

Materiality and the Construction of Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence

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Review of: Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, eds, *Geographies of Perpetration. Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021). 270 pp. (hardback) EUR 59,95 ISBN: 978-3-631-81098-9.

In their volume *Geographies of Perpetration. Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence* published in 2021, editors Brigitte Jirku (University of Valencia) and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (University of Valencia) bring together outstanding scholars who have contributed relevant insights to the field of Perpetrator Studies. The editors adopt a clearly defined understanding of violence, limited exclusively to mass violence and its narrative processing. Within this framework, the volume offers a very broad perspective, including essays about different geopolitical and historical contexts. In addition, the authors hail from different disciplines and all of them work with inter- and transdisciplinary methodologies, which results in a wide range of approaches to the issue.

The volume can be read as a continuation and further development of the previous collaborative research carried out by the editors. As lead researcher, Vicente Sánchez-Biosca initiated the interdisciplinary and transnational projects 'Contemporary Representations of Perpetrators of Mass Violence: Concepts, Narrative and Images' and 'From Spaces of Perpetration to Sites of Memory. Forms of Representation', in which Brigitte Jirku also participated. The projects aimed to promote the interdisciplinary study of the figure of the perpetrator, particularly in the context of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and terrorism.¹ In their numerous publications, Jirku and Sánchez-Biosca have already provided important and insightful findings regarding the representation of violence in literature and in film.

The contributions of this volume are a continuation of these previous research projects, adding new insights thanks to case studies that are dedicated in large part to rarely explored subject matters, including chapters that consider the often-neglected gender perspective. Despite the wide range of different cases, the editors have skillfully grouped the

1 For further information, see repercirg.com



chapters into coherent sections. The first section deals with the politics of memory, be it regarding memorials, museums, or cemeteries, while the contributions of the second section focus on 'Phantoms of the Perpetrator', echoing Derrida's ideas about hauntology. The very concept of the phantom has never been clearly defined, and it remains rather ambiguous in this volume, too. Nevertheless, this section offers an extensive range of productive approaches to a conceptualisation of perpetrator figures as a phantom. Interestingly, all chapters in this section – except one which engages with Argentina – focus on Spanish crime scenes. The editors of the volume do not give any further explanations for this composition, so it remains for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. One way to explain the concentration on Spain might be the recent proliferation of representations of the traumatic past after decades of systematic silencing of the victims' stories and the – often unsuccessful – attempts at erasing the traces of violence. Furthermore, the coming to terms with the recent past in Spanish society is highly topical and has provoked numerous political and social tensions and debates, which makes it a particularly fitting case study for an exploration of the hauntology of the perpetrator. The last section of the volume deals with the artistic representation of crime scenes, particularly with reenactments of very different kinds, ranging from landscape photography to literary archives.

As the editors point out in their introduction, the common thread that connects all the essays of the volume is the search for narratives that make traces of mass violence visible and counteract the intention to erase these traces from collective memory. As Jirku and Sánchez-Biosca argue, the attempt to forget, which is often a cornerstone for the construction of a national identity, collides with the demand for a transnational memory that is frequently linked to catastrophe. The editors illustrate this with the example of European identity that has its foundation in the destruction of World War II and the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust. They do not mention that this is a particular Franco-German conception of what may be considered a European identity, which is oftentimes not adopted by other European countries, for example by states that were part of the former Soviet Union. At the same time, this lack of nuance is perhaps less of a problem since the editors have not restricted their volume to case studies from Europe. The book covers sites of mass violence across the globe and thus gives the reader the chance to find striking similarities in the mechanisms by which traces of the past are erased and certain memories are suppressed.

