

## Book Review

*Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship: Absent Others*,  
by Emma Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

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Emma Willis's book opens with three provocative quotes from Judith Butler, Paul Lederach and Emmanuel Levinas, which become the starting point for this engaging and scholarly exploration of the human fascination with sites of genocide and disaster. The quotes issue a challenge to consider our ethical responsibilities for and to each other and the imaginative power that such a task demands of us; and its requirement that we think beyond violence and beyond our own short lives. Willis sees a role for theatricality in this challenge, which also demands a 'thinking beyond' and an engagement with absence. She sets out in this book to offer 'an expanded understanding of the role that theatricality has to play in making available to us the lost voices of absent others in order that they may urge us beyond the horizon of our own time and experience' (2). Butler, Lederach and Levinas's demands for creative and ethical thinking in response to violence resonate with theatricality's creative engagement with what is other than reality, its engagement with absence through representation, and its capacity to draw a community of spectators into moments of shared meaning-making. In this work, Willis draws upon a range of contemporary theorists and philosophers to explore the theatrical, ethical and spectatorial relationships in operation within sites of mass murder and catastrophe, taking as her primary material examples of curatorship and performance that memorialize the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the colonization of New Zealand and the Cambodian and Rwandan genocides.

In her introduction Willis describes the emergence of this project from a radio programme with Malcolm Foley on the phenomenon of 'dark tourism', which provoked her reflection upon her own fascination with such sites. Her early research took the form of a collaborative performance work called 'Dark Tourists' in which she worked as dramaturge and director alongside a choreographer and a composer. The piece premiered in Auckland and is described in reviews as poetic, visual and fragmentary, evoking moments of grief, lostness and beauty.<sup>1</sup> The reviews describe the 'aftermath' of an unspecified disaster. Willis speaks of using objects and bodies to investigate a sense of disconnection between the tourists and the suffering others; the unease of the spectator, and the longing for something undefined and perhaps indefinable to emerge from the experience of seeing and being in the site of the catastrophe. This practice-based research is clearly a useful starting point for the research project and for the book, because it returns to the problem of embodiment in performances that attempt it; in work that involves the display of the bodies of the dead; in attempts to allow the living a vicarious engagement with the experience of the dead, and in the author's nuanced engagement with the ethical difficulties that this raises.

This book pushes the boundaries of existing work on 'dark tourism', a term often used to describe tourist travel to sites of death and disaster such as war zones, natural disasters such as New

Orleans, Ground Zero in New York or the Nazi death camps. The term is used by a number of scholars like Lennon and Foley (2000) and Sharpley and Stone (2012), while Tony Seaton proposes 'thanatourism' which situates this phenomenon within the historical tradition of the human contemplation of death (18). Willis traces these terms through tourism studies to performance studies, memory studies and curatorship. These three disciplines form the basis of her own study, and the examples she selects for closer examination in each of her chosen geographic locations reflect this. The work of Laurie Beth Clark, Lucy Lippard and Brigitte Sion offer other terms for this kind of work that reflect different aspects of it: trauma tourism (Clark), or tragic tourism (Lippard) and Sion's work focuses on memory and its relationship to performance. The exploration of these terms is more than mere semantics, as the study consistently interrogates trauma, tragedy and memory with reference to theatricality and ethics of spectatorship.

Willis's key theorists include Agamben, Rancière, and perhaps particularly Levinas. One of the important arguments of this book is that 'it is not a particular theatrical aesthetic that can be considered most ethical, but that the ethical aspect of theatre can be located in its responsive character' (11). This ethical question is the core of the study, variously phrased and explored as the work roams from one geographic location to another. Willis's subject of inquiry is essentially and necessarily absent: the dead, the silent witnesses to atrocity and barbarity. If we conceive of the dead as inhabiting an 'audible silence' then, Willis argues, 'in the dialectical tension that arises from this positioning of the spectator as audience to the unspeakable' an ethics emerges which is 'affective and theatrical ... and calls for an embodied attention to silence' (13). This embodiment draws the reader back to the opening descriptions of 'Dark Tourists' and to the Practice-as-Research that precedes the writing. The book identifies its organizing questions as all concerned with the nature and motivation behind dark tourism; the degree to which it can be regarded as theatrical; the roles of the spectators and the ethics underlying that spectatorship in terms of both knowledge and action; the dialectic of absence and presence that haunts these sites and performances, and the relationships between ethics and aesthetics (18). But as I read I came to think of these as research tangles rather than questions. Each draws on multiple strands of scholarship to interrogate artistic and spectatorial practices that are increasingly common in contemporary theatre and performance and that involve attempts to represent and 'witness' something 'real' or 'authentic'. Each exploration opens more questions: of the nature of violence, of human vulnerability; of Weil's essay on the *Iliad* which warns that violence reduces the human being to a thing. Repeatedly, in these performances and museums, objects are substituted for the absent other. It is one of the strengths of Willis's interrogative approach and the scope of the scholarship she draws upon that the reader is drawn into a discourse and into a scholarly terrain that describes, analyses and responds to primary material while maintaining complexity and facilitating thought.

