Representation and Authenticity of Testimonial Literature: Geoffrey Hartman on Holocaust Studies

Feng WANG
Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications

I. Introduction

Before the 1970s, Geoffrey Hartman has been a distinguished scholar on literary issues of romanticism, deconstruction and creative criticism, a "classical Hartman" as Harper Beckham has addressed him. After that, however, the Holocaust comes to be a major concern in his research partly because of his Jewish identity. He engages himself with organizing and preparing the Holocaust Video Archive Program while thinking over such issues as authenticity, representation, public memory, which are closely related to modern media culture. In 1979, he became a member on The Holocaust Survivor Film Project started by a professor at Yale University, and from 1981 on, he set out to establish with great enthusiasm the influential Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony at Yale University by making videos of the Holocaust survivors and witness in the United States, Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Yugoslavia, Israel, Latvia, Slovenia, Argentina and other
countries. Later years have seen a series of publications on the Holocaust by Hartman as a literary critic who develops penetrating insight into modern media from the perspective of testimonial narrative and its authenticity of representation.

II. Shift to Holocaust Studies

As Nicolas Tredell commented, the 1980s saw a crisis in English and American literature during which literary studies in the traditional sense was challenged with renewed eyes on established paradigm, its method and limitations since 1960s. The crisis designated by Tredell is, in essence, largely generated by the shift of paradigm from purely literary text study to cultural text or socialized text study.

With the paradigm shift, Hartman moves his focus accordingly from the uncertainty and diversity of literature and literary criticism to the social functions of it. To him, cultural studies makes invisible the boundary between literary studies and social studies, thus theorizing or ideologicalizing literary criticism. To reverse this homogenizing tendency, Hartman turns to urge the necessity and importance of artistic studies, or human studies in a general sense. As far as Holocaust studies are concerned, he insists on an artistic method which could both helpfully defend the independent status of art on its own and avoid a defensive thus exclusive posture taken by art for its own.

While the prevalence of cultural studies is contributive, as an external factor, to Hartman’s shift to the Holocaust, his steadfast belief in truth and concern of the memory issue are the two major factors from within. Benjamin’s theory on art replication and Jean Baudrillard’s ideas on simulacra have exerted great impact on Hartman, with the latter’s influence being more obvious. According to Baudrillard, all popular cultures and their representation in a postmodern society, television or film included, disguise and distort the reality instead of reflecting it, to the extent that the absence of reality is totally obscured. People in this culture just feel or experience a non-real world as if in a world of simulacra. This non-authentic feeling lifts the barrier between them and their illusion, collapsing the reality in hyper-reality. Consequently, a profound sense of fracture in time and flatness in depth is fostered that makes themselves less imaginative and their everyday life less substantial but more virtual. The symbol, which has been traditionally thought to point to an equivalent in the real world, has lost its referential value with the lack of a reality. In other words, representation is no longer possible in a world of simulacra as it was.
Like Jean Baudrillard, Hartman holds that with the help of modern technology, the popular media has made it increasingly difficult for people to distinguish between what is real or true through mixing the world of image and the world of propaganda, and weakens people’s ability to detect the truthfulness of falseness of what comes to them from the media. However, he adopts a positive attitude, if not optimistic, to the popular culture represented by the media, unlike Baudrillard who, with his analysis of the popular culture, comes ultimately to a pessimistic conclusion and makes a decisive break with it (though this break is virtual). In Hartman’s view, in spite of frequently recurring of such disasters as the Holocaust in history, people are not necessarily subject to a nightmare-ridden life brought about by them. What counts most, according to him, is how the events are properly presented to the public, including the victimized and traumatized populace surviving those disasters. On the one hand, history cannot be erased as hard evidence of what has happened in the past. On the other, man as a positive agent still plays a significant role in modern culture with his memory waking up the cultural events in history.

So which one serves best in presenting history among the alternatives of novels, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, movies, TV shows, etc.? Much as Hartman regards essay as an appropriate style for literary criticism which bears a long history and great flexibility, his option of the form for presentation of the Holocaust is television video, which combines the long-history oral tradition and modern technology to present to the public the historical period of darkest human nature which, though all too painful to recollect, shouldn’t be disregarded and cast into the dust accumulated as time goes by.

