As in his earlier book What is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement (2009), Sergey Dolgopolski (hereafter D.), professor of Comparative Literature and Jewish Thought at the University at Buffalo, approaches the Talmud from a philosophical perspective. For somebody used to the literary and/or historical study of rabbinic literature, reading this book is not always easy, but the effort is well invested. D. places the Talmud in the context of late ancient philosophy and rhetoric where “persons were not seen as the origin or cause of thinking; rather, they were believed only to participate in thinking as replaceable and interchangeable agents” (2). Only in the Middle Ages the thinking subject became a central notion and, consequently, the composer or redactor of a text like the Talmud. In the Talmud, thinking is an essential instrument of memory. One should therefore not ask “Who thinks in the Talmud?” (i.e. who is the redactor), but rather “Who remembers in the Talmud” (36). D. develops this idea in constant comparison with two modern Talmudists, Shamma Friedman whose approach he calls “literary-formalist,” and David Halivni, whose approach he describes as “literary-realist”; these approaches should be complemented by his own “literary-philosophical” approach (45). This is developed in the following three parts of the book: Who speaks? Who thinks? Who remembers? D. identifies three aporias in the classical approach: Is the author/redactor within or without the text? Is his activity emendation or interpretation of the text? Is the Talmudic culture the actual environment from which the Talmud emerged or the environment of the text as text? He then proposes to solve these aporias by separating thinking from a thinking subject and reconnecting it to memory, the main activity performed in the Talmud (76f). “[T]he notion of the thinking subject is grounded in medieval theological and philosophical agendas and their continuations in modernity” (132). It follows the approach represented by Maimonides’ More Nebukhim and Thomas Aquinas’ Summa and informs much of Talmud criticism even today. Against this position, D. claims: “The thinking process in the Talmud has nothing to do with the modern notion of the thinking subject… it is a process of the collective rational reinvention of the memory of tradition produced through the conversations that the characters conduct in the text” (158).

Of great interest is D.’s comparison of the redaction of the Talmud according to Halivni’s approach to the Talmud with the stammaim at the center of the
analysis with S. Eisenstein's theory of film montage. The stammaim “belong no longer to the representational content of the Talmud, but rather to the making of the Talmud's montage, which is always as intrinsically intra-Talmudic (and only extrinsically historical) as any representational content that the Talmud conveys” (222). The stammaim add, change, extend and fill gaps, they do exactly what is done in the montage of a film, when the viewer becomes subject, part of the scene in the film (226-28). “[O]nly a strict filmic analysis can access the cutting of the Talmud without dependence on any external historical-chronological circumstances or historical explanations” (230). D. greatly appreciates Halivni’s analysis of the work of the stammaim, although he insists against Halivni’s efforts to place the work in a chronological context, in linear time, that the Talmudic argument is “a post-Talmudic intellectual event in which we become characters in its montage . . . the intellectual event of the Talmud is a rediscovery of something that has always already been there, but does not belong to any present whatsoever . . . but rather belongs to our always open future, in which it waits for us to arrive” (244).

Much of this book will sound strange, even provocative to traditional scholars of Talmudic literature. Most people have great difficulties conceiving a complex work of literature without imagining a real author or redactor behind such a work, separating the work from concrete persons behind it. But one has to acknowledge that any search for the thinking subject within the Talmudic text leads to reconstructions and hypotheses which will easily be rejected by others working in the field. The same holds true for the chronological frame within which we try to locate the development of the Talmud. Although we are used to see chronological stages within the text, sources and their rewritings and re-interpretations, we are also constantly aware of the permanent switching back and forth within the text where a fixed point of time can never be really grasped, as is clear from the many attempts of fitting the Talmud's redaction into a temporal sequence. Halivni’s continuous renewed attempts of dating the work of the stammaim over the several volumes of his Sources and Traditions perfectly illustrate the dilemma, as do all other serious efforts to describe the redaction of the Bavli and to locate it in time. D.’s book should make us aware of the constant temptations to treat the Talmud like a modern piece of literature, not sufficiently taking into account its “timeless” aspects and the many intellectual moves within it not to be attributed to any historical persons within the period of its redaction. The role of the reader as part of the text, never fully outside it, is another aspect to be taken seriously. Even if the book will not change very much the approach of most Talmudic scholars to their text, it will certainly force us to consciously rethink our ideas of