Willis identifies one of these research knots in Clark's work: 'the tension between the desired closure on the one hand, and the desire for disclosure on the other, is "At the internally contradictory core of the practice of trauma tourism"' (3). Again and again, this seems to be at the heart of the human attraction to these sites and performances: the tension between the desire to confirm one's worst imaginings, and the desire to be at peace or to achieve closure: these are mutually contradictory desires.

The book's first chapter 'Landscapes of Aftermath' lays the groundwork for the geographically focused chapters that follow it. Willis's central organising research imperative is summarised as the reading, in ethical terms, of the dialectic of absence and presence that is characteristic of theatre, and that is at the heart of the experience of these geographic sites. This chapter includes a review of the literature on 'dark tourism' that places it in the context of the enduring human fascination

with death; but Willis argues that the contemporary 'dark tourist' seeks an affective rather than a spiritual experience. This 'illustrates a collision of contemporary mobility, mediatization and the neoliberal political paradigm, where the spectacular gratification of the individual is placed at the centre of economic and social life' (21). Two paradigms frame this investigation and bring into contrast the work of Levinas and Rancière on ethics: these paradigms are the ontological 'which includes the contemplative, personal and even mystical' and the political 'which is concerned with how such activity is understood in relation to narratives of power' (24). This provides a frame to introduce the aesthetics / ethics relationship and the range of positions occupied by the spectator -- Willis suggests 'pilgrim, witness, bystander, observer' (35).

The remaining five chapters draw together tourism, curatorship and performance. For example, Chapter 2 takes the Holocaust as its object of investigation, and the primary material includes a visit to three concentration camps, an analysis of Charlotte Delbo's account of performing Molière's *The Hypochondriac* in Raisko, the work of artist Artur Zmijewski and Grotowski's *Akropolis*. In Chapter 3 on Vietnam, the focus is on the War Remnants Museum and the interactive Chu Chi memorial, and under the subtitle 'metatheatre' Willis analyses Jackie Sibbles Drury's *We are Proud to Present* and Adrienne Kennedy's *An Evening with Dead Essex*. The representation of the Vietnam war in American film and media performance is also acknowledged as part of the accretion of meanings around this history. Chapter 4, on Cambodia, contrasts the Vietnamese war memorials with those that commemorate to Pol Pot's genocide. Since the Cambodian genocide has not been widely represented through the medium of film, the museums are engaged in education and in the creation and preservation of memory. The exhibition at Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide includes thousands of photographs of the murdered, which place the spectator in an encounter with the face of the individual, confronting us with their silence. Does this enable an ethical response, or does it reduce the sense of a mass of people, erasing individuality and perhaps heightening a sense (for the Western tourist) of the devalued life of the Other? Willis explores these possibilities, invoking Rancière to ask what should our response be? The chapter examines these questions through their materialization in two other works, Filloux's *Photographs from S21* and Panh's documentary *S21*. Chapter 5 takes the dispossession and genocide of the Māori people in New Zealand as its focus, and Chapter 6 examines the memorials to the Rwandan genocide and Erik Ehn's poetic and brutal play, *Maria Kizito*. In each case, these various primary materials are coherently drawn into an exploration of key questions that include the relationship between memorial and performance, the limits of representation, and the potential inherent in the theatrical to engage ethically with the limits of memory and human endurance. The work is compelling, though the chapter on New Zealand is somewhat weaker. It is an important chapter in that it identifies the inherent and systemic violence of settler-colonies and attempts to address it, through Māori memorial performance and theatre productions including Māori work and a production of *The Tempest*; but the chapter seems to have less critical distance than the others, or perhaps is simply less closely aligned with dark tourism, as Willis notes (163). Yet it is an important inclusion, if only to point the way to future work that might be extended in New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

This is a highly readable, rigorous scholarly study that makes a significant contribution to debates in ethics and performance and spectatorship as well as to dark tourism, while raising provoking questions for theatre scholars. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary range of primary material offers a valuable model for other performance studies scholars to structure the diverse sources that are increasingly typical of the discipline.

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**Notes**

i. See [www.theatrereview.org.nz](http://www.theatrereview.org.nz) for more information.

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