an experiential relationship to a past that most did not live through. Though lacking an overall narrative, the memorial site is a place for “personal reflections” and “communication” that is more evocative than telling (Hewel 2005). As Uri Jacob Matatyaou suggests, “Foregoing traditional means of representation and referential significance,” the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* breaks with the traditional didacticism of memorials, interrupting and challenging the customary ways in which the culture of remembrance is commonly articulated and represented (Matatyaou 2008: 94).

The function of most memorial sites and museums, particularly those that deal with the Holocaust, is to help visitors “remember”—offering pieces of what remains from past lives and working to weave together some solid collective narrative of remembrance; these sites therefore purposefully encourage visceral responses (Huysen 1995). However, as a counter-monument, challenging traditional engagements with history, the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* provokes, through abstract reflection and embodied affective engagement, an interaction with the Real. As Matatyaou argues, “Neither self-contained nor self-referential, [the memorial] makes one acutely aware of both its necessity and its inherent limitations,” questioning “the meaning of death without itself providing an answer” (Matatyaou 2008: 181). It is precisely this disorienting walk through the stelae, in its purposefully elusive and abstract encounter with the past, as it breaks from traditional models of remembrance, that triggers the conditions for ethical thinking and an engagement with the Real—provoking, in the process, a reflection through which feelings of empathy for “so many people [who] died here” arise (Hewel 2005).

Žižek’s use of Lacanian analysis helps us to better understand this engagement with the Real; as the Real, in Lacan, is identified in relation to both the symbolic and the imaginary, what we sense or perceive to be “reality,” according to Žižek, is always articulated through the symbolic, but characterized by the imaginary and often manifested with media images or other cultural expressions. Although both the symbolic and the imaginary function within larger systems of signification, the symbolic is, theoretically, open-ended, while the imaginary functions to control or make sense out of that open-endedness by imposing upon us a spectacularity that mobilizes the symbolic around individualized—though deeply fundamental and socially ideological—fantasies (Žižek and Daly 2004). In other words, the Real exists within

the negation of the symbolic-imaginary order of signification; its dimension of existence is within the lack or absence of such constructions. Referring, then, back to Žižek's use of the anecdote^{viii} about the East German working in Siberia, in *The Desert of the Real*, "by inscribing the very reference to the code" into the message, through a paradoxical encoding, the mention within the message of the absence or lack of red ink "produces this effect of truth *independently of its own literal truth*; even if the ink really was available," Žižek asserts, "the lie that is unavailable is the only way to get the true message across in this specific condition of censorship" (Žižek 2002: 1-2, italics in original). The stelae, analogous to Žižek's red ink, offer a language that abstractly—through its absence of referentiality and spectacular [a]ffect—becomes paradoxically encoded and the language through which the Real is then articulated.

The tenuous fissures between the past and the present that occur within the memorial site elicit visceral responses, as exhibited in *Steles in the Heart of Berlin*; the traumatic memory of the past and coming to terms with it "takes a little bit in my heart," a woman explains in the documentary (Hewel 2005). A young man interviewed after walking among the stelae says he feels insecure; he would have liked for the memorial to "have been more concrete, more direct. It bothers [him, too,] that it was planned for a single group, when there were other persecuted groups—gypsies, German resistance fighters—that were just as deserving. Theirs were lost lives too. Everyone has only one life" (Hewel 2005). The perceived misrecognition of the victimization of "gypsies, German resistance fighters" and homosexuals, in this instance, becomes an additional "stumbling block for a more inclusive re-narration of history of memory and harnessing of the legacies of violence in the interest of a more egalitarian future" (Rothenberg 2009: 21). Indeed, the lack of direct representation of the persecution and execution of all bodies, including "gypsies, German resistance fighters," and homosexuals, is a complex moment where one person's memory competes with the remembrance that is offered at the memorial site; this moment of conflicted memory elicits feelings of anxiety, or as a visitor declares, "I have mixed emotions. And when you think about it, that's probably the best response that a memorial of this type can elicit" (Hewel 2005). As Žižek reminds us, however, "reality as the really real" (Žižek 2002: 17) is not delivered to us in the way we want or expect—as a "substantial autonomous entity" (2002: 19)—but rather, the absence of direct referentiality (the analogous absence of red ink) has a determining presence, which surfaces, rather, through a spectacular [a]ffect.

