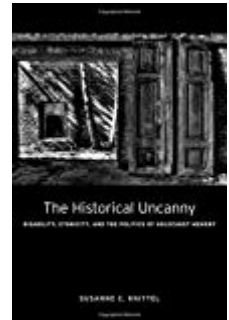


Susanne C. Knittel. *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. xii + 350 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-6278-6.



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In *The Historical Uncanny*, Susanne Knittel, an assistant professor of comparative literature at the University of Utrecht, investigates the differing ways in which atrocities are commemorated at two particular sites: Grafeneck in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, where the Nazis murdered at least ten thousand mentally and physically disabled people between 1939 and 1941, and the various sites in and around Trieste in Italy, including the Risiera di San Sabbe, a former rice-hulking factory in Trieste in which “thousands of Slovenes, Croats, Jews, and Italian anti-Fascists were imprisoned, killed or interned pending deportation between 1943 and 1945” (p. 176). The choice of these two “sites of memory” has been made because the two have traditionally been marginalized, in part because they do not “fit in” with the respective mainstream national discourses about the Nazi genocide and how it should be remembered. It is this idea that is meant by Knittel’s term “the historical uncanny,” which she explains as “vertiginous intrusion of the past into the present, the sudden awareness that what was

familiar has become strange” (p. 9). The two events upon which Knittel focuses fulfill this definition in different ways: the Nazi “euthanasia” program does so because of the continuing precarious position of disabled people in modern society, which raises questions about the extent to which disabled people constitute a minority group and whether disability can form the basis for an identity in the same way as, say, ethnicity, while the killings in and around Trieste raise a number of troubling questions about Italian self-concept.[1] Both sites demonstrate how important it is for historical events—particularly those involving mass atrocity—to be commemorated in a way which is true to the events themselves, rather than in a way that serves the agenda of nations or groups.

The book is divided into two main sections of three chapters each. Part 1 deals with the euthanasia program at Grafeneck and the many questions and problems that are raised by the way both this and the wider Nazi euthanasia program are (or are not) commemorated. This in-

cludes a very welcome consideration of how the program and its victims have been portrayed in film, television, and literature. Part 2 considers similar questions that are raised by the Italian Fascist and Nazi killings of Jews, partisans, Slovenes, and Croats in and around Trieste. The reasons for Knittel's selection of these two particular sites is further explained in a bridge chapter between parts 1 and 2. These questions are also considered in the book's introduction and conclusion.

The opening chapter provides a thoughtful and original introduction to the themes of the book as a whole. To this end, it opens with two thought-provoking quotations, the first one from the historian Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1994) concerning the problem that young people of the late twentieth century have a tendency to live in what he terms "a permanent present" (p. 1). This is caused, claims Hobsbawm, because the young people in question live in a society which has no real link to the past. The second quotation comes from Giorgio Bassani's novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1962) and introduces the idea that deaths that occurred a very long time ago are seen as being less important than those which occurred recently. Knittel opens her chapter with a demonstration of how this works in practice, with a focus on plans to overhaul the memorial at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp to give it a more "educational" focus and thereby combat feelings among young people that Auschwitz is "ancient history." It is seen as part of a more general problem in that visitors to the memorial react "appropriately" while there, for example, crying and asking why more people of the time were not righteous, but then fail to carry the "lessons" of the memorial into their own lives, such as watching reports of current genocides on television news yet failing to make any connection, or to question why they themselves are not righteous. The chapter then moves on to consider the French historian Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de memoire* (places of memory) and the European memory

projects--Brussels-led initiatives to foster European integration. Knittel observes that these have to be done very carefully in order to ensure that what emerges is not the kind of *lieu de memoire* envisaged by Nora--one which does not even seem to acknowledge the existence of national, racial, or other minority groups, much less accept that they might have their own legitimate points of view (p. 3). Knittel does follow Nora's methodology in one way, though, which is in her conception of a "site of memory" encompassing not just a place (e.g., Grafeneck Castle), but also such things as relevant television programs, works of literature, et cetera. These all help to demonstrate the ways in which understanding of a site's meaning does (or does not) change over time.