The focus of the participating authors lies on the materiality of the sites and how the attempt to minimize traces of mass violence and their significance has frequently converted them into non-places. One characteristic of the material dimension is that it cannot be eliminated entirely, and it never remains unaltered through time. It mutates, be it through decay, conservation, or recuperation. One of the volume's strengths is that it shows how such sites are in a state of 'permanent flux' with respect to their role in collective memory (p. 12): despite attempts at reducing them to non-places, they do not exist in a void but interact with certain social discourses. On the one hand, these interactions make it possible to change the sites' meaning and recover them for their integration into a collective memory. On the other hand, the places themselves and their significance are influenced by the ongoing changes in memory discourses.

In the first section of the book, this is illustrated by the criminologist and Holocaust and genocide studies scholar Christophe Busch. He highlights this reciprocal influence and the transformations of the material when he reflects on decision-making policies at heritage sites. According to his analysis, the custody policy of museums reflects current discourses rather than the 'original' place. Its material existence is not reason enough for an object to be preserved. It is an authority with decision-making power that determines whether a certain place or object is integrated into heritage or not. On the last pages of his contribution, Busch hints at the link between Authorized Heritage Discourses and Multi-Level Perspectives (pp. 38-42). It is a pity that he only touches upon this link in this contribution, as it presents a highly interesting avenue for future research.

The ghetto as a site of contested memories is at the center of the following chapter. Anja Tippner, scholar of Slavic literature, analyses the Theresienstadt ghetto as a site of mass violence and its commemoration. She shows how traces of crimes against Czech and Jewish victims have been assigned different levels of importance over the decades and how this relation has changed. She works with the term 'timescape' coined by Ruth Klüger to show the nature of a place in time. The link that Tippner traces to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's concept of latency as the origin of the present might help explain present conflicts as products of the past (p. 54). According to Gumbrecht, latency describes unspoken and unacknowledged trauma whose presence is hidden but can nevertheless be felt. This latency conditions our present and frequently aggravates conflicts by its silences. However, the link between Klüger's

concept and Gumbrecht's could have been made even more evident given the fruitfulness of this line of inquiry in her analysis.

Symbolic violence as defined by Johan Galtung is a key concept for António Sousa Ribeiro's case study that deals with cultural violence in (post-)colonial museums. It is no coincidence that Sousa, who is a scholar of German studies, leaves the prefix 'post' in brackets since he finds clear Eurocentric and colonial gestures in museum and exhibition policies, for example with respect to the Humboldt-Forum in Berlin. In this insightful chapter, Sousa shows how these policies are embedded in a much broader debate around the foundations of our knowledge produced by ethnographic research in the nineteenth century. According to him, our knowledge is grounded on assumptions which perpetuate a colonial discourse projected into the present (p. 63) and thus require a rethinking of the museological context in general.

In her contribution, entitled 'Memory and Post-Colonial Experience. Victims and Perpetrators in Jose Eduardo Agualusa's Novel *Teoria Geral do Esquecimento* (*A General Theory of Oblivion*)', literary scholar Dagmar von Hoff focuses on standardized views on the representation of traumatic experiences in literature and film. According to von Hoff, trauma can never be abstract, but always concerns individuals embedded in a determined social context. The so-called trauma discourse, however, is ultimately a 'translation' or 'representation' of the injuries which the individual has experienced. Hence, speaking about trauma means creating particular narrative contexts, which, in literature and film, all too often follow patterns which von Hoff considers standardized and dependent on a simplistic dichotomy of perpetrator and victim that frequently disguises the political dimension of trauma discourses. Von Hoff argues that José Eduardo Agualusa's novel gives a clear example of how these standardized discourses can be challenged and overcome. Following Martha Nussbaum's embodiment approach and Michael Rothberg's ideas on multidirectional memory, von Hoff shows how the novel offers a prospect of healing and freedom that can lead to a constructive form of forgetting. In this context a further definition of this forgetting would have been helpful since it remains questionable to the reader if traumatic experience can be forgotten at all.