It is precisely the *absence*, of all direct or literal referentials to those who perished in the Holocaust, that actually delivers the spectacular [a]ffective response that allows us to connect more intimately with the event. Daly and Žižek point out that "While the Real, by definition,

cannot be directly represented, it can nonetheless be alluded to in certain figurative embodiments of horror-excess” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 7). Additionally, while Žižek’s earlier writings dealt more with how the Real manifested in some kind of powerful force of negation, Žižek’s later work is more concerned with the subtler manifestations of the Real (Žižek and Daly 2004). While most of us cannot actually remember the bodies or the lives that perished, the absence of these bodies, profoundly experienced within this memorial site through their palpable and yet indescribable absence, produces the conditions necessary to engage us more deeply on an empathetic and emotional level, as we attempt to fill those gaps.

The short documentary film of this project, entitled, *Steles in the Heart of Berlin: Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe*, exemplifies how mass-mediated modes of representations of the past offer alternative venues to produce historical knowledge, as well as new repertoires of attention—a new vocabulary of social or collective attention through the engagement with the Real—that assert a certain kind of publicness that, in turn, emphasize interactive learning and empathic engagement with the past (Hewel 2005). In his documentary, Hewel traces not only the emotional responses of individuals who visit the memorial site, but also captures reflective personal narratives to provide authenticity and emotional credibility (Hewel 2005). The fragmented process of remembering and narrating the Holocaust bears resemblance to an “historical rupture relevant to the contemporary societies” within which it was produced (Maron 2009: 82). Indeed, Maron suggests that melodrama can be understood as a perpetually modernizing form of representing historical events, as the appeal of melodrama lies in its ability to gesture towards and “enacting inexpressibility” in the midst of confusion and disarray, and thus offers a particularly appropriate method of representation that, in turn, elicits an affective response that is both visceral and moral (Maron 2009: 69).

Hewel’s documentary reveals such a moment of historical rupture, in which history and memory are sensual experiences transferred “across temporal and geographic chasms” (Landsberg 2004: 111). The history of the Holocaust and the individual feelings that are induced, as people reflect on their memorial walks, migrate to new geographical and temporal contexts. The documentary about the memorial site has the potential to facilitate expressions of moral indignation, a sense of individual or collective responsibility, empathy, or compassion. The acts of remembering and the reflexive levels of consciousness are interwoven in the documentary and elucidate the difficulty of transmitting the experience of coming to terms with the past at the memorial site. Memorial walks, as visualized in the documentary, *Steles in the Heart of Berlin*, represent a re-inscription of the past through a “particularized set of bodily

actions” that blend personal experience and individual revelation with an historical event (De Groot 2009: 103).

Affect, according to Gregg and Seigworth, “marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters;” thus, there always exist “ambiguous” or “mixed” encounters that impinge on the body and extrude through the layers of mediation (2010: 2). Moments of anxiety and insecurity about the representation of the past and its presence in local German’s daily lives, for instance, arise when images of people—sitting on the stelae eating lunch or lying down, kissing or in intimate embraces—flicker across the screen. Memorial sites are typically places of quietness and reflection, occasioning respect. Stewart suggests that attending to the facets of everyday life means first to recognize that a scene might appear as “potential lines that *something* coming together calls to mind and sets in motion” disparate elements of unpredictable weight and densities (Stewart 2007: 2).