In Baudrillard’s point of view upon simulacra, he develops a four-stage theory with regard to the process of transition of image from the traditional image to simulacra. The first is the image reflecting a profound reality, the second masking and denaturing a profound reality, the third masking the absence of a profound reality, the fourth breaking with any reality whatever and being its own pure simulacra. Within this referencing frame, Hartman stays on the first stage with his adamant faith in memory, truth and reality and thus possibility of representation in spite of the haunting nightmares of the tragic events, Baudrillard has come to lose confidence in human history and future with his unsparing critique of the mass culture. But Hartman maintains an absolute optimism, though not explicitly stated, in human beings as a literary critic believing the power of literature that is strong
enough to resist the sweeping force of cultural studies to subsume all under it. Obviously, Hartman places high hopes on literature and literary criticism as powerful weapons fighting against positivism as a concomitant of unprecedented advancement of science and technology that has become the most prevalent in all disciplinary research.

In terms of history, Hartman takes a similar stance to Nietzsche as a strong opponent of historical positivism. As Nietzsche believes, a person who chooses, sifts, puts together various historical materials can only be regarded as a manual worker on history with regard to the nature of their work as that of a mason or an apprentice, whereas what a true historian does is to explain the past with what you have now. With his life-long devotion to literary criticism, Hartman invalidates the popularly-acclaimed idea that history is the best to provide explanations or representation of the past, as "It is an understandable mistake, but still a mistake, to tout history, in its purely positivistic reach." Then his alternative falls upon literature, the most powerful in his eyes to explain and represent the past out of his never diminishing care of man's fate that is held most precious among other things.

It is his hope and care that promotes Hartman to look at the Holocaust from a literary perspective other than a non-academic perspective. In his opinion, it is necessary to take an appropriate way to wake up those Holocaust survivors and witnesses from their deeply buried memories of the nightmare for nearly half a century in order that "the meaning of humanity must be restored". Of the various modes of representation such as by biography, autobiography, fiction, drama, movies, Hartman puts no any priority on them. Alternatively, he prefers to represent through videotaping of the memories and narrations of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it is because Hartman believes in truth. On the other, a way to disclose the real history in case of any falsification of it is needed. In a postmodern world where all things, lofty or ordinary, are cut down to the ground level without any boundary between, what may enable people to believe that the massacre ever happened, and believe that it has brought about pains into and cloudy shadows over their life that have never gone far from them? And what are the proper ways to prevent the memory from being misappropriated for paralyzing the public or as an ideological instrument under disguise? Like Baudrillard who carries out an intense struggle against the institution from within, Hartman displays his discontent at the pretense and hypocrisy of culture and politics, stating that the public should turn their eyes away from those events though there
are many barriers blocking from a clear focus. \[^{[6]}\]

In what way, then, does testimonial literature help build a more clarified view of what has occurred a few decades before than the all too powerful and realistic media?

III. Representation and Authenticity

Trauma studies were first introduced into medicine to wake up and bring back the traumatized patients out of their lingering over or obsession with a point in time or a traumatic scene to consciousness through psychoanalysis and therapy. With the study of trauma progressing, it is no longer limited to personal psychological problems, but extended to analyze such collective events as the Second World War, the Vietnam War, or some socially significant issues as American slavery and identity of colored people within the fields of sociology and cultural studies. Trauma has two components. One is the traumatic event, the object of trauma studies, which is closely affiliated to history in that the event really takes place at a certain point in time of the past. The other is memory of the event. The victim is too shocked at the time of the event to understand what has happened, and in the process represses memories about this event. Reproduction of the traumatic scene is unavoidable, people’s memories of traumatic events tend to be deformed, distorted and even disguised. Taking this into consideration, the traumatic event may be represented historically, culturally, or literarily. Alternatively, he chooses its representation by way of video testimony, which is based on his unique understanding of representation.

To begin with, Hartman disagrees with historians on their insistence of objective truth. Historians hope to disclose the truth concerning the traumatic event by way of empirical research and regard it as the only effective way to recover the historical truth. In their view, it is not advisable to restore the historical context of the event through individual or collective memory because memory takes place here and now and is no more than a mere reconstruction of the past experience. Memory is counter-historical, thus nothing but faithful representation of the past. To avoid subjective factors, empirical historians propose to trace exhaustively the files and material evidence on the past to retrieve the original scene, as is opposed to memory which exclusively rely on the way the individuals mind works. Maurice Halbwach, a French philosopher and sociologist who is famous for studies on collective memory, believes that collective memory is not a true record of what has happened.

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to a group of people. On the contrary, it is a social construct ignoring the discrepancies between the present and the past, even going so far as to simplify history into a myth prototype. Likewise, Kali Tal, an American scholar, believes that the survivor talking truthfully in front of the public may pose a threat to the social status quo and plunge himself into a dangerous situation in which he could be silenced or forced to modify his story under the overwhelming pressure from the powerful social forces that conspire. This is especially true with the survivor who is a member on the underprivileged or marginalized groups. What the survivor tells in this case is “a highly political speech”. This line of thought leads naturally to the conclusion that memory of the survivor is not reliable due to its failure to restore the objective historical facts.

