Book Reviews

Astrid Erll. *Memory in Culture.* Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2011

Astrid Erll's tersely titled book *Memory in Culture* (though falling short of coming across as a marvel of noncursory efficiency) was trailed by the editors of the Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies series as "groundbreaking work", providing "one of the most thorough, sophisticated and challenging overviews of the area to date." Memory studies – or the "memory paradigm", in Erll's terms – are presented as an alternative to historiography, whose cradling of grand narratives and conceiving of history as a monolithic "collective singular" (Reinhart Koselleck, 5) is no longer sustainable, nor viable against the backdrop of the new postmodern insights, which consider the past "a human construct." Astrid Erll's whole structuring and conceiving of the book is the result of her professedly poststructuralist positioning vis-a-vis this "all-encompassing sociocultural phenomenon", purportedly aiming at giving a sharp overhaul of memory discourses and practices.

In the seven chapters of the book, the author pursues the theorisation of the memory paradigm from its charismatic and founding father, Maurice Halbwachs, to its "most prominent" and internationally most frequented Pierre Nora to more recent, globally-oriented and semiotically informed researchers of the field like James Wertsch or Sybille Krämer, accounting for as many different ways of engaging with a cultural practice that "has endowed the humanities, written off by many as irrelevant, with a new legitimacy within society." (5)

Critical revisitings of Halbawachs and Pierre Nora will see the latter pioneer of remembering practices sidetracked on grounds of "sore undertheorization" (27). Departing from a fundamental assumption about the constructedness of cultural memory, Astrid Erll acknowledges the importance of the "expansive understanding" (7) of the term "collective memory", which set its propounder against his masters (Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim) and his contemporaries (Sigmund Freud), who only spoke of individual memory. However, the use it was put to by Nora, in the nation-centred "lieux de mémoire" is seen by the author as counterproductive, because the "old-fashioned and ideologically charged assumptions about the nature of memory, history and the nation" (27) deprive memory studies of the possibility to capitalize on the "globalizing processes of cultural memory." (27) Cultural memory is broadly defined by the author, halfway through the book, as the "sum total of all the processes (biological, medial, social) which are involved in the interplay of past and present within sociocultural contexts." (101)

Erll herself joins the ranks of those who choose to talk about transcultural memory (in a global context). The coinage is based on adaptations of propoundings by James Clifford (1992), the anthropologist who used for the first time the metaphor of "travelling culture", turned unabashedly by Erll into "travelling memory", in a bid to shed what she perceives as Nora's "methodological

nationalism," the cumbersome "nation-culture bind." (65) Actually, this is the butt of Astrid Erll's argument, namely that memory, individual as well as social, is fundamentally a transcultural phenomenon.

To all accounts and purposes, Erll's own professed indebtedness to poststructuralism and cognately, to constructedness organizes the author's entire critical discourse. Yet although she had no qualms about embracing unequivocally the tenets of poststructuralism: memory is constructed (5 and passim), the author maintains with an equally unflinching composure, speaking about the epistemological possibilities of literary texts as carriers of memory that "basic research is necessary if we want to counteract all-too-simple poststructuralist positions which claim that all facts are fiction and every narration about the past is literal." Disgruntled readers may wonder what's ahead: backtracking wholesale on the constructionist positioning in the final part of the proceedings?

In spite of this conflicting stance, when she seems to be on the wrong side of the argument, Erll argues quite convincingly, albeit too eagerly, in favour of the mediality of cultural remembering, the encoding and circulation of images of the past by means of media, which reinforces the constructedness of memory. The concept of mediality is not an original accretion of the author's own ruminations on the subject, but one borrowed and further glossed upon from forerunners in the field like James Wertsch (2002) and Sybille Krämer (1998), in the name of theoretical filiation. This overkeenness in deeming mediality the archtrait of cultural memory lures the author into lightly reached and insufficiently shored up assertions about the "inherent mediality" of memory, which warps theorization and are conducive to further easily furled out, if not altogether abusive equations: "the medium is the memory," left theoretically stranded.

In a cerebral contemplation of memory and its discontents, the author advances, albeit uncovincingly at times, the boundaries of cultural inquiry. The overall discourse is, in my opinion, flawed by bothersome repetitive inroads into prior theorists' frameworks, leaving the sense of an excessive, not entirely streamlined tributariness.

Astrid Erll fares far better in the particularly insightful latter part of the book, which makes up for the discursive flaws and redundancies heretofore, where she emphasizes the ethical and political implications of cultural remembrance, announced in the first, yet touched upon in the very last few pages of the book. Retorting to critics hailing the demise of memory studies in the wake of 9/11 terrorist attacks, the author writes in the unpretentious, yet powerful wording of someone who is unwittingly imparting an epiphany: "Today (and whether this is more an era of crisis than any other age is also open to debate) we cannot afford the luxury of not studying memory, [....] (it will) provide insights into the unintentional, implicit side of cultural memory, which seems to impinge on politics more strongly the less people are aware of it." (172) The adage that memory is political is given fresh and slant perspectives.

This intelligent, though somewhat ponderous book lacks the oomph to be *the ultimate* memory studies handbook it purports to be, by and large due to the holes that could easily be picked in the author's terminological echafodage and the

lack-lustre synthesis. Those seeking groundbreaking scholarship will be disappointed.

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