The memorial sculptures themselves also provoke heated debate. Hungarian-Jewish writer, György Konrád, believes the design to be “too big” and calls it “merciless kitsch” (Hewel 2005). At the memorial site, the notion of recalling tragic events through the material objects (the stelae) as part of commemorating unspeakable acts of terror, impose constraints on the body; the reflection on the traumatic event through an object works to undermine the sensate understanding of terror and the conditions for having a physical sensation that is oppositional to it. Konrád explains, “I think I failed to understand the idea that the artist already had in his imagination, that the different levels within his relatively tight space would call forth various inner states” (Hewel 2005). In other words, the material objects—the stelae—supply a framework to thematize the elaborate social interpretation of traumatic historical events (Sturken 2007).

The production of (stelae) objects and the ability to understand the feeling the artist tries to capture with the “austere apathy of the concrete forest” (Hewel 2005), as Konrád explains, is a recognition of “our soft bodies in these narrow corridors, where we are forced to be alone” (Hewel 2005). Konrád’s remembrance and reflection seems to suggest that the implied narratives of the stelae metonymically represent the past as a flashback, reminding the viewer of images from movies about exhausted, starving, humiliated bodies; the visuals of the stelae of the memorial site, as represented within the documentary, bring forth conflicting ideas of simultaneity—a cognitive dissonance—where cues must often be provided to fill in the gaps that the site itself seemingly fails to represent; these visual cues, however, “often push form at the expense of content” (Zelizer 2010: 52). This cognitive dissonance, however, is precisely the condition that opens up access to the Real; the Real is experienced as much in absence as it is in excess. And form, rather than content, “may provide a means of approaching it. Content may

mesmerize and mislead,” suggests Sarah Kay, but if we can approach things in such a way as to “make the content recede from view and instead bring the formal parallels into focus, then the gaps that emerge *between* them,” echoing Žižek, may offer some insight into the Real (Kay 2003: 9, my italics).

Visual historical landscapes are not our only entry points into the Real through affective responses. Soundscapes, according to Alison Landsberg, structure the audience’s “conditions of engagement” (Landsberg 2010: 541). The viewer is connected to representations of past events through dialogues and sounds, which Landsberg calls the “aural visceral” (Landsberg 2010: 541). The connection between “sound and body” brings forth the human condition at the intersection between the particular and the universal. This particular strategy of sound, according to Landsberg, has important implications—both engaging the viewer, but also keeping the viewer at a distance (Landsberg 2010: 539). However, in a sort of reversal—a non-aural visceral moment—the memorial site with “no center, no edge, no meaning, no sense” is “silent” and “attempts to be silent like those people from Auschwitz are silent” as Eisenman, the architect, makes clear (Hewel 2005). Among the ocean waves of stelae, however, the visitor feels the vulnerability of the body in its isolation from dialogue and sound. There are no words carved up into the shiny cement, not an utterance of grief, humiliation, nor longing to be interrogated. This particular strategy of sound, most notably within the dialogue, according to Landsberg, has important implications—both engaging the viewer, but also keeping the viewer at a distance (Landsberg 2010: 539). Only the individuals in the documentary fill the silence with their experiences of walking through the memorial site; their introspection does not necessarily mean a disavowal from social engagement with the historical past. The horror of the annihilation of the Jewish people is articulated through a deafening silence of the memorial site itself; the memorial makes “no explicit reference to the perpetrators,” Paul Spiegel, Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, reminds us (Hewel 2005). The muted narratives thus come to the surface from within, like a diver emerging from the waves, in an effort to leave a mark, a trace. And yet, the documentary attempts to give voice to the architectural silence through narrations of visitors and historical commentators, arguably making the original non-aural visceral moments provided by the memorial itself *less* powerful.

Formed by a living body, the encounter with the historical past of the Holocaust that occurs, while walking in the snakelike paths that the stelae form, morphs into—what I call—a *mise en abyme*, prosthetic memory^{ix} of what it “must have felt like to walk alone in Auschwitz,” because “one walks alone here” (Hewel 2005). The literal translation of the French phrase, *mise en abyme*, means “into the abyss,” though the term is commonly used to describe a sort of