However, influenced by Adorno, Hayden White, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Herbert Marcuse and other thinkers, Hartman is skeptical of what the historians hold. Firstly, like Adorno, Hartman thinks of history as written by the triumphant of social struggles, “the official history” in his term. In his opinion, it is one kind of memory of the past too, but is politicized so as to neglect the complexity of human nature and interpretation by permeating ideology into everything and claiming its capability to scrutinize the past with an unbiased attitude and a redemptive force. For this, Hartman regards official history as a result of the state’s ideological manipulation as it manipulates journalism. Secondly, since history is the result of ideological manipulation, it is at the mercy of the state as a narrative without its so-called objectivity and historical truth. Thirdly, in order to seek a total, consistent, and pure reproduction of the objective truth and achieve its ideological purpose, the official history not only tries to simplify history, but also endeavors to quench lively fresh public memories coming through folklore, poetry and other traditions by adopting a single, determinate perspective. This leads to, without denying, falsification or uplifting of historical facts and finally, deceptive public memory. With it, the official history constitutes the greatest threat to public memory. Finally, in an electronic era with prevalent media, the official history tends to come under the spotlight for disputes by academics or journalism in the free market of ideas. However, the more controversy it arouses, the more acute sense of unreality it stirs among people. Negatively, this sense of unreality may push people further to the feeling that all things in public are untrue. This is in consistence with Lyotard’s point of view that what is true is unrepresentable and accordingly, Auschwitz is
truest of the true because it is impossible to reproduce and historicize. The claims by the historians of the authoritative, objective historical knowledge are invalidated.

Meanwhile, Hartman questions media in presenting extreme events realistically for it dims rather than clarifies the public's understanding with its high efficiency and representing models. Hartman goes further than Benjamin and Baudrillard. The public is aware that the media image is simply a facsimile or simulacra with nothing to do with truth or reality. The so-called authenticity of media culture misses its desired target. Consequently, two things subsume. On the one hand, people do not trust the media any more with the knowledge of its false and processed coverage of the disastrous events against a certain background. Then the image on the TV is just an image nothing but real. This produces an antibody in people's reaction system to prevent them from any interference with or disturbance from the outside, to such an extent as to become insensitive to extreme events. This trend will inevitably lead to lessened responsiveness or even irresponsiveness of the people who are ultimately made very cold-blooded onlookers of violence. On the other hand, the media is omnipotent in the sense it oversees or overhears everything. Of what it has laid hand upon it claims realistic mirroring as things are. However, this pursuit of truth and reality distances the public from the world to be perceived. In other words, real-time images does not help foster a feeling of the real in the public, but creates a sense of unbelievability, or unreliability of the images like some interesting constructs or imitations. This approach of revealing truth through media with utterances, pictures or movies, has been suspected. People are worried, with no confidence in what they have seen or heard, that they might be cheated by the joint efforts of image and propaganda to cover up the truth. Adorno's insight into the dirty combination of aesthetics and reality, Baudrillard's claim of the disappearance of the boundaries between reality and non-reality brought about by the simulacra of image, for Hartman, no longer pose a surmountable obstacle to those onlookers living in a culture of knowledge. Technology has brought about great expansion of consciousness that easily exposes people to the worldwide disaster on the one hand and alienates them from this disaster on the other just as indifferent bystanders. It is reasonable that Hartman laments over a troubling distrust over the real and moral indifference in an electronic and democratic era.\[8\]

Hitherto Wordsworth has greatly influenced Hartman. Wordsworth once complained in 1800 that people have regressed back to an almost uncivilized state in their capacity to distinguish and be moved at sight of ordinary scenes and daily
life. Correspondingly, Wordsworth wrote lyrical ballads to inspire his readers to develop an eye for beauty in common trivialities. [9]

It enables people to discern truth in commonalities and empowers things of absence more imaginary.

For one thing, a one-dimensional, total historical narrative has lost its credibility and legitimacy. On the other, media brought about by technological development fall short of its desired objective in its pursuit of truth. As an alternative, imagination turns to take the task of representation of the past. According to Hartman, art remains in close contact with the tradition, which means that, by resorting to history, art is more effective in representing specific historical facts than historical writing, thus is more capable of passing on history. At the same time, art goes hand in hand inseparably with imagination. Modern media has overdone to display realism so that the public is separated from the real and tend to distrust what they see. As a result, people are weakened in their perceptibility of the extreme events and are lost in their imagination that enlivens memories.

