

**From:**

BRUNO ARICH-GERZ

**Mittelbau-Dora: American and German  
Representations of a Nazi  
Concentration Camp**

Literature, Visual Media and the Culture of Memory  
from 1945 to the Present

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In 1945, U.S. Americans liberated the Nazi concentration camp complex of »Mittelbau-Dora«, and retrieved tons of intact rocket technology from the nearby »Mittelwerke« factory. Today, an astounding mix of first-hand memoirs, biographies and false survivor tales, novels and theater plays, Hollywood movies and newsreel footage testify to the role the U.S.A. have played with regard to »Mittelbau-Dora«, and vice versa. This book provides the first comprehensive analysis of these textual and visual representations, and juxtaposes them to publications by German eyewitnesses, local researchers and academic historians, and experts in cultural memory.

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An earlier version of the last chapters of Part II (76-92) has appeared as "Cato Jaramillo's (Un-)True Story' of Holocaust Survival" in *ZAA (Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik)*, see also Arich-Gerz 2007. Reprint with permission by ZAA. The "Introduction" contains elements, translated into English, from "Darstellungen von Dora. Thomas Pynchons *Gravity's Rainbow* im Spannungsfeld von fiktionalen, historiographischen und erinnerungsbasierten Repräsentationen des Konzentrationslagers *Mittelbau-Dora*" in *arcadia* (see Herman/Arich-Gerz 2004).

## Introduction

A minor Nazi concentration camp compared to Buchenwald, Dachau, Flossenbürg or the one located in Auschwitz, *Mittelbau-Dora* existed for roundabout twenty months between the late summer of 1943 and April 1945. Established after the Allied air raid against the hi-tech development and production center of the Nazi-German V-2 “retaliation weapons” in Peenemünde, it soon expanded from a single camp – “Dora,” originally a satellite camp of Buchenwald – into a fully fledged network of concentration camps. In the end, the complex consisted of roundabout thirty-five sites the characteristics of which were SS terror, miserable living conditions for their approximately 60,000 inmates resulting in a sum total of 20,000 dead, and forced labor under similarly catastrophic conditions. Spreading over the entire Harz region, the camps were peopled by mainly political and criminal prisoners, the vast majority of them males, from the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia in the East of Europe, and from France, Belgium and the Netherlands in the West, to name the nationalities of the largest groups of inmates. In addition, numerous political opponents of the Nazi regime from Germany and representatives of what the Nazis considered “racially inferior” ethnias – Jews, many of them from Hungary, Sinti and Roma – were deported to the “Dora” main camp, the second and third-biggest camps of Ellrich and Harzungen and other, usually smaller ones. In April 1945, U.S. troops liberated “Dora,” Ellrich, Harzungen – all of them located near or, in the case of the ill-famous *Boelcke Kaserne*, in the city of Nordhausen – as well as the more remote satellite camps. At that time, the SS had evacuated many of these camps, and had sent most of their inmates on the notorious death marches. Columns of increasingly emaciated prisoners were once again deported to concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen or Oranienburg, partly in cattle cars and partly on foot, guarded by heavily armed SS personnel and exposed to the risk of getting shot if they fell behind. Other prisoner transports did not reach their destination: some of them were liberated by the ad-

vancing troops, another was driven into a field barn near Gardelegen north of the Harz mountains before the building was set on fire, killing more than one thousand concentration camp inmates on April 13.

Camps names, figures and a cursory historical sketch necessarily give an only futile and insufficient – if indispensable – first impression of the *Mittelbau-Dora* camp complex. Background information in the form of research, historical and other, must be consulted in order to round off the picture. Efforts of this kind have in the present case been undertaken ever since 1947, when William J. Aalmans prepared a small *Booklet with a Brief History of the 'Dora'-Nordhausen Labor-Concentration Camps* for the trial against former camp officials, SS men and other individuals who had been involved in the crimes committed in the camp complex (Aalmans 1947).



Illus. 1: Judges and officials at the “Dora”-Nordhausen war crimes trial, commenced on 7 August 1947 at Camp Dachau (National Archives, Washington)

Another extremely valuable contribution, originally published for a North-American audience too, are Michael J. Neufeld’s studies, in particular his 1995 book *The Rocket and the Reich*. From the perspective of a historian of technology, this book reconstructs the Nazi German rocket program from its beginnings under amateur conditions to the large-scale efforts taken at the Peenemünde Army Research Center under General-Major Walter Dornberger and technical director Wernher von Braun which culminated in

the development of the Aggregat 4 (or A-4), the first supersonic ballistic rocket. Neufeld gives ample room to the “move underground” (Neufeld 1995: 197ff) of the entire rocket production after the bombing of the Peenemünde facilities in August 1943 by clarifying, firstly, the decision to relocate the armament production to the “tunnels near the small city of Nordhausen in Thuringia” which had previously been used for storing lubricants and oil, and which now became “the location for the primary A-4 factory. That facility would soon be called the Mittelwerk (‘Central Works’), a deliberately vague allusion to its geographical position in Germany” (202). At once and secondly, Neufeld establishes the context for the foundation of the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps – with “Mittel” in *Mittelbau* again indicating their location in the center of the Reich – and effectively points at the entanglement, deplorably often muffled in other historical sketches of “the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era,” of the top rocket engineers in the systematic exploitation of forced laborers before von Braun, Dornberger and a selected number of rocketry experts were brought to the United States as “Beutedeutsche” (booty Germans). “The whole story of Mittelwerk and its prisoners was to be obscured as much as possible,” Neufeld concludes, “because it would besmirch Army rocket development. Indeed, from the very end of the war, if not before, the Peenemünders had divorced themselves from any responsibility for slave labor” (270).

As a side effect of Neufeld’s groundbreaking study, therefore, the ordeals suffered by the *Mittelbau-Dora* prisoners were put back on the map, and brought to the attention of a larger public in the United States. As such, it prolongs and continues a development begun by Tom Bower (1987) or Linda Hunt (1985 and 1991), who had cast critical light on the person of Wernher von Braun in the 1980s. On the cisatlantic side among the surviving internees, Neufeld moreover helped to make known their standpoint by providing forewords to the American edition of the memoirs by Yves Béon, *Planet Dora* (Neufeld 1997) and André Sellier’s *History of the Dora Camp* (Neufeld 2003).