Chapter 1, "Remembering Euthanasia: Grafeneck as Heterotopia," centers specifically on Grafeneck and its history. "Heterotopia" is a term borrowed from Michel Foucault and denotes an alternative or counterspace--a definition that is appropriate to both Grafeneck's past and present function (p. 69). Knittel describes Grafeneck as "a place where the past is always present" (p. 35). This is in no small part because it functions both as a memorial to those who were murdered there by the Nazis, and as a facility that is home to impaired and mentally ill people. It is this, writes Knittel, that makes the site particularly "uncanny" (p. 36). Here, Knittel considers various ways in which the victims of the euthanasia program in general, and those murdered at Grafeneck in particular, have been commemorated. This includes the initiatives of individuals and groups, such as the 2012 play *Spurensuche Grafeneck* (In search of Grafeneck) and a 2009 documentary film about Grafeneck and the Nazi euthanasia program, as well as art installations such as Gunter Demnig's "stumbling Blocks" and Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz's 2005 Monument of the Grey Buses--the grey buses having been the vehicles used to transport those selected to be murdered in the euthanasia program from outside institutions to the six killing centers, of which Grafeneck was one.

The “stumbling Blocks” project is one that commemorates any victim of the Nazis, whether an individual or a member of a persecuted group. As such it helps to achieve a wider discussion about Nazi crimes rather than the usual assumption that either the Nazis solely persecuted Jews, or that, for some unspecified reason, the systematic murder of non-Jews does not matter. What is striking about these initiatives, however, is that they are very much the work of individuals and small organizations, a problem which is not lost on Knittel.

One of the most original contributions in this chapter is the gauntlet that Knittel throws down to disability studies. She writes that “the history of Nazi euthanasia invites reflection on the position of people with ... disabilities in today’s society. It is all the more striking, then, to note that within the ... field of disability studies only a handful of scholars have addressed this topic at all” (p. 47). Knittel offers two possible explanations for this phenomenon: first, that disability studies grew out of the disability rights movement, which focuses on present-day issues, and second, the distinction between the disability rights movement and the psychiatric survivors’ movement. This, claims Knittel, is due in part to activists from the two movements feeling that attempts to lump them together are not apposite, which results in a reluctance among disability studies activists and scholars to engage with the Nazi euthanasia program, as the majority of the victims allegedly had mental, rather than physical impairments. This claim is extremely problematic. As Henry Friedlander pointed out in his book *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, “although the victims were institutionalised in state hospitals and nursing homes, only some suffered from mental illness. Many were hospitalised only because they were retarded, blind, deaf, or epileptic, or because they had a physical deformity.”[2] In addition, my own work on the Nuremberg Medical Trial, which I am currently turning into a book, shows beyond doubt that the perpe-

trators of the euthanasia program used the claim that the victims were too insane to understand life, death, or what was happening to them to sidestep the issue of consent. Taken together, all this suggests that the claim that the euthanasia victims were primarily psychiatric patients should be treated with a little more skepticism than Knittel affords it.

Chapter 2, “Bridging the Silence, Part One: The Disabled Enabler,” considers various cultural representations of the Nazi euthanasia program and its victims. The cover the US television series *Holocaust*, shown in West Germany in January 1979, as well as a number of novels, including Alfred Andersch’s 1957 novel *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund*, its more famous contemporary *The Tin Drum* (1959), and Christoph Hein’s 1985 novel *Horns Ende*, which, writes Knittel, can be read as a kind of rewriting of Andersch’s novel, touching as it does on similar themes of responsibility, resistance, and the capacity for empathy. She argues convincingly that although all of these cultural representations mention the program and its victims, the ways in which they do so remain highly problematic. For example, *Holocaust* touches upon the program in two ways. First, Anna, a member of the fictional Weiss family—assimilated Jews who are the series’ protagonists—is brutally raped by Nazis after tearing off her yellow star. Deeply traumatized, she withdraws from the world and is sent to Hadamar for “treatment,” that is, death. Knittel shows how the other victims of the program, including those murdered alongside Anna, are portrayed as a nameless mass, distinguishable to the viewer as “other” by virtue of obvious tics or other indications of physical, mental, or psychological impairment. The viewer, however, is only expected to identify with Anna, a previously “normal” character who, but for a traumatic event, would never have had any involvement with the euthanasia program, much less been sent to a killing center. Elsewhere, the series invents a completely new category of cloth badge—“BLÖD” (stupid). These badges were af-