visual experience that is similar to standing between two mirrors. The phrase has also been used to describe a story within a story, or a smaller version of an image placed within its copy larger image. I make use of both the literal translation and the symbolic meanings frequently associated with the term to describe an experience of walking “into the abyss,” but through a double mirroring of multiple layers of mediation—the act of walking through an architecturally created metonymic memorial, wherein the stelae stand in for the perished Jews and attempt to represent the totality of the Holocaust, with one’s own individual understanding of history through affective responses. The stelae, as described within the documentary of the site, highlight that “nothing points to meaning, neither the number of steles nor their form. They create a space, a space for nothingness.” (Hewel 2005). But, for some, it is within that experience with nothingness that the stelae begin to make sense: “It is not just emptiness, a meaningless vacuum, a not-in-existence, rather, it is a not-yet-in-existence” (Hewel 2005).

As part of Germany’s coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), these artifacts are illustrative of an ongoing dialogue with various attempts to reestablish a ‘normal’ German consciousness and assuage lingering national guilt about the Holocaust. Although the layers of (re)mediating—through the documentary, *Steles in the Heart of Berlin*—Germany’s Nazi past have the capacity to impede the spectator’s reflections of tragic events through the body; the spectator’s cognition is more focused on the *mis en abyme* experiences of the narrations. The historical walks through the memorial site itself are moments in which the viewer spends time with the *self*, but is guided through the historical past as if she is in an “open-ended-in-betweenness” at once “intimate and impersonal” during the palimpsest of “force-encounters” that flicker across the screen (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2).

Furthermore, through this documentary remediation, the split or void that occurs (the ultimate void that Žižek speaks of) as one walks through the stelae is reinforced; because we experience this something missing as a lack, we desire to close it, to fill it in, to replace it with something—hence, a cinematic remediation of the site in an effort to explain it. While the documentary, to some degree, fills some of the void with voices that attempt to narrate some of the gaps that are represented in the stelae, they still don’t fill the gap from mediation to mediation. And as Žižek reminds us, our desire to fill this gap, wholly or completely, will never be achieved. The spectator of the documentary also encounters, through various layers of cinematic mediation, not the experience of being face-to-face with the architect’s construction and the absence of the bodies it implies, but the body turning towards the experience of being set within a different historical narrative and context; the spectator takes on the role of the performer who walks with the individuals in the documentary through the site and to whom one

feels responsible, encountering a layered, or *mise en abyme*, prosthetic construction of memory.

Žižek furthermore argues that the twentieth-century “passion for penetrating the Real Thing,” ultimately within the “the destructive Void,” and arguably underscored within this abyss of a silent gray concrete forest of stelae, is sought after “through the cobweb of semblances which constitutes our reality” (Žižek 2002:12). Although the Real is typically sought after through the spectacularity of digitalized media and special effects, such as Žižek highlights in our pursuit, for instance, of disaster films or the spectacular receptiveness of watching, over and over again, the fall of the World Trade Center towers, experiences of the Real also occur within the spectacularity that is produced by the palpable absence of bodies and stillness of the stelae in its purposefully designed landscape of disorientation. Within the documentary, Giulio Busi, a professor of Jewish Studies in Berlin, echoes Žižek’s theory of the Real when he remarks that “in Jewish religious mysticism, the idea of nothingness plays an important role. The entire world was created out of Nothingness; ergo, Nothing also represents the possibility of a new beginning” (Hewel 2005). Busi goes on to say that the first step towards realization occurs through an emptying-out of reality through mediation, “until one reaches a small, dark spot that is Nothingness, that contains nothing. From this spot the new creation of reality begins” Busi asserts, “always through a mediation. From the starting point of Nothingness, one can understand reality” (Hewel 2005).