As yet not translated into English but nevertheless extremely insightful historical inspections, the book-length studies by German researchers such as Manfred Bornemann (1994), Joachim Neander (1997 and, in a condensed version, 2000) or the previous GDR publication by Erhard Pachaly and Kurt Pely (1990) further elaborate the internal, organisational structure of the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps. Presumably the most important – and most up-to-date – publication of this kind is however *Produktion des Todes*



(Production of Death) of 2001 in which Jens-Christian Wagner, the present director of the *KZ-Gedenkstätte Mittelbau-Dora* memorial, supplies a historical in-depth analysis of the (mis)use, planned by the Nazi officials right from the start, of the internees for the purpose of establishing a system of weapon production that was supposed to help win a war which had objectively already been lost. Consciously calculating the loss of lives among the forced labor prisoners, Wagner claims, the Nazis had set up *Mittelbau-Dora* in a vain effort of changing the course of the war; as such, the camps in the Harz area had been paradigmatic for the entire “late period” of concentration camp foundations in the Third Reich. Frantic and absolutely unrealistic schemes of increasing the efficiency of German terror weapons had ruled the entire idea – and had actually legitimized the existence – of the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps, which began with the transport of 107 prisoners from Buchenwald to the underground facilities near Nordhausen on August 27, 1943. Wagner describes the camp-internal mechanism of “mobile selection:” the systematic exploitation of the physical capacities of the internees down to a pre-mortal state of utter exhaustion resulting in their continuous downgrading from labor details to, ultimately, the dying camp (*Sterbelager*) of the Boelcke Kaserne (Wagner 2001: 359-500). Apart from that, the study sheds critical light on the civil population around the camps that must have been well aware of (and in various cases even benefited from) the camps in their direct vicinity, regardless of what they were willing to admit afterwards (501-74). Of great(er) importance is Wagner’s detailed and well backed-up analysis of the forced laborers’ division into construction and production details which effectively undermines the long-living myth of *Mittelbau-Dora* as primarily a “Raketen-KZ,” or concentration camps established exclusively for the production of rockets. While a mere twenty percent of the total prisoner population was actually forced to work in construction details and assembled the V-2 supersonic rocket weapon and the subsonic V-1 buzz bomb or the various aircrafts produced in the “Mittelwerke,” the majority of the internees had to engage in the so-called “Baukommandos,” or construction details: *Mittelbau-Dora*, in other words, was a concentration camp complex whose prisoners mainly had to work in the further construction of underground facilities, requiring excavation work, or infrastructural projects such as railway lines or the building of barracks in the newly founded satellite camps.

Much as Neufeld's, Wagner's and, despite its lack of temporal distance to the occurrences, also Aalmans' analyses can nowadays be seen as pre-eminent landmarks in the historiography of the *Mittelbau-Dora*, they are not the only ones to invoke this past referent. Like with any other Nazi concentration camp in or outside Germany, a wide variety of more or less extensive memoirs exist which from a first-hand perspective relate the subjective experiences of camp-surviving internees. Remarkably many of these survivor narratives are of French, Belgian or Dutch origin; another substantial number was produced by German political inmates whose accounts have throughout the time of the GDR's existence enjoyed great recognition.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, there are a mere handful of book-length memoirs published by survivors from the central or Eastern European countries, and even fewer have – with Boris Pahor's *Nekropola* of 1967 as a notable exception – been translated into German or English.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, there are practically no English translations of accounts written by Sinti and Roma representatives of the *Mittelbau-Dora* survivors nor, with the exception of Jean Améry's works or Siegfried Halbreich's and Abraham Biderman's recollections, ex-

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- 1 One of the earliest testimonies, Edgard vande Castele from Belgium finished and published *Ellrich. Leben und Tod in einem Konzentrationslager* as early as in 1946. Other Belgian publications include Samijn (1995) and the collection of eye-witness reports anthologized by d'Hainaut and Somerhausen, *Dora 1943-1945* (1992). These memory accounts are in Flemish while those by survivors from the Netherlands are normally written in Dutch. An exception to this rule are Dutch citizen Guido Zembsch-Schreve's "Wartime Memoirs" *Pierre Lalande: Special Agent* that were translated into English (1996). Published recollections by former camp prisoners from France include the above-mentioned Yves Béon, Jean Michel's influential 1975 memoir *Dora. The Nazi Concentration Camp where Modern Space Technology was Born and 30,000 Prisoners Died* (English translation 1980), Jean Mialet's *La Haine et le Pardon. Le Déporté* (1997), Paul Rassnier's blatantly revisionist *Le Mensonge d'Ulysse* of 1959, translated into English in 1978, and most recently Pierre Berg's *Scheisshaus Luck. Surviving the Unspeakable in Auschwitz and Dora* (2008, with Brian Brock). The memory accounts by German communist internees such as those by Karl Semmler will be dealt with in greater detail in one of the subsequent chapters. A testimony by a non-communist is Kochheim's of 1952 (Kochheim 2003).
  - 2 The German translation of Pahor's memoirs, *Nekropolis*, sticks to the title of the original. The translation into English, published in the United States in 1995, is entitled *Pilgrim Among the Shadows*.

haustive reports of the ordeals suffered in the camps by Jewish former internees.<sup>3</sup> Despite the deplorable under-representation in terms of translated survivor accounts, *Mittelbau-Dora* however looms large in the context of U.S. American representations of the Nazi concentration camps. Clearly, this has to do with the mentioned connections, most of them dating from after April 1945, between the camps, the adjacent “Mittelwerke” factory and the United States of America: the liberation of the camp precincts by units of the 104th Infantry Division, their shocking discovery of the atrocities committed in the name of the self-declared Aryan master race, and the *translatio imperii* of rocket technology and the engineers around von Braun from Nazi Germany to the United States.

#### SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

##### COMPARATIVE, INTERDISCIPLINARY, “BETWEEN”

Apart from the few translated documents by first-hand witnesses, the specifically American representations include a wide variety of material: text-based invocations of the camps such as (no longer memoirs or autobiographical testimonies but) biographies produced and published in the United States, wannabe survivor tales, thriller fiction by popular writers such as Erich Segal, James Michener and Joseph Kanon, or widely acknowledged high literature such as *Gravity’s Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon and, last but not least, filmic and photographic footage shot immediately after the liberation of the camps as well as Hollywood movies. This highly diverse package of *Mittelbau-Dora*-related representations will be approached in three methodical and conceptual ways.

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3 Améry spent a mere few weeks in *Mittelbau-Dora*, and mentions his experiences in these camps only in passing in his publicist work. Halbreich’s *Before – During – After* of 1991 (last reprint in 2000) includes an exhaustive account of the evacuation transport from Auschwitz to Nordhausen, and relates the liberation of the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps. Biderman’s book-length autobiography entitled *The World of my Past* appeared in Australia in 1995 (Biderman 1998). Hans Frankenthal’s *Verweigerte Rückkehr* (Denied Return) ranks pride of place among the testimonies by German Jewish deportees who arrived in the “Dora” main camp from Auschwitz (1999). Outstanding among the accounts by the racially persecuted Sinti and Roma are Ewald Hanstein’s *Meine hundert Leben* (My one hundred lives, 2004) and Otto Rosenberg’s *Das Brennglas* (The burning glass, 1998).

First, they will be integrated in a distinctly comparative setup through an extension of the scope to textual documents written by Germans: reports and memoirs by German camp survivors, histori(ographi)cal works dating back to the GDR period or contributions by local historians. While parts of the inspected material of (East) German and American origin can well be analyzed in a truly comparative manner – for example, the use of heroic narratives in the respective documents from the Cold War period – others do not allow for a facile juxtaposition like this. Here, a reasoning is instead demanded that lets one item (say an American one) substantially comment on, (dis)prove, subvert, unmask or otherwise put into perspective another (say, a statement from a German source): a case in point will be the recent discovery of U.S. film footage which, by giving evidence of the lootings in the freshly conquered town of Nordhausen, effectively questions the opinion instigated by local researchers in the GDR and afterwards that the majority of the plunderers were liberated prisoners from the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps and American GIs.

Second, the following analyzes embed the various American and German representations of the camps into currently circulating models of memory culture, especially the concept of “cultural memory” developed by the German theorists Jan and Aleida Assmann; another source of inspiration is Lawrence Langer’s close reading of survivor interviews conducted at Yale and collected in the *Fortunoff Video Archive*. By relying on – yet not over-identifying with – these positions, the following elaborations thus challenge the more established academic disciplines which claim to have a stake (in fact, a primary stake) when it comes to approaching a more than sixty year old referent. Instead, the referent of *Mittelbau-Dora* and its fact-oriented or documentary, memory-based or literary representations will methodically be approached in a positively eclectic interdisciplinary way. Assuming that these representations are in individually varying degrees combinations of certain writing modes – the “historiographical,” the “fictional” and, in the case of first-hand survivor accounts, a mode that may tentatively be termed “traumatographical” – they become analyzable within a “three-pole tension field”<sup>4</sup> (Herman/Arich-Gerz 2004: 391) of academic disciplines comprising the historical sciences, literary studies and – due to the presently booming area of trauma theories in cultural studies – psychoanalysis. A case in point for the usefulness of this deliberately

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4 “innerhalb eines damit dreipoligen Spannungsfeldes.”

flexible methodical approach are the activities of two *Mittelbau-Dora* survivors: engaging as historians, they effectively challenge the idea, held by some scholars of cultural studies, that after the memory-shattering experience of the concentration and extermination camps, the concept of trauma excels the existing modes of approaching and “writing” the past. The analysis of memoirs by surviving *Mittelbau-Dora* internees such as Guido Zembsch-Schreve’s *Pierre Lalande* is another case in point. Much as this text seeks to invoke the genre of the heroic tale, it cannot (nor does it wish to) downplay the traumatic nature of the occurrences witnessed in the camps: experienced as events in which the individual was utterly helpless – the square opposite of “heroic” – and overpowered by their intensity still in the moment of narrating them, the painful act of memorizing these events adds a distinctly “traumatographical” element to the account.<sup>5</sup>

The third and actually major conceptual approach to be found in the following analysis has a grammatical conjunction as a hallmark and a common denominator: “between.” Like the disciplinary situation just mentioned – the idea that the representations of *Mittelbau-Dora* can effectively be negotiated by and between three disciplines – the vast majority of survivor accounts and second-hand historical or biographical depictions cannot easily be categorized generically as pure(ly) expressions of heroic survival or, for that matter, as unique and unchallenged hagiographic tales of bravery and an unbroken will to resist the ordeals in the camps. Instead they, too, possess “their Other:” be it an Other of the distinctly unheroic kind as in Zembsch-Schreve’s memoir or, in the era of the Cold War, an ideological opponent which invokes the heroic for its own tenets. The serious literature about *Mittelbau-Dora* must seemingly always be situated between certain genres, as will be shown in the first part of this study. The same can be observed when in the very act of disclosing their inauthenticity, memoirs that fraudulently stake a claim of truth and trustworthiness reveal the characteristics of fairy tales.

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5 Another example of the applicability of the three-pole disciplinary setup to the issue of *Mittelbau-Dora* and its representations takes its cue from Pynchon’s 1973 novel. As Luc Herman and I have suggested, the formal complexity of Pynchon’s narrative can usefully be brought to bear for historiographical depictions of the factual “system of double and multiple assignments” (Neander 1997: 53) [System der Doppel- und Mehrfachunterstellung] characteristic of the SS-governed camp organisation (see Herman/Arich-Gerz 2004: 401-9).

Another intricate grey zone, extensively dealt with in the second part, spans between the much-discussed notions of perpetrators and victims or, more particularly, in the claims for victimhood as articulated by the civilian population belonging to the perpetrator society in the context of Allied city bombings. As the discussion of notions such as “guilt” and “shame” at first demonstrates, the perpetrator-victim distinction proves to be less than clear-cut, but a closer look also reveals that in the case of the air attacks against Nordhausen and the subsequent conquest of the town by U.S. troops, the exculpatory and self-victimizing gestures of the locals have recently been effectively undermined by the mentioned discovery of documentary material from U.S. archives.