fixed to the uniforms of concentration camp inmates to denote different categories of prisoner, but, as Knittel points out, this category is completely fictional. This, however, is problematic--not merely inaccurate. Taken together with Anna's murder at Hadamar, the result of this portrayal is that other victims of the euthanasia campaign "never achieve the status of subjects. They do not have a voice, functioning only as a framework for Anna's tragic death. The Holocaust remains a specifically Jewish tragedy and the viewers' empathic identification begins and ends with its Jewish victims" (p. 81).

Problems of a somewhat different nature exist with the literary texts that Knittel discusses. Early texts in particular tend to suggest that the Nazis were a brutal occupying force, quite separate from ordinary Germans, and/or that the program came from nowhere. This does not help to foster understanding of the euthanasia program, or of Nazism as a whole.

Similarly unhelpful are the stereotypical portraits of disabled characters that many of the literary works contain. Many of these, such as Heinrich Böll's "Daniel, der Gerechte" (Daniel the Just) and Woldietrich Schnurre's "Freundschaft mit Adam" (Friendship with Adam), both published in the early 1950s, have their disabled characters in the role of "disabled enablers," whose sole function is to assist the nondisabled character in developing his moral sensibilities, or discovering his true self. Knittel reiterates the concerns expressed by many other disability studies scholars, including Stuart Murray and Mitchell and Snyder, that such representations are reductive, exploitative, and only serve to "other" disabled characters (and real people) further by suggesting that they exist outside society. Knittel writes about the persistence of the disabled enabler trope in fiction--German fiction in this case, but it exists elsewhere too. However, the most recent novel she discusses is Christoph Hein's *Horns Ende* (*Horn's End*), published in 1985, which leaves the reader wondering

if any more modern representations do anything to buck this trend, or whether there simply *are* no more recent representations.

Chapter 3, "Bridging the Silence: Part two, *The Vicarious Enabler*," takes a number of so-called hybrid texts, telling the stories of real victims of the euthanasia program. It begins, however, with a discussion of a vital, overlooked text, Alfred Döblin's 1946 short story, "Die Fahrt ins Blaue" (Journey into the blue)--a reference to a journey to an uncertain destination that is described by Knittel as "an ironic play on Nazi euphemisms" (p. 107). One important way in which Döblin's story is linked to the "hybrid texts" which follow it is in its unflinching description of the murder by gas of victims of the euthanasia program (pp. 108-109). As Knittel explains, the value of these descriptions cannot be underestimated being as they are the very opposite of the evasion and obfuscation on display in the texts discussed in the previous chapter. These texts force the reader to confront the horror of the Nazi euthanasia program and to see how wide was the complicity in it. This focus on the act of killing is also found in Hans-Ulrich Dapp's memoir of his grandmother, Emma Zeller, murdered at Grafeneck on June 21, 1940. The memoir recreates Emma and achieves the remarkable feat of giving the reader a sense of Emma as a person, showing how her family rejected her and could have saved her life, and also showing the post-Nazi legacy of having had a family member murdered during the euthanasia program--the complicated emotions it arouses in families who see impairment as a source of shame. This shows the different problems confronting the families of victims of the program and of sterilization--for example, Jewishness is not generally seen as a source of shame, and no one is the only Jew in his or her family.

