H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tanja Schult. *A Hero's Many Faces: Raoul Wallenberg in Contemporary Monuments.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. xviii + 425 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-22238-0.

Reviewed by J Franklin Williamson (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
Published on H-German (October, 2013)
Commissioned by Shannon Nagy

Memory in Two-and-a-Half-Dimensions

Tanja Schult's *A Hero's Many Faces* is an ambitious study, impressively working to blend interpretive methodologies, cross disciplinary boundaries, and construct multitiered arguments that speak to several audiences at once. Although H-German readers may be surprised to find relatively little *German* history in this book, Schult's volume does address the topic via the history of the Holocaust and Raoul Wallenberg's rescue activities as they were remembered in multiple national contexts across the postwar decades. At its core, this work aims to understand how the past is preserved in the present using the tools of art criticism, making it likely that Schult's intervention will find a more receptive audience among art historians than among historians.

Schult begins by clearly explaining her goal as "investigat[ing] the various understandings of Wallenberg as expressed by the artists in their particular monuments" (p. 2). At the same time, Schult's research necessarily becomes a history of memory, too, as the thirty-one monuments to Wallenberg under consideration all seek to project different remembered histories of this man and his actions. Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who led a mission to rescue Jews in Budapest from deportation to concentration camps in 1944-45. Most famously remembered for the *Schutzpässe* that he distributed to delay or prevent arrests and deportations, Wallenberg himself disappeared after the Red Army secured Budapest and was sent to Soviet prison.

As Schult explains, the Cold War (but also the relatively slow-to-emerge consciousness of Wallenberg and his actions outside of survivor communities) meant that many public audiences knew nothing about his story for decades after the war. Consequently, most of the monuments under consideration here were only erected since the 1980s and these were largely in Western Europe (but also in Hungary), as well as in North America. With relatively little discussion of victims, perpetrators, processes, and the complex event that was the Holocaust, in exchange for this focus on one rescuer and how artists subsequently remembered and represented his activities across time and space, Schult's book is a departure from many of the historiographical and interpretive concerns of Holocaust specialists in recent decades.

Methodologically, Schult unambiguously establishes that she is working through the lens of art history, declaring that "how the artists choose to represent Wallenberg's deeds, fate or legacy, and which aspects of the Wallenberg narrative the artists regard worth telling, is the center of attention" (p. 2). Yet cultural historians could easily infer that the author also aspires to write a history of memory, especially since Schult admits that, while she endeavors to "comprehend 'the truth' of each monument" and "the forms that will be encountered by future visitors," she also believes that the "design [of a monument] reveals the attitude of their makers toward Wallenberg and how the memorial makers wished Wallenberg to be commemorated by future generations" (pp. 20-21). While the bulk of the text finds the author fulfilling her role as art historian, "aiming to grasp the first effect [a given monument] produces as well as giving an extensive analysis of the work's meaning" to the reader, at the same time, she is aware that the complex decision-making process involved in planning and building a monument "together document[s] the cultural attitudes of a certain historical period toward a certain person or event as well as the genre or art in general" (pp. 22, 18). Thus, the author seems to admit that her questions and larger interpretive concerns call for both art-historical and cultural-historical methods, since monuments can be considered both "art as well as signs of visible political statements of public memory" (p. 18).

Indeed, this interdisciplinarity between art history and cultural history makes this book a fascinating examination of an understudied topic but at times also be-

comes a source of unresolved tension. Schult criticizes the field of cultural memory as comprising efforts "by historians and literary historians" whose "main interest is not the works [of art] themselves as products of art" but instead "as artistic artifacts that serve as examples to illustrate such aspects as the attitude of a nation toward the Holocaust and dealing with this particular memory" (p. 18). It is not clear why the author objects to this conceptualization of art-as-artifact while accepting the notion (above) of art-as-evidence-of-cultural-attitudes, except that she evidently believes that such "cultural attitudes" tend to "ris[k] drawing overhasty conclusions and missing the meaning *of the monument*" (p. 19, emphasis added). For Schult, a cultural-historical approach to the history of memory may be illustrative but ultimately has less explanatory power than artists' own conceptions and memories in showing why monuments look the way they do. This collaborative effort to blend historical with art-historical research methods carries over into the selection of sources, too, which include biographical literature on Wallenberg, sketches of the historical context for the different artists and their monuments, oral interviews with many, if not most, of the artists or those close to them, as well as critical reviews of the art and theoretical literature on memory, the Holocaust, monuments, and art history. Still, a history of how these Wallenberg monuments fit into the collective memories of certain groups or whole societies does not rank among the author's goals. Rather, she is more interested in the artists' individual memories and understandings of Wallenberg as well as those artists' aesthetic designs and hopes for how the audience will react, with only secondary interest in how these artists fit into their own respective historical contexts.