Accordingly, the inevitable conclusion of Hartman is that art is the perfect combination of history and imagination, which means that artistic truth contains both historical reality and imaginary reality, with the latter being at a higher level of truth. With artistic truth, enlightened modern people stay far away from the thought that due to ideological manipulation, history functions as a political discourse for the official to maintain its dominance over the civilian. Likewise, they would not take a skeptical stance upon the reality in front of media. Thereby it helps overcome “the real unreal” [10] created by history and media, namely, a false memory. By token of this, art, especially literature, excels others in overcoming mental inertia contributed to the modern media culture, and is unparalleled in evoking their sensitivity to the world outside, known as art’s performative function which Hartman has been endeavoring to promote in establishing the Holocaust archives. In addition to its aesthetic function, art plays another role in shaping the cultural discourse and cultural awareness through encouraging people to overcome alienation with others and with themselves. It is at this point that art comes to full play as far as its value is concerned.

Any artistic representation of the Holocaust in the darkest period of human history, holds as an obligation not only informing people of the historical facts, but more importantly, stirring their reaction to both inhumanity and humanity as forces to endow the collective memory with imagination in order to produce a
model of representing the collective memory in modern conditions. In all the artistic models, Hartman choose to video testimony as a narrative mode that combines the oral tradition and modern technology. This combination conveys much more immediacy and authenticity than novels, biographies, autobiographies, and makes what is absent present by stimulating the reader’s and auditor’s imagination. Most importantly, it realizes what Hartman has been making efforts to accomplish in his literary criticism by incorporating the oral text of narrators and the criticism of viewers.

Initially Hartman tried to understand from a psychological point of view the trauma caused by the Holocaust. But later he gives up that cognitive effort and turns to explore it from a literary perspective. In his view, to explore the traumatic event from a cognitive perspective involves the human condition such as psychology, and ascertains a tendency to seek an ultimate interpretation of the trauma as any cognitive research tries to find a biological or psychological meta-mechanism at the bottom. Human passion, agony, affection, and other emotions inherent in human nature are bound to be ignored in this way. In contrast, trauma studies from a literary point of view are not to provide definite answers or curing prescriptions, as literature is intended for knowledge about the past. Instead, it attends to absence, fragmentation, rhetoric, and voice in relation with identity in the speech, even in a negative way.

IV. Video Testimony as Literary Narrative

As testimonial literature, video testimony allows interpretations of diversity to “transmit knowledge in a form that is not scientific and does not coincide with either a totally realistic (as if that were possible) or analytic form of representation”. [11] It bears the following features as a literary narrative.

Firstly, these videos not only serve to make statistics of the deaths from the racial persecution and genocide, but to explore the story of human life itself. Therefore, with a powerful sense of historical mission, this mode shortens the distance between narrative and imagination.

Secondly, the video testimony is to reconstruct the past in a literary language. In the videotapes, survivors and witnesses speak on their own to the present or real-life auditors or listeners instead of speaking as an impersonal narrator through a very neutral persona to a non-existent shadow. This may be more effectively curing. Having different individuals retelling the same event from different perspectives
would be more effective in achieving the purpose of reconstructing that history. Besides, the present narrator is also a character in the narrative, as the intransitive writing proposed by Bart, which means that the writer himself is in the text, not beyond, and he expresses himself directly without any distance between him and the text. Berel Lang suggests that this intransitive writing stands for an impersonal representation opposing literary imagination. Hartman views contrastively. He sees testimony as a personal narrative of literature or a literary construction of the memory. In general, cognition of trauma includes the traumatic event and traumatic memories. The former is the initial encounter that is real, definite, similar to the literal meaning of literary texts, while the latter is similar to the figurative or rhetorical meaning in literature as the traumatized person is so shocked by the traumatic event that he cannot really comprehend what is the event and what is his experience. This mismatch or dislocation between the event and experience is precisely what Hartman highlights as the place where rhetorical language comes to the fore. Any general description or modeling of trauma, therefore, “risks being figurative itself”. With the rhetorical aspect of language coming into full play, the correspondence between the signifier and the signified vanishes, which results in the substitution of signifiers and loss of one single, ultimate, true meaning of the text. Hereto interpretation is necessary. In this sense, the narration of the Holocaust by the survivors and witnesses is one form of interpretation as well as literature because they see nothing and understand nothing in fact when they say “I see” or “I understand”.

