

## Book Reviews

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Russell J. A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty, eds. *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013. Pp. 355. \$85 CAD.

In *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*, Russell J. A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty locate their methodological approach “in the concepts or processes of memory, mediation, and remediation” (26). Their approach highlights that memory is not fixed (the flashbulb memories that feature so strongly in popular discourse and film), but something that “gets constituted, legitimized, ‘naturalized,’ replicated, and reproduced through narrative or visual media forms” (26). Understanding remediation as referring to both “mediation and its repetition” (18), Kilbourn and Ty draw attention to how memory changes not just through repetition but also through the media writers’ and artists’ use. Their concept of media extends beyond contemporary forms such as multimedia and twenty-first-century cinema, for included in this collection of fifteen essays are pieces on the construction of female mourning in World War One, writing by Gertrude Stein, the fiction of W. G. Sebald, Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*, Carlos Fuentes’ *The Old Gringo*, life-writing about the Holocaust, and Neil M. Gunn’s autobiography *The Atom of Delight*.

While several contributors testify ironically to the complex terrain of memory studies when they make competing claims regarding the centrality of their area of research to these studies—for example, K. J. Keir on autobiography, Anders Bergstrom on cinema, and Kate Warren on re-enactments—what is most valuable in the collection is how individual essays challenge theoretical pieties. Exemplary here is Stefan Sereda’s reading of the cinema of simulation’s potential to challenge Jean Baudrillard’s and Fredric Jameson’s conclusions regarding the treatment of history in late capitalist film. Defining the cinema of simulation as “films that self-consciously provoke intersections among fiction, history, and media” (227), Sereda uses Steven Soderbergh’s *The Good German* and Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* to demonstrate how the cinema of simulation “can challenge or reinforce hegemonic political discourses in the contemporary moment” (229). Fidelity in such films operates in two ways in that films “that are unfaithful to the historical record often display an high level of fidelity to the manner in which history has been recorded” (234); that is, our memories of World War Two are inseparable from our memories of watching Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the film *Casablanca*. According to Sereda, the best films in this mode thus move beyond prosthetic memory (Alison Landsberg’s term for

memories that are created through our experience of popular culture representations) to create “a form of post-prosthetic memory” (244).

What Landsberg’s theory of prosthetic memory has in common with Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory and Cathy Caruth’s transmission theory of trauma is a notion of empathy that raises issues of appropriation. Such issues are central to many of the volume’s strongest contributions. Examining the “virtues and shortcomings of Hirsch’s concept of postmemory” (52), Kathy Behrendt critiques Hirsch’s recently expanded concept of postmemory for its “intimation that the post-rememberer can herself live through anything resembling what the victims lived through” (55). She makes a good case for the ethical quagmire that results when the concept of postmemory expands beyond close family relatives of the rememberer, and even here, we might ask what kind of memory those close family relatives can possibly experience.

Focusing on Hirsch’s view of Sebald as a postmemorial writer, Behrendt rightly points out that it is “the absence of memory that is so often at the heart of [Sebald’s] stories” (65). It is precisely “by eschewing imaginative empathy” that Sebald “escapes accusations of appropriation” (56). Just as what characterizes Sebald’s *Austerlitz* is the character’s inability to witness and testify, the unnamed narrator of *Austerlitz* does not fit Hirsch’s insistence on the empathetic potential of postmemory in that he retains an external perspective in which easy empathy is deliberately avoided.

Marlene Kadar’s account of her research into the life of Hermine Braunsteiner, a guard at Ravensbrück and Majdanek, is equally compelling in its nuanced assessment of how her research has made her engage with difficult knowledge, including complication of the victim/perpetrator dichotomy. Kadar does not just add detail to our understanding of the Holocaust and post-war immigration policy in Canada and the United States; she also challenges “radical-feminist claims about the ethical and moral superiority of women” (132). Grounding her theoretical analysis in her personal experience, Kadar stresses how her project has forced her to “unlearn inherited ‘outsider’ knowledge” and led her to “conundrums and contradictions” that cannot always “be resolved” (138).

Another issue in Caruth’s work is how her insistence on the stability of the memory image strongly conflicts not just with remediation theory but with contemporary work by cognitive scientists. Although Kilbourn and Ty acknowledge the latter conflict, work by cognitive scientists is minimally addressed in the essays with one important exception: Sabine Sielke’s essay on seriality. Part of a larger project that “interfaces methods and research questions of literary/cultural studies with those of the cognitive sciences” (40) and

takes for granted that research in the cognitive sciences and memory studies as understood by cultural studies “are moving in opposite directions” (37), Sielke proposes that conceptualizing “both memory and forgetting . . . as serial operations” (45) may offer a way to bring the two fields together. In addition, paying attention to seriality, she posits, will have other benefits including reconceptualizing modernism and our understanding of mass media.

Sielke’s work resonates with John McCullough’s essay on how seriality in commercial television produces memorial spaces. McCullough contrasts *Treme* (which memorializes the victims and survivors of Hurricane Katrina) with *Saving Grace* (a show that responds to the disaster and trauma of the Oklahoma City bombing on 19 April 1995) and *Rescue Me* (a show that explores the impact of 9/11 on New York City firefighters). Noting how *Treme* “privileges realism and *witnessing*” whereas the two other shows “*translat[e]* their crises through fantasies” (279; emphasis in original), McCullough, unlike some of the anthology’s other contributors, does not reject the viewer empathy produced through translation but sees it as a potent way of remediating national traumas. His work demonstrates, as do so many of the essays in this fine collection, that contrary to those who claim that all our talk about memory merely signifies our fear we no longer have it, we also continue to talk about memory because we still disagree about the significance of the memory practices that so compel us.

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### Works Cited

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