The German philologist Ana R. Calero Valera frames her discussion of World War I cemeteries as sites of memory within Aleida Assmann's conceptualization of World War I as a 'Urkatastrophe' (foundational catastrophe). The myth of the war experience was central for the rise of patriotism and nationalisms, and cemeteries played an important role

in the politically loaded commemoration of the World War I victims. Literary texts, on the other hand, are able to adopt a more transnational perspective when it comes to the commemoration of those who died in World War I. Calero discusses the novels *Testament of Youth* (1933) by Vera Brittain and *Au revoir la-haut* (2013) by Pierre Lemaitre and convincingly traces the changes over time in the representation of those who passed away in the World War I in literature. She shows how in the later novel the knowledge of the catastrophes that were to come also transforms how we interpret the remote past of World War I. Calero pays laudable attention to the gender perspective, which Brittain herself highlights explicitly throughout her novel on several occasions. This discussion of the role of gender in the commemoration of World War I could have been deepened even more since the surviving dependents were frequently, albeit not exclusively, women. Their view on the historical events and their construction of memory are important given that mourning is all too often relegated to women in memory discourses about war.

In light of the current war against Ukraine, literary scholar Phillipe Mesnard's findings about the figure of the wartime 'hero' are very timely. In his chapter, Mesnard shows how attention in media and in cultural representations has shifted from a monolithic hero figure towards the victims and their perpetrators. On the one hand his findings are based on the analysis of media representations of victims and perpetrators in war crime trials (against members of the SS and the Gestapo but also in the context of the so-called 'Gacaca courts' in Rwanda), and on the other hand on the analysis of cultural productions, such as the movie *Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino, or art projects such as Piotr Uklanski's series *The Nazis* or *Economical Love* by Elke Krystufek. Mesnard speculates to what extent the interest in perpetrators and their victims arises from a fascination with extreme violence and transgression that mythical heroes no longer produce, 'mostly if our current heroes are less fighters than rescuers' (p. 98).

The second section begins with Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi's study of the statements of ESMA perpetrators during the Argentinian dictatorship. Hailing from the fields of Communication Science and Sociology, these Memory studies scholars explore the relationship between materiality and disappearance. In their illuminating contribution about The Naval Mechanics School (ESMA) as a place of prosecution, torture, and death, they show how the ESMA materializes as a place of the victims' physical demise. Furthermore, they explain how

the perpetrators' public statements resulted in a debate of contested memories where the perpetrators' stories could be understood as a confession but could also be perceived as 'truer' than the accounts of survivors or other witnesses. They show how media outlets ultimately reinforced this imbalance as more credibility was given to the perpetrators' declarations than to those of the victims. Feld and Salvi trace in detail how the perpetrator discourse has changed over the decades, which has led to a transformation of the ESMA into a symbol of state terrorism.

The historian Santiago de Pablo focuses on the remarkable differences in the discourses about distinct victims of terrorism in his contribution about Basque Political Violence in Spain. In a primarily descriptive manner, he establishes that, depending on the victim's identity, crime scenes received different levels of public attention. While victims of the terrorist organization ETA are hardly recognized, ETA members who had been victims of police-violence are commemorated in public space that are oftentimes converted into important *lieux de mémoire*. However, their status as *lieux* is due to their geopolitical situation in the Basque Country. In light of debates about national identities in Spain, the civil war and the forty-year dictatorship, these controversial places show the ongoing fragmentation of collective memory and the difficulty of a shared memory consensus, not only in the Basque Country, but in Spain as a whole.

Several of the assembled contributions deal with Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia and link it to Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and the ghostly. This is the case in historian Stéphane Michonneau's chapter about the town of Belchite. Belchite, completely destroyed during the Spanish civil war and now an abandoned ruin, can be considered the first martyr-town in European history (p. 131). Belchite has also become famous for recordings of psychophonies - sound recordings of past voices from the civil war that talk to the living via a medium. What becomes evident in Michonneau's contribution is the dual structure of remembrance of the Spanish civil war that does not allow a common interpretation. Michonneau manages to show in detail and with analytic precision how a chasm persists between the democratic myth of reconciliation and the discourse of victimization. According to Michonneau, only the return of the dead - they 'reappear' as ghosts in psychophonies to visitors of the town- could be capable of bridging this gap, a diagnosis that even in this concrete case needs further evidence.