The textual and other invocations of the camps’ past are nowadays reaching a stage when living memory successively disappears. As will be sketched at the beginning of the third and last part, the imminent death of the last survivors marks a transition from “communicative” to “cultural” memory. At the *KZ-Gedenkstätte Mittelbau-Dora*, the challenge resulting from the present situation between the two modes of memorizing the occurrences in the Nazi concentration camps has led to a number of efforts. These include the systematic collection of eye-witness interviews, i.e. the media-based preservation of “communicative memory” for future retrieval and use, as well as an intensified concentration on the historical sites themselves which through their memory-infested materiality are going to assume a pre-eminent function for the evocation of the past once the last *Mittelbau-Dora* survivors disappear.

The recording of the interviews and the site-specific activities necessarily take place mainly on location in Nordhausen, which by conversion reduces the “American share” at this point. In order to make up for this, the study ends with an overview of the recent fictional and biography-based representations of *Mittelbau-Dora* in the United States, giving thus an idea of the American approaches to the “threshold situation” between communicative and cultural memory. A curious example is *The Journey of Private Galione* of 2004, in which the author and daughter of the U.S. soldier Galione relates what she recalls from the conversations with her late father, thus vicariously telling the story of the allegedly first American who discovered the “Dora” main camp. If this marks an attempt of inscribing the private past of a family member into the larger history of rocketry and even world politics, the reverence displayed here for Wernher von Braun is unusual and in fact untypical if one compares it to other noteworthy American publica-

tions after 2000. As mentioned, the assessment of both the personalities and achievements of von Braun and other German engineers who emigrated to the United States after World War II has effectively been reviewed ever since the 1980s: a revision that continues to reverberate in popular fiction such as Joseph Kanon's thriller *The Good German*, adapted for the screen by Steven Soderbergh in 2006, or stage plays such as Julia Pascal's "The Woman in the Moon" of 2001. At once, the newly discovered critical interest in the public figure of von Braun re-invokes the other major connection that exists, next to their liberation by units of the 104th Infantry Division nicknamed *Timberwolves*, between the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps and the United States of America.

PROGRAMMATIC AND PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS:  
THE "AMERICANIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST"

In essence, this study inspects the specifically American – or in terms of language use: English – representations and image(s) of *Mittelbau-Dora*: their particular role in depicting this historical referent and their share in framing it. As such, it figures as the first close analysis of the ways in which a specific culture appropriates the past occurrences in the concentration camp complex. In fact, the following considerations on the American or, for that matter, "comparatively" American-and-German representations may in a sense be(come) programmatic. They not only outline and at the same time provide a first example of a new kind of analysis, compared to the so-far existing approaches to *Mittelbau-Dora* which are largely monodisciplinary and, more precisely, historical or historiographical. More than that, this book wishes to encourage other case-specific approaches of this kind: endeavors which have in common the analytical interest in more than six decades of textual and literary, visual and other medially encoded invocations of *Mittelbau-Dora*. These may be in-depth analyzes of Belgian or French ways of (re)presenting the camps which may (or may not) substantiate what Jean-Michel Chaumont calls the prevalence of "a meritocratic system"<sup>6</sup> (Chaumont 1997: 40): a nation-wide recognition, expressed in rituals and acts of commemoration, of the countrymen formerly imprisoned in the Nazi camps who have in the postwar years come to deserve the same merits as the anti-fascist achievements of its military leaders. Conceivable and in fact urgently needed is also a detailed inspection of the seemingly more complicated situation in the former

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6 "un système méritocratique."

Soviet Union, where repatriates from German concentrations camps have up to the present day faced difficulties whenever they tried to point at their own existence as past Nazi camp internees. It goes without saying that another, equally important concern is that of the racially persecuted groups, the Sinti and Roma as well as those internees of Jewish belief.

At the same time, the study reveals that a discussion of the German and American representations exclusively in terms of an “Americanization of the Holocaust” seems problematic. In the field of criticism, this notion was among others propagated by Alvin H. Rosenfeld who in the mid-1990 notes with a critical edge “that for most people [in the United States] a sense of the crimes against the Jews is formed less by the record of events established by professional historians” – he elsewhere explicitly mentions Raul Hilberg’s seminal study *The Destruction of the European Jews* of 1961 – “than it is by individual stories and images that reach us from more popular writers, artists, film directors, television producers, political figures, and the like.” The creation of a nationwide awareness of the Holocaust owes much to “mass culture” and “those forms of communication that comprise the information and entertainment networks of this culture – novels, stories, poems, films, television programs, newspaper and magazine articles, museum exhibitions, etc” (Rosenfeld 1997: 120). For better or worse, examples of this type will be analyzed in this study, too, yet what remains remarkable at this point is that of the examples from mass and consumer culture Rosenberg mentions (Anne Frank’s *Diary* including its stage adaptations, the *Holocaust* TV docudrama of 1978 or Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* of 1994), virtually none contains a hint at the concentration camp complex to be inspected here. If the concept of an “Americanized Holocaust” draws on a typically popularized canon of textual, audiovisual and other key documents, the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps play at best a secondary role.

Seen as a whole, then, Rosenfeld’s diagnosis indirectly points at a blank, especially if one observes that the extinction of the Jewish prisoners continued in the Harz region when the evacuation transports from Auschwitz arrived in the “Dora” main camp in early 1945. At the same time, the tendency to overlook *Mittelbau-Dora* is not only a remarkable feature in mass cultural formats such as film, television or popular literature (exceptions have already been mentioned: Segal’s, Michener’s and recently Kanon’s thriller fictions), but also in the academic approaches to the Holocaust and its appropriation by Americans. A case in point



is a recent critical analysis of American novelist Melvin Jules Bukiet's 1996 novel *After*. Accordingly described as "arguably the most radical Holocaust comedy, an angry satire that displays truly sardonic humor" (Rohr 2006: 245), the critic goes on to characterize the narrative's postmodern features of Bukiet's novel and its intertextual indebtedness to Pynchon's 1973 novel as "Gravity's Rainbow goes KZ" (Rohr 2002: 548), but does not notice (or forgets to mention) that the precursor novel actually contains scenes set in the "Dora" main camp and other passages discussing the inner struggles of the freshly liberated "Dora" survivors.<sup>7</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* in fact does "go KZ," but apparently the concentration camp that Pynchon invokes here falls short of the renown and ill-fame of other such camps.