Thirdly, the video conveys true emotions impressively. The videotaped testimony of survivors and witnesses is based on their memory of the massacre happening nearly 50 years ago, which was quite beyond their comprehension due to extreme shock. The wide temporal gap, lack of understanding, coupled with subjectivity, the memories are inevitably deformed or distorted, especially when it comes to the date, name, sequence of events that require empirical knowledge. This is irrefutable. Nonetheless, what is equally undeniable is that the video testimony reveals what the traumatized victims feel and experience emotionally about the past events at the present moment through their face-to-face verbal communication with the real-life auditors. And this passes upon to the listeners a sense of absolute reality that is valuable not in its correspondence to the historical details decades of years ago, but in its emotional identification with what the survivors and witnesses convey through memorized imagination. At the same time, each testimony plunges the listener and
audience into the present memory to experience what the survivors and witnesses have experienced at the original scenes of the Holocaust in a way that could emotionally, mentally, and spiritually shorten the distance between them. Comparatively, whether the testimony is fully consistent with the historical events is less important. It is in this sense that Hartman believes that the video testimony suspends distrust, as Coleridge calls for his readers to do in his poem "Ode to Ancient Mariner". In the Holocaust, the victims suffered great fear so much so that it is beyond belief both to the spectator and to the victim himself when situated in such desperation where atrocities kill the impossibility of making any reaction or response. The public wakes up to react only when the victims or others who have heard about it, believe that it has really happened, believe that it could happen again, and believe that this genocide has not dehumanized their conception of human being and human nature do they rise to react.

Finally, the videotapes promote individual reactivity. To those peddlers, homeless women, poor shepherds, blind beggars, wild boys, insane mothers, paralyzed men and others encountered on his way, Wordsworth has displayed tremendous enthusiasm, indicating his ability to respond. This daring responsiveness from Wordsworth inspires Hartman to recognize what testimonial literature can do to extend, deepen and strengthen the awareness and sensitiveness of the public to extreme social events. In Hartman’s reading of the videotext, there are two types of readers: the explicit narrator himself and the implicit reader. The former refers to the narrator itself. On the one hand, highly personal testimony reflects common aspirations of humanity, but this commonality does not mean oneness. The survivors and witnesses are representatives of lower classes who have been deprived of the right to education because of wars and harsh economic conditions have fallen into obscurity in the official history. On the other, their sense of seriously ruptured identity as a victim necessitates their self-acceptance. Therefore, each narrative by the narrator is targeted at another implied and inherent other, as Paul Celan alleged the ghostly "you". This less seeming but necessary "you" or "other" is, by nature, a listener and spiritual partner of the narrator whom he has not be conscious of in a long time even after being released physically. Many survivors are still kept in captivity of the shadows cast by the darkness spiritually. Then each of the survivors and witnesses play three roles: the narrator, the character and the listener.
Although different memories surround the same event, the response triggered is far more diversified and complex than novel writing by virtue of the large number of victims. Hartman recognizes the value of video testimony with regard to this as he understands from the beginning “educational value of recording survivors, as well as bystanders to the event, and other relevant people, on video” and has been thinking a lot about “the medium of video, and the Holocaust, so these two matters came together.”[13]

V. Conclusion

For Hartman, the forms of non-realistic fiction and empirical history on the Holocaust may make readers feel like a close observer of the event or even sympathize with it, but both of them cannot effectively cover the complexity of the massacre. With view to this, he chooses to videotape the testimony of survivors and witnesses. As a more individualized approach, the video not only involves a wide range and a large number of citizens, but most importantly, it is characterized by visual, auditory, emotional, imaginary authenticity and enriched reactivity. Hartman believes that traumatic memory in the form of oral testimony is a literary representation that perfectly fulfills the tasks of cultural heritage, intellectual commitment and moral obligation unrealized satisfactorily in the past few decades of Holocaust studies. This, according to Hartman, revealingly exposes the extreme cruelty lurking in the dark depths of human nature and avoids the danger of it being appropriated culturally. What Hartman expects his studies on the Holocaust to do is to repolish humanity for both moral and political lessons that has been heavily dimmed by the massacre over the years.

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Feng Wang, Ph.D., professor at School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications. Her research focuses on contemporary literary theories, Geoffrey Hartman’s thoughts on literary criticism in particular. Her most recent publication includes a paper entitled “Literary Criticism as Midrash: Geoffrey Hartman and the Jewish Exegesis” in Foreign Literature Review and a monograph entitled Geoffrey Hartman and His Literary Criticism published by Chinese Social Sciences Publishing House.