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Lia Brozgal. Absent the Archive. Liverpool UP, 2020.

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Lia Brozgal. *Absent the Archive*. Liverpool UP, 2020.

Abstract

Review of Lia Brozgal. *Absent the Archive*. Liverpool UP, 2020. 368 pp.

Keywords

October 17, 1961, Algerian War, cultural studies

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As a literary scholar, it is satisfying when someone makes a compelling case for our existence. If we are constantly being asked why we read texts—and trotting out expected answers about close reading or critical thinking—Lia Brozgal's *Absent the Archive* is a reminder that literature is part of the fabric of history, and even, under the right conditions, an archive. *Absent the Archive* tells the story of a “rogue collection of cultural texts,” all of which document the October 17, 1961 massacre of Algerian protestors, who were challenging a curfew on Algerians living in Paris (5). Even though the French branch of the Algerian National Liberation Front explicitly called for a peaceful march, protestors were beaten and killed or pushed into the Seine by the police, with the blessing of the police chief Maurice Papon. The event, which was widely publicized in the press over the following days—including via a testimonial by François Maspero in *Le Monde* and several days of front-page headlines in the *New York Times*—was subsequently silenced; the press coverage was quickly stifled, and police records were sealed shortly after, only to be released some fifty years later, in 2011. Brozgal convincingly argues that the memory of the events lived on in diverse artistic productions that she calls an “anarchive” or counter-archive: visual and textual documents—from documentaries and *bandes dessinées* (‘comics’), to posters, pulp and young adult novels, rap, and webdocs—that documented and remembered, fictionalized and analyzed the event in the absence of an official state record.

The first two chapters of Brozgal's book are theoretically and conceptually complex. She tracks several chronological waves of October 17 fiction, beginning with testimonial photography and documentary film that appeared and was suppressed shortly after the event. The second wave includes artistic objects made by second-generation North-African or *beur* authors who reconstruct history through post-memory. The third, multimedia wave begins after 1999, when Papon lost his defamation trial against historian Jean-Luc Einaudi, who provided convincing evidence that Papon supervised the police repression of the protest. This final wave bears a porous end date, which coincides with the 2011 release of the archive, but artists still create art about October 17, especially after the 1990s, an era of *hypermnésie*, or excessive memory, according to Henry Rousso. In her theoretical analysis, Brozgal muses on the tensions between Derridean archive fever and Achille Mbembe's archive as meaningless talisman, pointing out that the anarchive both testifies to our primal desires for and disrupts the very meaning of historical evidence.

Some of the most compelling moments in the opening chapters are when Brozgal brings her literary gaze to bear upon historical testimony, reading, for instance, the text of the Papon-Einaudi defamation trial. The second chapter, called “Archive Stories,” points out that while the police archives were nominally open to

the public after 2011, accessibility was promised by state officials for years prior, and the intermittent accessibility of the archive—that plagued Einaudi’s own book on the event—continued to be a problem after their supposed release. Brozgal’s own ethnographic encounters trying to access the archives in 2012 and 2013 are familiar to those of us who grappled with the bizarre, unstated rules of entry required to access seemingly rational, centralized French libraries. (Half by appointment and half by mere chance, I accessed materials held by the Association de George Perec, which were buried in a random basement room of the *Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal*.) Brozgal makes a telling observation that the police archive lends itself to *critique génétique* ‘genetic criticism,’ given the multiplication of document drafts (of the curfew memo, for example)—a revelation of which historians should take note.

The structure of the second half of the book, which tracks the anarchive across thematic topoi, like maps, the Seine, race, or references to WWII, is well researched, but lent itself to an analytical déjà vu. While the book draws on an incredibly rich multimedia corpus of texts that span from the canonical or mass press to the fully unknown, it seemed sometimes like Brozgal was repeating herself; she seemingly reads the same texts—like Didier Daeninckx’s police procedural *Meurtres pour mémoire* (*Murder in Memorium*) (1983) or Kateb Yacine’s poem “La gueule du loup” (‘The wolf’s jaws’) (1962)—in every chapter, in a slightly different way, in an exercise of Derridean *différance* that did not always pay off. Brozgal avoids the mistakes of October 17 criticism, eschewing, for the most part, overanalyzed examples, like Michael Haneke’s film *Caché* (2005). While her book was also a welcome relief from the much-overused chapter-author format, I found myself longing for an extended close reading of a single artistic object, cover to cover, in its full literary and historical depth. If later chapters sometimes suffer from listing, I also hoped that Brozgal would make a full-throated endorsement of the paraliterary—in the vein of Merve Emre’s *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (2017)—given that detective novels, young adult fiction, and graphic novels were so central to her corpus. In a similar vein, I longed for multimodal analysis that would allow graphic novels to shine in their own light, like Claire Gorrara’s article on *Octobre noir* (‘Black October’)(2011), written by Didier Daeninckx and drawn by Mako (pseudonym of Lionel Makowski)¹. While Brozgal mentions some important graphic texts on October 17, like Benyoucef Abbas-Kebir’s *17 octobre 1961, 17 bulles* (‘October 17th, 1961’) (2011), other well-known examples in comic studies, like the Franco-Italian artist Baru (pseudonym of Hervé Barulea) and his collaboration with Jean-Marc Thévenet (script) and

¹ Gorrara, Claire. “Black October: comics, memory and cultural representations of 17 October 1961.” *French Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 36, no.1, 2018, pp. 128-147.

Daniel Ledran (colors) in *Le Chemin de l'Amérique (Road to America)* (2010), were visibly missing. But, as Brozgal rightly noted, new texts continue to appear, like Benyoucef Abbas-Kebir's latest album, *Fatima: la fille du fleuve* ('Fatima: Daughter of the River') (2021), which references Fatima Bédar, one of the few female victims, and concludes with a list of over four hundred names of Algerians missing or dead. Despite these minor critiques, the book speaks to literary critics and cultural historians across disciplinary divides, especially scholars of Algerian and *beur* identity and art, of the Algerian War, and of late 20th-century French policing.

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