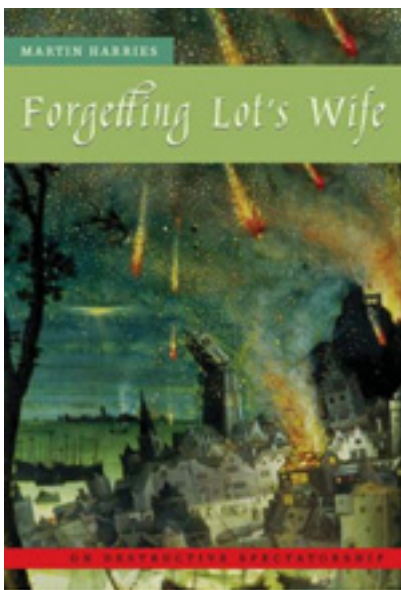


## ***Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship* by Martin Harries**

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How does one represent an event which not only signals destruction in its image (a burning city, mass death at the scene, an explosion within the frame), but also carries the threat of the viewer's death, the promise of utter desubjectification for anyone who, should anyone else be left to look on, will have been caught in the act of looking? This difficulty—something like envisioning vision in its effacement—is at the center of Martin Harries's *Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship*. In the face of a ban on vision, where vision is doubly specified as an act of looking back, and looking back upon a scene of radiating devastation, how does one represent and think about the viewer's impossible place? Taking on the figure of Lot's wife, and her often disfigured, impossible forms of appearance in selected works by Antonin Artaud, film noir, and Anselm Kiefer, Harries examines problems related to what he calls "destructive spectatorship." This category, which for Harries is both aesthetic and historical, points to an act of vision in which the viewer, gazing upon an act of destruction, is herself somehow destroyed, or in which she would find herself threatened with annihilation as masochistic viewing effect. Harries encourages us to ask, find herself where? In what space of recognition and in what location of desire? Keeping Lot's wife in mind, if not exactly in view, Harries shows that if Lot's wife is a figure for the spectator destroyed, she is also a "way to imagine the desire to destroy the spectator," a desire which, Harries argues, emerges in the 20th century as an investment in a logic that "placed the

spectator in a spot where that spectator had to contemplate her own destruction” (8–9).

Harries’s book builds upon, but goes beyond, the current critical interest in visibility and trauma studies. In tune with Lyotard’s interest in the problem of the “last”—here one could say that Lot’s wife is a kind of last witness—Harries’s work can also be compared with that of Agamben, whose focus on the paradoxes of the survivor as witness has received so much attention.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Agamben’s work on *homo sacer* however, Harries wants to refrain from making trans-historical claims about the figure of Lot’s wife. Rather than a paradigmatic or generic figure for the witness to destruction as such, Lot’s wife, for Harries, emerges through readings of specific works at “the nexus of a constellation of twentieth-century fantasies and fears about the potential for spectatorial damage” (8). While iterations of the story of Lot may provide “something like a framework for a problem,” a way of approaching “an investigation of the conditions of watching catastrophe,” Harries returns to those specifically “modern,” and in some cases “modernist,” pressures upon spectatorship and memory that combine to make Lot’s wife visible, if also hardly legible, within an annihilating logic in which retrospection—vision as looking back—is both forbidden and compelled (65).

“Whatever we may know of Lot’s wife, it seems, we know she knows she should not look back” (6). Harries calls our attention to the peculiar injunction against looking back as it appears in the story of Lot (Genesis 19), arguing that in its contemporary forms of appearance, Lot’s wife embodies the irreconcilable disjunctions between the demand for and the sanctions against the viewer’s full participation in any ideal of historical retrospection, including that ideal by which the viewer would, in an outcome somehow similar to the face of Lot’s wife, wind up dead, annihilated, reduced to an inhuman substrate or inconclusive remainder. As a pillar of salt, Lot’s wife’s greatest power may emerge from the refusal of any mimetic or allegorical resonance (say, an image of the statue as after-image and residual mark of punishment from above, a kind of petrified, paradoxically disfigured “personification” of power in its effects); the image of a desiccated remainder, while associated with something like an emblem or icon of becoming-corpse, is most recently, Harries argues, evocative of “a culture overwhelmingly saturated by the image. Indeed, this saturation of culture by images partly explains the continuing allure of the story of Lot’s wife: a story about a destructive visual experience of the destruction of cities resonates when most images, even images of intense suffering, have lost some of their power” (104–5).

Harries is interested in the many ways in which Lot’s wife, as withering figure of vision’s limits and the allure of the spectator’s effacement, forces us to consider the problem of images that fail to signify and in some senses fail to perform their promised violence (including that violence we might want to take for the work of ethical realignment) upon us.<sup>2</sup> If the desire for “destructive spectatorship” takes on the desire to witness, submit to, survive, and enjoy an experience of destruction, or the masochism that would compel the viewer to look back even and precisely in the face of a prohibition against so doing, *Forgetting Lot’s Wife* also encourages us to question the assumptions behind and the limitations of that desire. In our

ongoing fascination with the very possibility of our own and the viewer's spectatorial self-destruction, Harries asks us to consider: what might be concealed in our repetitive drive to claim and to participate in a limit experience, to experience the "beyond" of our own experience, to both undergo and survive an experience of instantaneous self-destruction than can never really be our own?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harries does not explicitly draw upon Lyotard's work. I am thinking, however, of Lyotard's well-known exploration of the problem of testifying to an event that, as a condition of its dehumanizing and encompassing force, seeks to destroy the very possibility of survival, including any possibility of the survivor giving testimony. See *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbelle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). For Agamben's discussion of the survivor, and of the *Muselmann* as particular figure of the survivor's "inhuman capacity to survive the human," see *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 133. See also Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Harries provides an excellent critical discussion of some of the governing impulses of trauma studies. See especially 18–20.