One problem with this section of the book is that it really makes it appear that disability is solely a family and individual matter. This is something that disability advocates have fought

against—they continue to show that it is a matter of societal oppression, as disabled people are part of society. The section would have benefited greatly from another introductory or first chapter in which the pan-Western interest in eugenics, and the Nazi propaganda against the disabled, were thoroughly discussed. Knittel could have followed, for example, Horst Biesold's *Klagende Hände* (1988) about eugenics and deaf people in Nazi Germany to show the emotional consequences of such societal stigmatization. This would have been a way around her continued insistence that there were no survivors of the program (so they cannot say anything). She might also have included those disabled people who have campaigned on the issues raised by the euthanasia program and its contemporary resonances—for example, Franz Christoph, a German disability activist who campaigned vociferously against the speeches made by the controversial utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, who visited Germany and Austria in 1989-90 to speak publicly about his support for the selective infanticide of disabled newborns. Knittel criticizes portrayals of disabled people which “other” them by making it appear that they exist outside society, but then perpetuating the problem by refusing to let them speak or be in any way seen.

Chapter 4, entitled “Lethal Trajectories”, is a bridge chapter in which Knittel explains her reasons for having divided her book into two sections as discussed at the beginning of this review. This is basically because similar personnel were involved in the euthanasia program and in the killings in Trieste, both of which were organized by Christian Wirth (1885-1944), a senior SS man and career soldier whose photograph is displayed at both the Grafeneck and Risiera di San Sabba memorials. Knittel describes the euthanasia program and the Trieste killings as Wirth's first and last assignments. The photograph at Grafeneck is a professional one for which Wirth posed in civilian clothes, while that in the Risiera is a snapshot of him in military uniform. As Knittel makes

clear, these two different photographic portrayals help to raise profound and urgent questions about the form that memorialization of Nazi atrocities should take—all the more valuable now because of their increasingly pedagogical role. For example, does showing Wirth in civilian clothes, as at Grafeneck, do more to ensure that we are all aware of the potential “little Nazi” inside ourselves than the military snapshot in the Risiera memorial? The latter might risk suggesting that there is little to worry about in this regard unless one is in the military. After a discussion of Wirth's life and career, and of the men who followed him from Grafeneck to the death camps in Poland and finally to Trieste, the chapter widens into a very interesting and deeply thoughtful discussion of memorialization in both Germany and Italy. Knittel points out that the two memorials reflect the different scholarly understandings of the killings that took place in these locations and how these have changed over time. For example, Grafeneck has had two memorial plaques: the first, which Knittel describes as “postwar,” describes the people murdered there as “victims of inhumanity” (p. 160). Knittel points out that this “expresses ... postwar avoidance and repression” (p. 161). The second memorial plaque, placed in 1985, describes the Nazis as having “seized” Grafeneck and set up a killing center there, continuing the theme identified in postwar literature in portraying the Nazis as an occupying power. A much more comprehensive exhibition gives a full explanation of the links between the “euthanasia” program, the history of eugenics, and the wider Nazi genocide. The exhibition opened in 2005 and was the result of Grafeneck's hiring of a full-time historian in the late 1990s. The exhibition at the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste, originally created in 1982, writes Knittel, is full of relevant documents, but still very abstract: they are portrayed as “abstract icons of Nazi evil” (p. 165).

Chapter 5 is “Black Holes and Revelations: The Risiera, the Foibe, and the Making of an Italian Tragedy.” Knittel points out that Trieste occu-

pies a unique position—surrounded by the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and only just connected to the rest of Italy. It therefore offers a unique perspective on Italian history and memory. The chapter considers two sites of memory—the Risiera di San Sabbe, and the nearby Foibe di Bassovizza, the memorial to the victims of mass killings by Yugoslav partisans in 1943 and 1945. While the former was designated a national monument in 1965, the latter is the subject of continued debates about how many bodies are actually buried there. People come to the Risiera each year on January 27, the international day marking the liberation of Auschwitz, while they visit the Foibe for the *Giorno del Ricordo* on February 10. The *Giorno del Ricordo* is very recent, having been instituted by the former prime minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi. Taken together, however, the two sites of memory and the two memorial days represent a huge simplification of the history of the period—one in which Italian innocence and victimhood is reaffirmed, the memory of Italian Fascism is swept under the carpet, and different groups of victims are lumped together with no real attempt at contextualization. For example, the Risiera is described in the decree establishing it as “the only example of a Nazi concentration camp in Italy,” although this is not true (pp. 194-195).