The viewer’s *Auseinandersetzung*, a term that is used to express or convey present German engagement with the past, is inexhaustible; the metonym of traumatized bodies offer access to the unspeakable essence of trauma and its continuity in the present, even though, as many have argued, the repetitive act of remembrance has lost its power through tourism. As Christoph Classen highlights in his analysis of the shower scene in the film, *Schindler’s List*, the “non-representable” of the actual murder of so many Jews is transferred to the viewer’s imagination through an always-present context of knowing. This context of knowing, however, continuously threatens the “*topos* of the culture of memory” (Classen 2009: 93), as narratives of the Holocaust potentially become sanitized and liquidated. Without physical demarcations or signs, the memorial site, as it is situated within the larger context of the city, penetrable from each direction—as if the Holocaust, itself, is silently integrated into Germany’s historical landscape—becomes its own unique context of knowing, but one that challenges not only the viewer, but those who live nearby. The *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe*, as it attempts to represent the history of Germany’s Holocaust past, is integrated into the local landscape and becomes a somewhat mute fascination. For locals, the site, as it stages the

transference of memory of the traumatizing events of the Holocaust, has become somewhat normalized. The nearness of the materiality of the Holocaust and the integration of the traumatic historical event into the fabric of their everyday lives potentially dull affective responses to the memorial itself. And yet, through the spectacle of historical tourism, the site may also potentially offer a different kind of affective response.

The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* must be viewed as a symbolic gesture that offers [a]ffective opportunities to immerse ourselves in the Real, as it functions, in various ways, to disrupt such normalization or even understanding, since, as the architect explains, “understanding is impossible” (Eisenman 2005: 12). For visitors, this encounter with the past forces their own unique experience at the historical site and makes the horror of the Holocaust somehow more palpable in their own imagination, eliciting constant examination through introspection. Because such introspection elicits a sense of a *decentered attachment* to the past, a phrase I use to describe one’s simultaneous emotional encounter with and distancing from past historical events in a particular present moment, the viewer feels empathetic; although the site enhances a visitor’s *self* in this public space, as she becomes more aware of her own sensuous experience with the past, it simultaneously disconnects her from the present. Such representations of the Holocaust in Germany, as highlighted by these two cultural artifacts, tend to confront the viewer with a sense of both absence *and* presence—which, in itself provides a sometimes disorienting imbalance or contradiction that gives us access to the Real, without undermining the affective and cognitive processes of feeling and experiences of empathy.

Juxtaposing disturbing memories of the Holocaust with comforting memories and thus disrupting the everyday setting and context of an historical trauma within a thriving contemporary city, the stelae, in their uniqueness, elicit two bodily drives: *the gaze*—through an urge to visually see the magnitude and repetitiveness of the gray columns in their symbolic abstraction, and *the voice*—through a drive to communicate the trauma across time and space and facilitate imagination and emotion as necessary indicators in the visual representation of the experience as ‘uncanny,’ which Žižek also invokes in his work. Uncanny refers to experiences in the realm of being frightened; but the uncanny can also invoke a kind of ‘helplessness’ that one can’t escape at the memorial site, because one has to come to terms with the past. The stelae confront us with an (un)familiar world or atmosphere of (past) fear; the feelings of (un)familiarity lurk at the heart of the experience and are exacerbated by the disorienting and abstract quality of the memorial. On the one hand, we want to repress the horror of the past, and yet, the sense of something familiar has to be repressed to some degree, because we live in a world that is constructed out of fear through spectacular mediations. The feelings of the uncanny are further

aggravated in the layers of mediation. And one experiences the fear even more so in the Nothingness when one is not familiar with Jewish mysticism. The unknown—the void of the Real—is the cultivation of a tradition or ideology that is less familiar, as Germans struggle with the continuing question of what it now means to be German. One has no imaginary or symbol of the Void; there is the Nothingness that is implied in the stelae, but how the Void is then experienced is within the uncanny, a sort of helplessness that guides one nevertheless into the Real. The uncanny also guides us in the everyday experiences of life, as the memorial, situated as it is within the city, provides a juxtaposition of that which is felt as real and that which remains hidden; the fear of both the known (in our intellectual context of knowing) and the unknown, in the impossibility of ever connecting to the Real fully or completely, thus comes together in the uncanny—a state we do not want to recognize. And yet, in our passion for the Real and desired integration of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*^x into a contemporary understanding of *Deutschsein*^{xi}, this counter-memorial, as such, presents us with an opportunity to move from Nothingness to empathy—through an unconscious [a]ffect of being at this interface between past and present.

