

Guest Seminar

Politicising traumata?

Contemporary art practice in South Africa viewed against the backdrop of multidirectional memory

Due to the latency period of trauma, traumata experienced some time ago might erupt in societies at a time when novel and different types of traumata have already occurred. Germany's engagement with its colonial history, for example, happened with such a delay as it was overshadowed by the trauma of the Holocaust. Different traumata that impact on a society resonate in its diverse arts and memory culture. In our analyses of how traumata express themselves in the arts, we will compare selected artworks from post-war Germany with post-apartheid South Africa. Considering South Africa's multi-ethnic population and the ways in which different ethnicities have been victimised, e.g. during colonisation, during apartheid and in the era of post-apartheid, the memory culture of South Africa might mirror the diversity of its population. This seminar explores how the experience of traumata resonates in contemporary art practice in South Africa. Rather than viewing traumata as competing for attention, this seminar will follow Michael Rothberg's approach. In his study *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Rothberg introduced the notion of multidirectional memory to do justice to memory's nature 'as a subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative'. The asset of multidirectional memory is that it impedes a hierarchy and prioritisation of memories that might result in the negligence of

equally important memories of other groups. Taking each trauma seriously is a necessary condition for starting a dialogue that is coined by mutual understanding, sympathy and forgiveness.



Thinking about memories and traumata in a multidirectional way will also refine our criticality towards the politicisation of certain memories in order to distract from others. In our exploration of memory culture in South Africa, we will scrutinise artworks engaging with collective traumata as well as contemporary museum politics and curatorial strategies in South African collections. Which traumata do they draw attention to? And, in doing so, might they distract from other - equally important - memories and traumata?

The seminar will take place from 5 until 8 March 2019 (times and venues to be announced in due course) and includes a field trip to selected art galleries in Cape Town.

Biography

Having completed a M.St. in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Oxford and a Magister in Philosophy and History of Art at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Sarah took up a post in the cultural section at the German Embassy in London. Subsequently, she undertook her doctoral research at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London under the supervision of Prof Sarah Wilson. During this time, Sarah also worked as college curator of art at Pembroke (University of Oxford) and as associate lecturer at the Courtauld Institute. Her dissertation, *From Bayreuth to Burkina Faso: Christoph Schlingensiefel's Opera Village Africa as postcolonial Gesamtkunstwerk?*, explored Opera Village as a testing ground for a critical interrogation of Richard Wagner's notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Opera Village also operated as a symbol to draw attention to Germany's colonial past which paved the way for the holocaust. In doing so, it targets to provide a platform for dialogue and the creation of transcultural arts that are informed by mutual understanding. You can find out more about her doctoral research in this film she shot in Burkina Faso, Berlin and London. Sarah also wrote an article about her journey to Opera Village Africa published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Currently, Sarah is preparing her post-doctoral research project (habilitation) that investigates into the potential of images to foster criticality in the era of post-truth politics.



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