

The uncanny memory of Nazi euthanasia, the Risiera di San Sabba and the *foibe*

Review of: Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2015, XII + 350 p., ISBN: 9780823262786, \$55,00.

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The friction between dominant memory culture and the alternative or counter-memories of marginalised groups is the subject of this excellent study. Knittel investigates two sites of World War II and Holocaust memory in Germany and Italy: Grafeneck and the Risiera di San Sabba. These two sites are apparently disparate, the former being one of the main centres of the Nazi ‘euthanasia’ programme and the latter a camp on the outskirts of Trieste in which thousands of Jews, Yugoslavs and Italians were exterminated. However, they have key features in common. Firstly, they, and their victims, are situated towards the margins of the dominant Holocaust topography of memory. Secondly, both sites have important historical connections in the transnational eugenics movement, as exemplified by the figure of Christian Wirth: he first supervised the gassing at Grafeneck, then became commandant of the Belzec death camp, and was eventually tasked with operating the Risiera in Trieste (p. 40). Thirdly, and related to the previous point, the construction of both as memory sites in their post-war history displayed a significant level of selectivity and a lack of ‘critical engagement with the perpetrators’ (p. 166). As a result, the continuity in personnel between the two sites (Wirth and fifteen of his collaborators) and their specific place in the Holocaust chain is unmentioned. Equally unmentioned and unrepresented in the case of the Risiera are the Fascists and their crimes (p. 165).

As an antidote to such sanitised presentations of the tragic history of these two sites, Knittel advocates the ‘historical uncanny’, a term she appropriates from Freud that has been recently deployed in the discussion of German and Italian memory culture.² In Knittel’s reading, a site of memory is ‘uncanny when it unexpectedly extends into the present, forcing a person or group to re-evaluate their understanding of who they are and where they come from’ (pp. 9-10). In order to do this, the author quite rightly conceives sites of memory as being more than their simple geographic locations, including the range of ‘cultural artefacts and discourses

² A. Fuchs, M. Cosgrove, & G. Grote (eds.), *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990*, Rochester, NY, Camden House, 2006; L. Accati & R. Cogoy (eds.), *Das Unheimliche in Der Geschichte: Die Foibe: Beiträge Zur Psychopathologie Historischer Rezeption*, Berlin, Trafo, 2007.

that accumulate around a given event or memory' (p. 7). This is particularly important in the case of sites of memory that involve a plurality of voices that are barely audible in, and sometimes actively contest, the official narrative. This theoretical framework informs the entire volume. The book is symmetrically structured into two parts of three chapters each, bridged together by an interlude. Within these two parts, chapters 1 and 5 discuss the history before and after 1945 of Grafeneck, the Risiera and the *foibe* sites; chapters 2 and 6 examine the dominant narratives concerning these themes; and chapters 3 and 7 offer examples of counter-narratives.

Grafeneck was the first institution to be outfitted with a gas chamber and crematorium, and over 10,000 people were gassed there (p. 34). However, as with the rest of Nazi Euthanasia, post-war acknowledgement of the crime was selective and belated, and justice was faulty. Moreover, victims were left without a voice and their victimisation was repressed, incorporated into other narratives or otherwise selectively represented. The selective representations of Nazi euthanasia in German culture and beyond are discussed in chapter 2. NBC's miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) exemplifies these ambiguities. Euthanasia is put on screen, but it is presented as something 'somewhat separate from the Holocaust' (p. 79), and even more significantly, its mentally and physically disabled victims are presented as innocent but also as an anonymous mass deprived of subjectivity and voice (p. 81). Knittel convincingly shows how this neglect is the result of deeply ingrained cultural reasons synthesised with the fact that victims of euthanasia could not constitute themselves as a community of memory in the same way other victims groups did, especially in the case of severe mental disability (p. 45). Here the book asks some probing questions of memory studies and disability studies, arguing that both are somewhat unprepared to engage with Nazi euthanasia: the former because it does not see mentally disabled subjects as agents of memory (p. 45), and the latter because it relies on clear-cut distinctions between physical disability and 'madness' (p. 48). For this reason, the examples of vicarious witnessing discussed in chapter 3 are particularly important. Often based on perpetrators' files, as in the case of Helga Schubert's *Die Welt da drinnen*, they 'create a space in which the silenced other may speak' (p. 131). These works not only challenge conventional victim-based Holocaust literature (p. 106), but also force us to rethink 'the assumptions about what the Holocaust was and how it relates to broader historical and contemporary mechanisms of othering, exclusion, and prejudice' (pp. 132-133).

The same structure gives shape to the second part of the book on the Risiera and the *foibe*. Chapter 5 provides a well-informed reconstruction of the history of the Risiera and Basovizza sites of memory from before 1945 to the present, with a postscript on the physical memorial of the Parco della Rimembranza. The chapter offers a refreshing analysis that does not limit itself to bemoaning the use of the *foibe* as a counter-memory to the Risiera, but convincingly argues that this zero-sum logic ends up marginalising 'the Fascist politics of Italianization [...] and the Cold War tensions after the war' (p. 181). Knittel continues that '[t]he competition between the Risiera and Basovizza thus serves ultimately only to divert attention away from Italy's role in World War II and the Holocaust - and thus masks the fact that both sites present version of history with significant gaps' (*Ibidem*). Chapter 6 discusses popular cultural products that constitute the discursive context around these sites, and focuses in particular on a clinical analysis of *Il cuore nel pozzo* (Alberto Negrin 2005). Knittel pointedly sees the miniseries as 'an attempt to create a uniform memory at the center of which lies the suffering of the Italians to the exclusion of the suffering of the Slovenes and Croats' (p. 235). The counter-memory developed in reaction to the imposition of a supremely selective narrative centred on "good" and

innocent Italians as the only victims of “evil” Nazis (Risiera) or Yugoslavs (Basovizza and *foibe*) is discussed in chapter 7. The work of Istrian, Slovene and Triestine authors Fulvio Tomizza, Boris Pahor and Carolus Cergoly offers a necessary counterpoint to the all-Italian narrative put forward in official memorials and museums. Multidirectionality is for them part and parcel of their liminal identity and a political statement against the forced Italianisation of memory. As Knittel argues convincingly, the very language in which these authors write (Istrian-inflected Italian for Tomizza, Slovene for Pahor, Triestine for Cergoly) is a form of resistance (p. 253).

These are just some of the key lines of inquiry of an extremely rich and thought-provoking book. Carefully structured, well researched and lucid throughout, the volume is essential reading for any scholar interested in Italian, German and transnational memory culture. Its argument for the importance of improving representation of, and scholarship on, the role of perpetrators in memory sites is a timely addition to a field often reluctant to undertake such endeavours.

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