If the so far existing debates and discussions about the Holocaust in terms of its Americanization seemingly tie in with a tradition of treating *Mittelbau-Dora* as notoriously "forgotten camps" (see Wagner 2003: 458), the very notion itself, Americanization of the Holocaust, by now clearly encompasses more than a mere popularization through mass (media) culture. The emergence of a genuinely American culture of Holocaust remembrance has in the mean stirred intellectual interest as the criticism of Bukiet's *After* shows. Other expressions of this are scientific publication projects – the American translation of Sellier's historical monograph of 2003 is a recent case in point for the specifically *Mittelbau-Dora*-related activities in this field – as well as the academic efforts of establishing and theorizing the Jewish genocide in disciplinary or discursive formats such as Holocaust Studies or trauma theory. Theorizations of this kind have by now well arrived in Europe, too (and so have, of course, Holocaust studies been implemented at numerous universities), which in its turn points at another level of meaning of "Americanization:" no longer the arrival in or importation of the Holocaust to the United States, but now its re-exportation. Whatever the reasons for this tendency of re-adopt-

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7 Luc Herman actually suggests that Pynchon's use of the "Dora" main camp figures as *pars pro toto* for the entirety of Nazi concentration and extermination camps, mildly putting into questions the author's motives for selecting, of all camps, the *Mittelbau-Dora* parent camp: "The choice of Dora labor camp as a metonym for the Nazi concentration-camp system possibly indicates that Pynchon subordinates the fate of the Jewish people to what might be considered his fetish, the Rocket, and yet this camp leads to the most stirring passage of all, Pökler's experience of Dora" (Herman 2008: 112. See also Pynchon 1975: 432f.).

ing the role models from North America on the cisatlantic side – some may think of catchwords such as Disneyfication or coca-colonization here while Jacob Heilbrunn aptly, if polemically, states in an article about Norman Finkelstein’s provocative *Holocaust Industry* theses of 2000<sup>8</sup> that “today, the academic level in Germany is unquestionably lower than in the U.S.A.” (Heilbrunn 2001: 89) – again it does not well, or easily, apply to the case of *Mittelbau-Dora*. Two examples may help to illustrate this: first, the general applicability of tenets from trauma theory, understood as a cultural paradigm propagated by critics such as Cathy Caruth, which aspires to offer a new approach to a dreadful past and its memory-specific late effects as experienced by concentration camp internees, and which as such positions itself in diametrical opposition to existing standards in the historical sciences. Second, and to begin with, the comparison between the politics of recently founded U.S. museums and memorials on the one hand, and the memorial in Nordhausen on the other.

### MUSEUM POLITICS IN COMPARISON: WASHINGTON AND NORDHAUSEN

According to Hilene Flanzbaum another “touchstone of Americanization” (Flanzbaum 1999: 4), the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* in Washington was opened in 1993. For this museum just as for numerous other memorials, Americanizing the Holocaust in the sense of developing and inventing other forms of presentation than those in the European or, for that matter, German context was for various reasons mandatory. As James E. Young observes, “American memorials are necessarily removed from the ‘topography of terror.’ Where European memorials located in situ often suggest themselves rhetorically as the extension of events they would commemorate, those in America must gesture abstractly to a past removed in both time and space.” The establishing of memorials in the United States, remote from the original sites of the historical occurrences, is there-

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8 In *The Holocaust Industry*, Finkelstein criticizes among other things the all too consumption-oriented appropriation of the *Shoa*’ in the United States by – this is another main target of his criticism – Jewish American elites and V.I.P. survivors at the cost of numerous less prominent victims. In the ensuing debates professional historians soon pointed at the unscholarly approach to the issue, and publicists remarked the allegedly anti-Semitic underpinnings of Finkelstein’s theses.

fore based on altogether different pre-assumptions: "The meaning in American memorials is not always as 'self-evident' as that suggested at the camps, places of deportation, or destroyed synagogues. In this sense, American memorials seem to be anchored not so much in history as in the ideals that generated them in the first place" (Young 1999: 71). In the case of the Washington museum, these are primarily "the nation's own ideals, its pluralist tenets" which stand in diametrical opposition to the outspokenly anti-democratic Nazi regime, its racism and politics of repression: "the Holocaust memorial defines what it means to be American by graphically illustrating what it means not to be American" (73). Clearly the requirements resulting from this for a museum or memorial in Germany would be difficult to meet: how to do the splits, in museological work, between what it means to be German by illustrating what it means not to be German if the nation's past has shown that "not to be German" had between 1933 and 1945 been commonly accepted and even euphorically welcomed by many of its citizens? Surely there is a way to make this work – but this would either include a complete split with and denial of the past or, as in the museologico-ideological attempts undertaken in the GDR, a necessarily not all-inclusive and therefore partial emphasis of the German antifascist resistance during the Nazi regime.

Initially, the museologico-educational design of the institution in Washington sought the visitors' confrontation with a repressive state system such as Nazism by at once transposing them into the role and position, to be re-experienced empathically, of one of the victims who had to endure extreme hardships while the oppressors constantly negated them any human dignity. Critically, Young goes on to describe the effects of "the interactive personal identity cards initially issued to visitors by the museum" (76) which at the same time served as a personalized guided tour through the museum's exhibits. "While the 'experiential mode' has come into increasing favor in museums, it is also a mode that encourages a certain critical blindness on the part of the visitors," Young concludes: "This distance [between the actual reality of the Holocaust and today's necessarily retrospective approach to it] is our preeminent reality now, no less than the Holocaust was the victims' preeminent reality then."