Spain and the consequences of the civil war are again in the lime-light in Francisco Ferrándiz's chapter about mass graves and exhumations. The anthropologist shows how forensic operatives create a certain narrative about the past by establishing a scientific scenography and socioscientific rituals that are bodily enacted by the operatives themselves. In one specific case mentioned by Ferrándiz, the forensic staff, activists and relatives of the victims lie down into the grave once it is emptied and adopt the same position in which the bones of the dead had been found. These enactments are sometimes accentuated by percussion that reproduces the sound of possible shots. This bodily reinscription of the grave is later translated into digitalized diagrams by means of an anatomy software and added to the scientific report about the exhumation. What we can observe is a confluence of scientific data collection with a highly empathetic ritual that leads to an implicit aestheticization of the scientific narrative. The scientific report does not lose credibility with this enactment, but is instead reinforced by the status of the operatives as scientists who work according to high standards of professional quality.

Ferrándiz's contribution presents a perfect transition to the third section that also deals largely with reenactments and with artistic representations of crime scenes. Luba Jurgenson, a scholar of Slavic Studies, opens this last part of the volume with a reflection on how landscape and nature can be used as an instrument of torture, especially in the Soviet Gulag system. The severe climatological circumstances made it impossible for the detainees to flee since surviving in these surroundings was almost impossible. Interestingly, the perpetrator himself is usually absent from the landscape. Jurgenson illustrates this by discussing pictures taken by perpetrators, which are characterized by a general absence of violence. She reads these pictures as representing the blind spots of violence that do not reveal the crime scene as what it was but instead create a kind of empty place which resonates with Foucault's theory of the disappearance of the subject in language – an approach worth being explored in more depth. What remains unclear to the reader at this point is why this chapter, rather than the one by Ferrándiz, was included in the third section of the volume. It deals with photography that was not meant as artistic expression in the first place, even if these images contribute to the aestheticization of a particular discourse, just as the forensic enactment in Ferrándiz's case does.

The volume continues with film scholar Vicente Sánchez-Biosca's analysis of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia and reenactments of crimes for different purposes: in a documentary film and during the proceedings at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). In the documentary *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) by Rithy Panh, a group of ordinary executioners recreate the atmosphere of terror they had originally acted in, while the legal investigation of the Cambodian genocide stages the former prison director of Tuol Sleng who also recreates scenes of terror. These reenactments suggest familiarity and create distance simultaneously, which invites Sánchez-Biosca to reflect on the participatory modality and the return of the perpetrator to the scene of the crime. In doing so, he distinguishes between three categories of agents that enter the stage: those responsible for the idea of how to execute perpetration, the mediators (those who orchestrated the machinery), and the ordinary executioners. These categories are important to a nuanced understanding of the different ways in which they bring together the memory of body and the word. The bodily enactment brings the past to life in the present when verbal description would not have had the same weight.

Documentary films also play an important role in sociologist Lior Zylberman's contribution, in which he shows the difference between verbal and visual modes of recalling the past. In his chapter he analyzes Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), among others, to reflect on the return of the perpetrator to the place of his crimes. The physical reenactment of crimes at the original crime scenes leads to a 'real performance' of the past, which is performative in the sense of Austin's approach, on the one hand, and highly theatrical on the other. Body and memory operate at the same time, which, according to Zylberman, is an effective tool to explore the 'mental landscapes' (p. 214) of the perpetrator.

The link between materiality and disappearance is highlighted again by Jaume Peris Blanes, scholar of Latin American Literature and Culture, who discusses how perpetrators operated during the Chilean dictatorship. To make the victims' bodies disappear, they were tied to rails before being tossed into the sea. Peris Blanes shows in his precise and convincing analysis how these rails acquire a twofold meaning as they constitute evidence of the crime and make the efforts to erase the traces of crimes visible since they bear witness to the absent bodies.