The selected artifacts are just a few of the many examples in which contemporary and historical events are linked to the discussion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in an intricate component within the political debate about instituting a *Leitkultur*^{xii}. These representations show that the borders between present and past are fluid; the places in which the viewer engages with this particular historical past visually provide concrete instances of an articulation of the extreme—in the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews*—in the everyday lives of Berliners and visitors of Berlin. The integration of such narratives into the cultural and historical landscape of Germany is an attempt to re-envision a contemporary Germany that willfully integrates conflicting and painful narratives into a vision for a cohesive national future.

The concept of German identity or *Deutschsein* has been addressed and articulated in countless ways and continues to be a very pressing and problematic issue within Germany, as a result of the influx of recent immigrants; however, with integration or assimilation, also comes a need, perhaps, for immigrants to also come to terms with Germany's past. Thus, national identity issues reflected within such memorial sites and their (re)mediations highlight, as well, how these debates have become central concerns for all involved. Thus, while retaining a claim to a *Kulturnation*^{xiii}, Germans seem to be caught between both the threats and promises of diversity, the past and future, the (re)construction of *Deutschsein* and the (de)construction of it. However, the *Leitkultur* debate in Germany represents an ongoing dialogue with various attempts to reestablish a 'normal' German consciousness and assuage lingering national guilt.

These kinds of public memorials function as transference sites that offer versions of diverse cultural identities and individual remembrances of the past and coming to terms with it through affect. The engagement with this memorial establishes a discursive space that challenges any articulation of an established cultural identity position; rather, the differences in cultural identity come across differently in space and time through the dialogical interactions with the representation of the past and a continual re-inscription of identity; being German is far from being a fixed entity. And national identity, as these cultural artifacts also suggest, is performative and constantly renegotiated. Furthermore, since “memory is closely aligned with identity” and has become “one of the most contested terms in contemporary debate” in Germany’s polity, acts of remembrance both reify attempts to establish a contemporary German identity, while simultaneously challenging any claims to its coherence (Rothberg 2009: 4).

ⁱ After WWII, Germans found it difficult to identify with the idea of a nation-state. Thus, Germans adopted substitute identity markers—“Holocaust identity” and “economic-miracle identity”—in which people shared the mutual understanding *not* to relate identity to the nation. Since the re-unification, however, the call for a national identity has been paired with demands for Germany’s “normalization,” which some choose to describe as an end to the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ debate), or “culture of shame” (Huysen 1995: 5). Huysen, thus, highlights that (national) identities are not only politically and culturally constructed, but also become products of narratives that are performed, repeated, celebrated, and criticized. The concept of German identity continues to be problematic in the political sphere, an issue also explored within various cultural institutions, especially with respect to immigration.

ⁱⁱ Weizäcker, in a speech on May 8th, 1985, (<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,354568,00.html>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Coming to terms with the past.

^{iv} Being German.

^v *Das Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*.

^{vi} *Stelen im Herzen Berlins: Das Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*.

^{vii} The Reichstag, which, damaged in a fire, was not fully restored until after German reunification and now houses the German parliament, or *Bundestag*.

^{viii} Žižek tells the parable of an East German sent to work in Siberia who sets up a communication code with his friends to avoid communist censors who he knows will read the mail that he sends back home. If the East German’s message is written in blue ink, then his friends will know that what he writes is true; if written in red ink, then the message is false. However, in the absence of the availability of red ink, the East German necessarily writes in blue ink, but in such a dramatic way that what appears to be true (that all is well in Siberia) provides a paradoxical moment of Truth that comes to light with the added hint that the only thing that is *not* available is red ink.

^{ix} I borrow the term “prosthetic memory” from Alison Landsberg (2010), who uses it to describe affective responses that are both visceral and moral and occur at the interface between an individual and an historical narrative of the past (113).

^x Coming to terms with the past.

^{xi} Being German.

^{xii} Leading culture.

^{xiii} Culture nation.

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