Thus flooded with emotional (over-)identification and a sense of piety, the visitors are led to conceive the exhibitions "as if it were a victim's Holocaust experience" (77) without considering the specific historico-political circumstances which had contributed

to its coming into being in the first place – and which could theoretically reoccur at any time. By contrast, the museological design of the *Mittelbau-Dora* memorial and its prize-winning exhibition seeks to preclude any over-identification of this kind, and instead promotes a contextualizing – as well as a less personalized and more detached – form of introducing the past:

In Germany and internationally, a common idea of history has established itself throughout the last few years which in a very general sense mourns the victims of 20<sup>th</sup> century violence without pointing out the causes of that violence, nor its consequences. Exhibitions about the past concentration camps should respond to this type of (re)presentation, which largely aims at a historically undifferentiating piety, by focussing instead on historical re-contextualization<sup>9</sup> (Wagner 2007: 7).

Distinctly not employing the “experiential mode” Young mentions as a key element in the early museum politics of the Washington institution, the Nordhausen memorial instead designs its exhibition in the tradition, more deeply-rooted in European history of thought, of enlightened reflection on the multifarious facets that finally led to the disastrous seizure of power by the Nazis. Here, visitors are not invited to re-enact the experiences of former camp inmates and their at that time necessarily limited ability to inspect and assess the broader political implications of their internment. Though numerous exhibits focus on individual prisoners and their specific ethnic, national or religious backgrounds, the visitors are in addition enabled to view their deportations and imprisonments within the broader framework of the time: the frantic efforts of a totalitarian regime to win the war nevertheless, propaganda minister Goebbels’ ill-famous “Total War” declaration in front of a cheering crowd of German citizens, the promise of the “wonder weapons” as opposed to their actual ineffectiveness, or the involvement of German top engineers in the development of these arms. At the same time, means are taken to prevent visitors from confounding the events from a sixty-five year past on the

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9 “Es scheint sich seit einigen Jahren in Deutschland und vielleicht auch international immer stärker ein öffentliches Geschichtsbild durchzusetzen, das ganz allgemein die Opfer der Gewalt im 20. Jahrhundert betrauert, ohne auf Ursachen und Folgen hinzuweisen. Dieser Darstellung, die sich auf historisch undifferenzierte Pietät beschränkt, muss in Ausstellungen zur KZ-Geschichte [...] die historische Rekontextualisierung entgegen gestellt werden.”

locale outside the museum with the perspective of today, as the third part will illustrate in greater detail.

If there is a museological Americanization of the Holocaust too, therefore, which materializes (or has at one point been employed) at the United States *Holocaust Memorial Museum*, the exhibition politics of the *KZ-Gedenkstätte Mittelbau-Dora* sets a different course. Through its emphasis on the historical context and the prevention of visits in the fashion of re-enactments of victim experiences, this politics at the same time corresponds with a specific master concept of approaching and appropriating the past: that of its stable referentiality and objective existence, which in turn is guaranteed rather in the form of “hard evidence” material such as historical documents than in the oftentimes unreliable minds and memories of eye-witnesses. Trauma theory, a concept transposed to the field of cultural studies in the 1990s and at the same time the second example from an Americanized Holocaust remembrance, approaches, appropriates and actually reclaims the past in a different way.

#### TRAUMA AND HISTORY: DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND *MITTELBAU-DORA* SURVIVOR PRACTICE

When the critical positions of Francis Fukuyama and Hayden White encouraged historians to question certain so far taken-for-granted aspects of their academic profession in the 1970s and 1980s, they were led to reflect critically on the issue of how they do what they do (and when), focusing thus on the implications that underlie any (re-)presentation of history: how (past) history and the (more present) act of “writing” history – the daily task of any historian – are in fact related. The necessity to reflect more intensively on the intricate relationship of the historical facts on the one hand, and its narrativization on the other cannot however one-sidedly favor the present act of writing history over the given historical referent.

The disappearance of the past is, in the case of trauma, not at stake either. The accessibility of that past is however theorized in a completely different way. Thus the storage device in which information about the past is encoded – the historical “source,” to use the regular historians’ terminology – is the living memory of the surviving trauma victim. More or less strongly subject to change, the memory of a traumatized survivor-witness thus differs from archival records and other “sources” e.g. paper-based documents which preserve and, if consulted, yield invariably the same encoded content. In the case of eye-witnesses such as for-

mer prisoners of concentration camps, the past events that occurred at these “traumatic sites” (A. Assmann) are moreover inscribed in their memories in such a way that their retrieval happens, for them, under very specific conditions. The past intrudes their present in a characteristically surprising and overwhelming way; the recollections occur mostly involuntarily and are of a typically painful quality, triggering the notorious post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (PTSD) such as “flashbacks, nightmares and other reexperiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hypervigilance” (Leys 2000: 2). The overwhelming quality of these sudden re-experiences does in a certain way mirror the overwhelming dimension of the past events that had caused the traumatization, which in turn leads to the characteristic temporal structure inherent in the psychopathological phenomenon of trauma: “the event,” Cathy Caruth explains, “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 1995: 4). If the individual’s memory does not assimilate or integrate the event at the time of its (past) occurrence, this special constituent of “trauma” also accounts for – or can be seen to account for – an important feature of many reports by traumatized persons: their fragmentary character and appearance of discontinuity and inconsistency. Whatever the individual reasons for this often-noted feature (some suspect an act of more or less conscious repression behind it): when measured against the standards of their discipline, historians frequently regard reports by traumatized eye-witnesses as not sufficiently reliable “sources” Jens-Christian Wagner, in his discussion of the numerous reports by surviving prisoners of the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps, thus diagnoses a “problem of representativeness” in connection with the *Häftlingsberichte* (prisoner reports):

One of the limitations stems from the psychic and moral processes of working-through and the self-definition of the reporting persons’ identity. [...] Quite frequently, gaps of memory are being compensated, or filled up, with screen and false memories, which can in turn decisively reduce the testimonial value of the report <sup>10</sup> (Wagner 2001: 33).

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10 “Eine [...] Eingrenzung ergibt sich [...] aus den psychisch-moralischen Verarbeitungsformen der Berichtenden und schließlich aus der daraus folgenden Definition der eigenen Identität. [...] Die resultierenden Erinnerungslücken werden häufig komplementär durch unbewußte Erinnerungstäuschungen und -verfälschungen ausgefüllt, was den Aussagegewert des Berichtes entscheiden schmälern kann.”