Chapter 6 is entitled “A Severed Branch: The Memory of Fascism on Stage and Screen” and expresses the same thought as that contained in the Hobsbawm quotation at the beginning of the introduction concerning the disconnectedness from history that young people today often feel. The proliferation of Italian “days of memory” in recent years aids this by privileging emotional engagement over critical reflection. This chapter is divided into two sections—the first dealing with televisual representations of the events commemorated at the two memorials discussed in the previous chapter, and the second dealing with documentary plays and thus taking in the topic of vicarious witnessing. One of the representations

considered in the first half of the chapter is *Il cuore nel pozzo* (2005), a drama which, it is claimed, is based on a true story. As Knittel points out, this practice lends the drama an air of spurious authenticity, often making the viewer more likely to suspend disbelief. *Il cuore nel pozzo* is divided into two parts, both preceded by the statement that the program is dedicated to the “thousands upon thousands of Italians killed in the *foibe*,” although by no means everyone killed in the *foibe* was Italian. Yet again, this oversimplification serves to foster an Italian identity based on victimhood and shared sacrifice. Worryingly, such dramas are often commissioned by the government, so their potential for distorting and influencing national memory and identity is alarmingly clear. This is not the case with the documentary theater pieces that Knittel considers in the second half of this chapter. One of these is the Slovene play *Rižarna*, which premiered in Trieste in 1975. It is based on extensive research by the journalist Albin Bubnič and is about the Risiera. Although it was well received at the time, it does not seem to have entered Italian public consciousness.

Chapter 7 is entitled “Bridging the Silence, Part III: Trieste and the Language of Belonging” and focuses on how various Triestine writers have expressed their identity through choices such as their subject matter and the language in which they write. Boris Pahor, a native Slovene, writes in Slovene as a reaction to the language’s suppression during his younger years and he highlights this form of oppression in his stories. Pahor’s comparative neglect in Italy can, argues Knittel, be traced back to his chronicling of anti-Slovene Fascist persecution, which does not fit the national narrative. By contrast, the writer Fulvio Tomizza writes in Italian, but uses some Croat words too, having grown up in a small village in Istria in which communication involved a mixture Croat-Slovene and a Venetian dialect, which were spoken and mixed together. Tomizza hoped to find a “third way” which would eschew tribalism and lead to a more mature, inclusive present

and future. This hope was dashed by the enforcement of, first, Italian (under Fascism), and then Croat.

I have really struggled with the question of whether this should have been one book or two. Without Knittel's formidable linguistic skills (a native of Baden-Württemberg in Germany, she wrote this book in English and is obviously fluent in Italian), it could not have been one book. In addition, part 2 does help with the reader's consideration of some of the matters raised in part 1. For example, Fulvio Tomizza's musings on identity were of great interest to me, particularly in view of Knittel's claim (also made by others) that disabled people are not a sufficiently unified group to be able to promote their interests in general, and remembrance of the Nazi euthanasia program in particular. This seems a rather rash claim, given that the promotion of group interests can only be successful if the "majority" are receptive. In this regard I am thinking particularly of the English disabled artist and activist Liz Crow, who has experienced many difficulties in getting her play *Resistance* staged due to the feeling among owners of potential venues that it is too "worthy," niche, or unimportant. Knittel's book would really have benefited from a discussion of this, and from the resulting questions of what identity as a disabled person means to someone like Crow--and whether this is really so different from the concerns of Fulvio Tomizza or Boris Pahor. Both this, and the content of Crow's play--the protagonist being Elise, an inmate of an institution who is wrongly believed to be incapable of noticing what is going on around her--would help to challenge Knittel's apparently fixed belief that disabled people's stories always need to be uncovered and told by nondisabled people.

Notes

[1]. The "euthanasia" program (that was its title) was a euphemism; it was systematic murder, which is why the word "euthanasia" appears here

in scare quotes. Readers should consider it used in that sense throughout the review.

[2]. Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), xi.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

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