As already mentioned, the gender perspective is often shortchanged in the field of Perpetrator Studies. For this reason, the volume benefits especially from the last two chapters, which compensate this imbalance at least partially. The art historian María Rosón talks about 'El Patronato', a collective governing organization in Spain for the reeducation of women who were considered renegades in a moral sense during the Franco dictatorship. She emphasizes that (structural) violence against women in a dictatorship like Francoist Spain has a different appearance than 'male' violence and frequently remains unnoticed in official memory discourses, due to persistent misogynist ideas in society. During the Catholic-nationalist discourse of the Franco regime, the female body was reduced to an object that could be locked away if a woman was acting against the established power hierarchies. These women were 'rehabilitated' in specially designated 'Patronato' schools – sites of oppression where young women and their children were subjected to all kinds of physical, psychological, and structural violence. These discourses prevailed even after Franco's death, as demonstrated by the last of these institutions closing only in 1984.

German scholar Brigitte E. Jirku describes the female body as a *lieu de mémoire* in the context of mass rapes during war. Jirku reveals to the reader how the violated female body becomes part of the battlefield and serves to transmit a message from men to men – one of total defeat. Riddled with shame, the women themselves did not speak up in order not to humiliate their husbands indirectly. Only the first postwar generations were able to talk, as Jirku demonstrates with her illuminating analysis of Radka Denemarková's novel, *Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Freude* ('A Contribution to the History of Joy'). Jirku shows that 'time does not cure wounds, time only preserves them, and the material body can transform them' (p. 258). This is why these women's bodies can be defined as an archive conserving memory; they do not simply own and represent memory, but they are a living embodiment of memory itself.

As observed in this very brief review, the sixteen contributions in this volume present highly relevant research with excellent academic standards. Despite a few more descriptive approaches, all analyses rely on well-defined theoretical frames that sustain the case studies. The link between space, time, and its materialization at the different crime sites becomes overwhelmingly evident, which proves the importance of the entanglement of verbal discourses and materiality. In this way, the volume reflects a recent and highly relevant development – not only for the field of Perpetrator Studies – which is the inclusion of the

aspect of materiality in discussions on the memory and representation of violence. Even if the authors do not mention the material turn explicitly, the influence it has on their writing is palpable.

In reaction to the ‘discursive turn,’ different researchers have approached materiality anew from very different angles. Bruno Latour, for example, pays tribute in his Actor-network-theory to the growing importance attributed to the materiality of both subjects and objects and the agency they perform when interacting with other things or beings. Latour has not been the only one who has elaborated on this issue. Some variants of Critical Realism address the same complex entanglement. Here Graham Harman’s work on Object Oriented Ontology and Speculative Materialism² should be mentioned, as well as the New Materialism advanced by Donna Haraway³ or Karen Barad⁴, for example. These approaches have a clearly posthumanist take and thus differ from sociological approaches such as Andreas Reckwitz’ Theory of Social Practices.⁵ Despite the differences that might be found among this wide field, the consideration of the agency of non-human elements is important common ground of all these different approaches. They explore how power is created and exerted by examining not only the importance of discursive practices but also of material (cultural) practices in the organization of power relations.

A deeper reflection on these theoretical approaches towards materialism could have enriched the discussions presented in this volume, and could have helped in further clarifying the complex interrelationship of spacetime and memory. The question that arises after reading the very illuminating contributions in Jirku and Sánchez-Biosca’s publication is how much agency materiality has in the resignification of cultural narratives of mass violence. However, the fact that the volume leaves this question partly unanswered should not be understood as a critique but rather as indicative of the publication’s current relevance and its capacity to open an important pathway for further research in the field.

2 Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology. A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018).

3 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

4 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

5 Andreas Reckwitz ‘Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5.2 (2005), 243-263.

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