Cathy Caruth's reflections on the nature of trauma picks up the ball at this point, and in a way makes a virtue of necessity when she takes the gaps of memory Wagner mentions and, resulting from these, the issue of the problematic reference to the past events – the unclear, at times doubtful and often unintelligible retrieval of these in the traumatized mind – as the very starting point for her own theory of "history" Caruth recognizes

the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma [...] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not (Caruth 1996: 11).

At first sight, this sounds promising for the science of history, challenged as it still is by the theoretical discussions about Fukuyama's *posthistoire* and Hayden White's insistence on the *emplotment* that underlies any writing of history. Especially Caruth's remark that her theory does not wish to eliminate "history" as a well-conceived concept for modelling the past will draw the attention of representatives of the historical discipline. Yet a closer inspection reveals the very conditions to which "the past" is being re-assigned to the historical discipline. Caruth explicitly questions its approachability by "immediate understanding" Instead the past transforms into an item which is by definition encapsulated and encrypted, and which for that reason forecloses any direct access by the historian. It is documented in a kind of mnemo-archive which due to the impact of trauma remains categorically inaccessible for the historian: "For history to be a history of trauma means" according to Caruth, "that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (18).

In her in-depth analysis of Caruth's theory, Sigrid Weigel focuses critically on the pre-suppositions and premises on which this new model under the sign of, now, trauma, essentially hinges. While she acknowledges on the one hand that "history, disrupted as it has recently been by so many and so far-reaching traumata, cannot possibly be conceived in traditional terms such as those that inform the concepts of social history, the history of mentality or that which highlights the mere succession of events," she on the other hand recognizes an "unease about the concomitant implosion of the notion of history as such" resulting from the "break-in of psychoanalytical concepts and categories into the home field of historical theory" The notion of history gets ab-

sorbed by that of trauma, Weigel concludes: Caruth, she goes on to say, reformulates “‘history’ as ‘trauma’”<sup>11</sup> (Weigel 1999: 52) when she presents the “inaccessibility of the historical fact as the only form of history”<sup>12</sup> (55).

For Weigel, Caruth’s theoretical project thus seeks to recode the historical discourse: what serves as the basis of evidence is, now, precisely that which is not evident – that which remains precluded – in history. By consequence, the primacy of historical interest will shift: for Caruth, the main focus is no longer on the factuality of what happened, but on the factual existence of the traumatic memory with its corollaries of fragmentariness and unreliability. The just-mentioned unease about this attitude stimulates Weigel to assume an alternative position. Combining a psychological element with a more traditionally historical one which takes the factuality of the past occurrences for granted, her position highlights the transmission of “history into the genealogy of generations” – an item which remains, after all, accessible to (and for) a post-Holocaust observer:

The concept of the transgenerational after all recurs on a concept by means of which collective traumata become historical, i.e., by means of which they enter history. Here, they do not break in so much – thus marking a caesura or a disturbance – but, quite to the contrary, figure as a continuation of the unspeakable, surfacing as they do in belated concretizations and psychological object formations<sup>13</sup> (76).

Weigel’s own position with its characteristic re-orientation toward the observable ties in with a pre-eminent field of studies which has for the first time been mapped out in a 1982 publication, *Generations of the Holocaust*. In his book-length analysis of videotaped eye-witness reports collected in the Fortunoff Archives in

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11 “Eine von so zahlreichen und weitreichenden Traumata gebrochene Geschichte kann nicht mehr in einem tradierten Begriff, sei es dem einer Ereignis-, Sozial- oder Mentalitätsgeschichte, gefaßt werden. [...] Unbehagen über eine sich dabei ereignende Implosion des Geschichtsbegriffs [...] Einbruch psychoanalytischer Bedeutungsfiguren und Untersuchungskategorien in die Geschichtstheorie [...] ‚Geschichte‘ als ‚Trauma‘.”

12 “Unzugänglichkeit des Historischen als *einzig*e Form der Geschichte.”

13 “Beschreibt nicht vielmehr das Transgenerationelle gerade jene Figur, mit der kollektive Traumata historisch werden, d.h. in Geschichte eingehen, - und zwar nicht mehr als Einbruch, Zäsur oder Störung, sondern als Fortsetzung des Unausgesprochenen in nachträglichen Vergegenständlichungen bzw. Objektbildungen.”



Yale, Lawrence Langer likewise refers to the problematic issue of growing up as a child of concentration camp survivors. At the beginning, Langer's study typically invokes the daughter of *Mittelbau-Dora* survivors Max and Lorna B. who, on being asked how her growing-up looked like in the light of the ordeals that her parents had to endure, passes the laconic reply: "You can't grow up in a household like this without having many, many strengths, first of all" (Langer 1991: x).

The daughter's statement exemplifies the transgenerational transmission of traumatic memories resulting from the past events that occurred in the *Mittelbau-Dora* camps. In the very act of articulating these familial experiences in front of the camera, determined as they were by Max and Lorna B.'s painful recollections, the woman's report indirectly highlights the longevity of her parents' overwhelmingly intensive recollections, affecting as they do even her own way of memorizing. At the same time, she externalizes these memories of hers, and turns them into an object to be consulted and a subject of analysis: Langer does precisely this: analyze them, in his interpretation of the videotaped testimonies. The interview setting, the request to remember the past and the selection of the interviewees (most of them first or second generation survivors of the Holocaust) may contribute to the trauma-governed mode of narrating and thus representing the past events which can be detected in most of the externalized memories collected in the Fortunoff files.

#### ANDRÉ SELLIER AND ALBERT VAN HOEY

Much as this example seems to support, again, Caruth's idea of reducing "history" to the traumatic memorizing of events from the context of the greatest caesura of the 20th century, it cannot easily be generalized. Other *Mittelbau-Dora* survivors have actually tackled the difficult task of dealing with the traumatizing occurrences of their own past in the concentration camps in a discernibly other way. For André Sellier and Albert van Hoey, for instance, the historical reality of what happened is clearly not of minor importance than the likewise factual existence of a traumatic substratum which characterizes their memories of the time they had to spend in the concentration camps. Especially when measured against Caruth's presumptions, it is notable that Sellier's monograph *A History of the Dora Camp* figures as a widely acknowledged, extensive "historical study [...] written by a historian, who also happens to have been a Häftling, a 'prisoner,' in the camp, where his identity was reduced to the number 39570" (Sellier

2003: 3). Albert van Hoey's historical sketches are likewise borne by a deep-rooted historical interest: although the Belgian's endeavor is certainly less ambitious than the Frenchman's "lucid analysis of the events of the past" (7) in the "Dora" camp, he exceeds Sellier by the sheer number of articles he publishes in the self-edited *Dora Bulletin*, the official organ of the Belgian *Amicale des Prisonniers Politiques de Dora*. Quite obviously, it is the shared interest in the past as history that connects the academic historian Sellier and van Hoey, who explicitly conceives of himself as a hobby-historian of the Nazi era<sup>14</sup> and chronicler of the survivors' activities, and who signs each of his contributions with his prisoner number 75623.

