

Book Review

Performing Feeling in Cultures of Memory by Bryoni Trezise (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

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Bryoni Trezise has written a complex book on a difficult topic. Traumatic memory is always culturally fraught: painful, contested and politicised. Like its case studies, the methods of memory studies are also fraught, drawing on multiple disciplines that sometimes have competing methodologies. It is Trezise's combination of performance studies, memory studies and affect theory that is both the book's achievement and its challenge. While there may not be many readers with competences across all three fields that match Trezise's own, the book nevertheless offers compelling insights into how memory sites 'mobilise various histories of loss through the experiences and re-experiences of affect' (4).

Trezise's methodological approach, most specifically her embrace of affect theory, requires careful reading. Grounded in the work of Michael Hardt, Patricia Ticineto Clough, Brian Massumi, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick and others, affect theory is a philosophical engagement with the phenomenology of emotion. It seeks to describe how feeling does its work in culture. And, importantly, it understands that work as political. Careful reading is not a bad thing in the context of traumatic memory. It's good to move slowly through intellectually challenging content and it's especially good to move slowly when thinking about the pain of others. This is, in fact, consistent with the author's own goals, as Trezise is in fact mounting a critique of the many casual, superficial deployments of memory culture.

In five chapters plus introduction, Trezise analyses the problematic ways in which memory culture encourages us to 'feel good about feeling bad' (4). Her point is that 'memory practices that claim to *do* ethics also use it to justify a range of other effects' (18). She contends that, while commemoration 'fetishize "pastness"' (14), 'feeling happens in the present, even if it is recalling a past' (2). That is to say, 'affect is constitutive' and 'affect ... *produces* the past' (20). Her central argument, which the carefully elaborated case studies of the book move towards, is that in fact *feelings about feelings* (meta-affect) might allow for more responsible knowing. The examples that she examines, works of art and popular culture, all ask spectators to engage with personal and social pain: a popular performances of indigeneity, a psychic's remediation of personal grief, a theatrical invocation of a physical brutality, and several genres of

Holocaust commemoration. The works of art that she in the end finds the most effective are those that precisely challenge any familiar sense of straightforward empathy or surrogate grief. These works instead engender a self-reflexive awareness where our personal *feeling* about the particular trauma represented is made subordinate to an affective transformation of perspective that unsettles feeling-based sense making.

In her nuanced opening discussion of a collaboration between a Polish artist and a Holocaust survivor to ‘restore’ his now-faded Auschwitz prison, Trezise effectively lays the groundwork for the arguments to come. The provocative artwork raises the central questions concerning ethics, spectatorship, feeling and responsibility that are subsequently pursued throughout. In chapter one, Trezise carefully illustrates how memorials, with a focus on Holocaust memorials, allow us to become morally self-congratulatory for not having been the perpetrators of or bystanders to the historical atrocity. Through their design, these memorials designate appropriate emotional spectatorial responses—grief, sadness, loss—which are in turn rewarded by a sense of ethical correctness and self-certitude. Trezise writes that ‘trauma memorials conflate the durational, material experiences of bodies that were lost with the durational, material experiences of bodies given to recollect loss’ so much so that ‘visitors can only ever *misrecognise* the site’s historical repertoire’ (39). In order to elaborate this argument, Trezise provides a series of examples of what she calls ‘syncopated histories’ (41), drawing on the less conventional memorials of artists such as Christian Boltanski to demonstrate the different registers of engagement with historical memory available to both artists and spectators.

In chapter two, Trezise moves direction and offers an account of a cultural show (‘ethno tourism’) at Tjapukai Cultural Park. The performance invites its spectators to experience Aboriginal traditions and narrates an aboriginal historical narrative that begins in the time of dreaming. From her discussion of performed indigeneity, I took note of Trezise’s observation that ‘the white nation *delegates* the act of remembering to its Indigenous people’, i.e. that ‘Indigeneity *stands in* for cultural memory’ (63). Trezise’s analysis demonstrates that, through cultural repertoires of “Indigeneity,” white Australia avoids coming to terms with its own colonising culpability.

In chapter three, the book tracks the circular logics of sentimental remediation at work in televisual performances of grief through a discussion of television medium John Edwards’ syndicated and live shows, and in chapter four, with a particular focus on the digitisation of Holocaust memorialisation, she thoughtfully explores the ways that virtual reality not only recycles genres but also repurposes affects. The discussion of Edwards’ televisual haunting was particularly perceptive about ‘our complicity in the unequal economies of visibility that circulate public sentiments of loss’ (105) and at the same time offered a complex analysis of how feelings themselves are distributed and exchanged as within an economically motivated experience ‘market.’ In her discussion of virtual commemoration in chapter four, she observes that this practice ‘is generative of new memory formations to the extent that it first relies on those corporeal sensitivities that pre-exist it’ (126). That is, through their avatars, these virtualised forms of historical engagement build upon the

emotionally familiar, and yet at the same time, and crucially, 'are experienced as a form of affective *indifference*' (127).

The final chapter, an extended discussion of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Tragedia Endogondia Br. #04 Bruxelles*, most firmly locates us in the realm of live theatrical performance. The Italian company's 2005 performance featured a scenario that involved the beating of an unnamed man by police which was so brutal that, as Trezise writes, at the end she was 'one of only several audience members remaining in an initially full house' (136). Her analysis of the work, with a particular emphasis on its affective brutality—its seeming 'realness'—offers new insights that can be applied to ongoing debates about the properties of liveness. For example, she writes that in place of 'culturally hegemonic practices of seeing and feeling memories' (140) such performances create 'a meta-affective state for the spectator that is built out of a continuous collapse and rebuilding of relations between real and fake, sensation and spectacle' (140).

While the book is on the whole theoretically dense, there are also compelling descriptive passages. Between long immersions in complex arguments about "the loss of loss" and the "meta-affective," the straightforward (first-person) prose was striking, even when that prose was describing disturbing content. Trezise vividly conjures what it is like to be an audience member watching a beating at Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Tragedia Endogondia Br. #04 Bruxelles*, or to be a "newbie" avatar emerging into a version of *Kristallnacht* by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. At Tjapukai Cultural Park, she takes us through the emotional ups and downs of participating in a "failed" performance of aboriginality. At Dachau, she is frank about how the site plays on her own investments and expectations.

Overall, I share Trezise's taste for and celebration of moments of rupture or "spill" in which an illusion is broken to reveal its inherent contradictions. These moments, which cause the viewer to become aware of themselves feeling, have enormous political potential, and these are at the heart of Trezise's argument in *Performing Feeling in Cultures of Memory*. Not surprisingly, Trezise is more critical of products of cultural industries (museums, televisual programs, and theme parks) and more generous with the work of artists (bodily interventions and their filmic records). In Trezise's examples, the latter provide opportunities to "de-remediate" cultural logics of spectatorship and thereby provide opportunities for ethical responses that return the spectator towards self-awareness and thought. Ultimately, this important book rewards the reader's efforts with important contributions to the study of feelings and to the study of feeling about trauma.

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