Schult's overall argument is complex and at times cumbersome to articulate. She frames her interpretation as being at once three separate but intricately related interventions: firstly, she contends that Wallenberg's history, as remembered by her subjects, constitutes a new kind of "hero" concept; secondly, she offers a record of the different ways Wallenberg's story has been expressed as a "hero" narrative through the monuments she interprets, taking pains to suggest that the monument genre of sculpture still has relevance in the present day; thirdly, Schult makes the case that Wallenberg's story serves as a global example for resistance against injustice and "a model to emulate in the face of ongoing crimes" in the present (p. 300). In addressing the first element, the "hero" concept, Schult relates different elements of Wallenberg's biography to what she considers standard tropes of heroic epics in Western culture, such as extraordinary childhood traits, noble family background, a longing for adventure, a willingness to tackle difficult challenges, fighting for good against evil, and suffering a tragic death. This chapter finds Schult citing examples in monumental representation as well as quoting artists' own explanations of their work, thereby continuing the trend of layering art history with a history of memory approach. The second aspect, cataloging and classifying different monuments as representing specific aspects of this "hero" motif, constitutes the bulk of the book. Chapters 6 through 9 present highly detailed and carefully considered analyses of monuments presenting Wallenberg as "the man-of-action persona that is ready to intervene and rescue the vulnerable" (p. 81), Wallenberg as a hero who becomes a victim by sacrificing himself to save others, Wallenberg's history as an example urging contemporary audiences to take action against injustice, and Wallenberg as an example of a "hero" whose power stems not from physical prowess but from his determination to fearlessly act against the oppression around him. These last two subpoints, rethinking the definition of "hero" and urging audiences to emulate Wallenberg, undergird the third element of Schult's argument, that Wallenberg represents a universally acceptable object of memory because his actions during the Holocaust represent a message that "convey[s] even more general values" that are both respected and necessary in the contemporary world (p. 297). Thus, the Wallenberg monuments serve a purpose in relation to the past but also to the present and future.

Much of the book works very well and Schult is at her best when deploying her skills as an art historian, rendering one fluid, vivid, and convincing description and deconstruction after another. Her treatment of Kirsten Ortwed's *Hommage á Raoul Wallenberg* is a good example. Throughout the book, Schult offers highly detailed and thoughtfully considered explanations of what the individual artists wanted audiences to see and understand from their works. In nearly all cases, photographs accompany the text, making it much easier for the reader to appreciate the meaning and symbolism Schult identifies. At many points, Schult also puts on the historian's hat to describe the historical context of the monuments, their coming into being, and their reception by the public, such as the examples of Lenke Rothman's *To Remember–The Outstanding Deed* in the Swedish parliament building and Gustav and Ulla Kraitz's *Hope* near the United Nations' headquarters in New York City. Yet, while these efforts at approaching a cultural history of collective memory are extremely helpful, they are also generally brief and rendered with less passion than the sections on the artworks

themselves. At the same time, one of the most fascinating points (for this reviewer) was Schult's rethinking the concept of the "hero," from a classical and pre-1945 warrior tradition into a "civil hero" who "is relatively new in history" and "who stands for resistance against injustice" (p. 63). While Schult was only referring to Wallenberg, such an open-ended and original conceptualization begs further exploration.

There are also some weaknesses, mostly related to how Schult chooses to interpret her sources. The argument for Wallenberg's story as a "heroic" tale and the monuments' value as carriers of an international memory of the Holocaust, both of which call for future generations to uphold human rights and prevent genocide, would be much more convincing if the author looked for evidence of agreement with such an interpretation among audiences outside of the political and cultural elites in each context. To be fair, reception by the broader public is a general problem for historians who study memory and Schult admits that it is "a real challenge for any artist to create a public monument that is expected to be understood by a wide range of people" (p. 274). Yet this lack of confidence in lay audiences leads to another problem: Schult explains early on that monuments to heroic figures are today largely seen as suspect due to the history of governments misusing them to represent only a very specific version of history to their audiences while denying alternative interpretations and memories. However, Schult appears to be similarly prescribing one "correct" reading to contemporary audiences of the Wallenberg monuments while evincing impatience with viewers who respond with alternative memories or understandings. This is not to accuse the author of sympathy with authoritarian regimes but only to point out that she seems unwilling to recognize unorthodox interpretations by audiences as also revealing evidence about the history of this memory. Finally, Schult's optimism about the potential for Wallenberg's story to become a positive "lesson" for the world to "learn" from the Holocaust might be excessive. After all, rescuers were unfortunately far fewer than collaborators and perpetrators, so framing the remembrance of the Holocaust through Wallenberg's mission to Budapest might risk exaggerating this success story at the expense of minimizing the larger and more troubling history.

In the end, *A Hero's Many Faces* is very convincing as an art historical analysis of monumental sculptures and representations of memory by artists and political and cultural elites. Additionally, the extensive catalog appended to the text provides a sort of field guide to all the monuments the author studied, offering students and scholars alike a ready point of departure for more work in these areas. However, if considered as a study in collective memory, following from the arguments about Wallenberg's usefulness as a "hero" and his story serving as a call to action for the contemporary world, then the book comes up short. This is because while the book wants to avoid an argument based on an underlying cultural memory that leaves traces in culture and everyday life, it still wants to make an argument for collective memory that leads to "social action."[1] Yet in this case, the audiences who might take such actions are only intermittently represented, leaving the reader seeing three-dimensional art but only a two-and-a-half-dimensional memory.

Note

[1]. This phrase comes from a call to reconceptualize how scholars use the history of collective memory in Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002). A good example of the other approach mentioned here, cultural memory preserved through traces, is Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: J Franklin Williamson. Review of Schult, Tanja, *A Hero's Many Faces: Raoul Wallenberg in Contemporary Monuments*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36926

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.