The example of the two historians seems to prove that any assumption which assigns an absolute primacy to "trauma" in the context of the historical past cannot easily be upheld. A question which more or less directly results from this interim diagnosis is that of the very function of these historiographical activities for the survivors of concentration camps.

One may with some right speculate that the function – at least one such possible function – is that of providing relief for the individual. Findings from psychoanalytical practice seem to corroborate this. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, in her article "From concretism to metaphor" defines the first term, 'concretism,' with regard to the traumatizations of survivors of concentration and extermination camps and their children: "Many patients conceive of what they report in a thing-like manner, thus precisely not as something imagined, a thought or remembrance; for them, it lacks the quality of a sign nor does it have the flexible character of a fantasy – instead it possesses a peculiarly inflexible, concretistic quality"<sup>15</sup> (Grubrich-Simitis 1984: 5). As Grubrich-Simitis elsewhere specifies, the hardships endured during their time in the camps has significantly reduced the victims' later capacity to use and create metaphors – to think in metaphorical terms – as well as to differentiate between the past, the present and the future. Her conclusion for the psychoanalytic approach to these survivor-patients:

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14 See for example van Hoey's article on Martin Bormann, in: *Dora. Bulletin Trimestriel de l'Amicale des Prisonniers Politiques de Dora* 2001/1, 22-7. Albert van Hoey has moreover been elected chairperson of the *Advisory Board for the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp*.

15 "Die Patienten fassen, das, was sie mitteilen, oft dinghaft auf, also nicht als etwas Vorgestelltes, Gedachtes, Erinnerunges; es hat für sie nicht Zeichen-, nicht beweglichen Phantasiecharakter, sondern eine eigentümlich unverrückbare, konkretistische Qualität."

“If there is a more or less generalizable directive for the treatment of [these] patients at all, my suggestion would be: from concretism to metaphor”<sup>16</sup> (15).

Notions such as metaphor or (the character of a) fantasy might at first sight suggest that the aim of psychotherapy consists of a heightening of the imaginary and/or fictional element in the patients’ narratives. This is of lesser importance, though, compared to a strengthening of the ego-function for the sake of keeping in check the concrete threat of destruction which had been a hallmark in the concentration camps, and which has evidently preserved its concretistic quality in the minds and memories of the traumatized victims. Another pre-eminent aim is the restitution of the more general capability of transforming the events, concrete and concretistic as they appear and re-appear in the traumatized person’s memory, into a coherent pattern (or tackling the traumatic memory by substituting for it a narrative memory, as Pierre Janet would call it). Following that line, Dori Laub – another psychoanalyst specialized on the treatment of traumatized survivors of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps – states: “Part of the retrieval [of ‘lost memories’ due to the impact of trauma] is the (re-)construction of a psychic representation in an inner, post-traumatic landscape of emptiness and destruction – the creation, in other words, of a coherent narrative where so far no such narrative had existed”<sup>17</sup> (Laub 2000: 871). Pointing at the importance of the “emphatic relation [between analyst and patient] in the therapeutic setting”<sup>18</sup> (891), Laub stresses the “validity of the (re-)creative process and its fundamental function for the persistence of meaning, truth and a feeling for the reality of things.” Like Grubrich-Simitis, Laub explicitly addresses the function of (giving) relief which inheres in the use of language, of metaphors and the integration of the overwhelmingly intensive (and therefore traumatic) events into a consistent narrative.

The observation from psychotherapeutic practice that the capacity of creating a coherent narrative harbors the effect of providing relief for the traumatized survivor can usefully be inte-

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16 “Sofern sich für die Behandlung von Patienten [...] überhaupt so etwas wie eine generalisierbare Behandlungsrichtung angeben läßt, könnte sie meines Erachtens heißen: vom *Konkretismus zur Metaphorik*.”

17 “Zur Rückgewinnung gehört die (Re-)Konstruktion der psychischen Repräsentation in einer inneren, posttraumatischen Landschaft – die Schaffung einer kohärenten Erzählung dort, wo es bisher keine gab.”

18 “[Restaurierung der] emphatischen Verbindung durch die therapeutische Arbeit.”

grated in the discussion about trauma and history. Beyond the seeming incommensurateness of trauma and history that Caruth seems to suggest – beyond, more exactly, the traumatic mode of bearing witness to something which had not been adequately memorized in the first place on the one hand, and the representational mode of conventional historiography on the other - it allows after all for the tentative conclusion that the allegedly overcome mode – the writing of ‘history’ – seems apt to reduce and relieve the psychic burdens characteristic of trauma. The function of historiography does last but not least lie in its therapeutic dimension, one might conclude with regard to the *Mittelbau-Dora* survivors and historians Sellier and van Hoey. For them, history writing may indeed possess an element of “working through” and gaining distance to the past as well as to the painfully haunting memories of it. Understood as a self-therapeutic process, it thus adds a new meaning to the notion of historization, as Dori Laub observes: “This [re-creative] process can also be termed historization, and would thus not be limited to the context of psychoanalytical work proper”<sup>19</sup> (871).

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19 “Validität dieses (re-)kreativen Prozesses und seiner grundlegenden Funktion für den Fortbestand von Bedeutung, Wahrheit und einem Gefühl für die Wirklichkeit der Dinge. Dieser Prozeß läßt sich auch als Historisierung bezeichnen und bleibt damit nicht auf den Kontext der psychoanalytischen Arbeit beschränkt.”