

Dementia, Violence, and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Literature, Film, and Comics

Workshop at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, September 13-15, 2018

Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies, Freie Universität Berlin,
Habelschwerdter Allee 45, 14195 Berlin, room JK 33/112

In public discourse and the day-to-day provision of health care, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia are predominantly regarded as illnesses afflicting individuals. Although diseases of memory can have great impact on relatives, caregivers, and communities, stories of dementia are not necessarily understood as entailing any wider political meaning and it seems common sense not to hold individuals with dementia accountable for their affliction. At the same time, however (in Western societies at least), memory loss is not always viewed purely as a contingent, 'neutral' neurobiological process but can tie into political debates, especially in the context of WW II and the Holocaust but also other experiences of racial/ political violence and trauma, e.g. in the contexts of colonialism, slavery, genocide, and forced migration in or across Europe, the Americas, and beyond.

In perpetrator societies, dementia-induced amnesia can be interpreted to be a wilful refusal to remember (the neurobiological equivalent of repression), and sufferers might even be blamed for strategically 'giving in' to their disease at a specific point in time in order to avoid confrontation with their past. This happened in Germany when Walter Jens, rhetorics professor and influential post-war public intellectual, succumbed to dementia at the very moment the media uncovered the fact that he had applied for membership to the NSDAP and published anti-Semitic essays whilst still a student of literature (see Tilman Jens' 2009 essay *Demenz: Abschied von meinem Vater*). In the case of both victims and perpetrators of traumatic injustice and violence, dementia may reveal previously buried or hidden memories. Dementia and amnesia, in these cases, paradoxically reveal rather than conceal uncomfortable truths. In the context of forced migration, demented protagonists may return to their childhood language and re-enact (traumatic) memories, challenging their successful integration into the countries of destination.

Memory theorists and cultural studies scholars have raised the fact that our memory culture will change once the last eyewitnesses of 20th century catastrophes have died – communicative memory will turn into cultural memory, to put it in Jan Assmann's terms. Should the increasing focus on protagonists with dementia in recent books and films be understood as related to this development? Is dementia in these contexts a simple plot device, is the illness depicted realistically, and/ or is it used as a metaphor to raise larger cultural and socio-political issues? How do literary texts, films, or comics conceptualise the dynamics of remembering and forgetting and the interrelations between 'real', repressed, re/imagined memories, or those (un)covered by screen memories? What are the political repercussions and the larger cultural impact of these works? What kind(s) of 'truth' do they propose? What is at stake when dementia meets history and politics?

Programme

Thursday, September 13, room JK 33/112

14:00 Welcome & Introduction (IRMELA MAREI KRÜGER-FÜRHOFF, NINA SCHMIDT, SUE VICE)

14:30-16:00, chair: Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff

MARTINA ZIMMERMANN, Goethe Universität Frankfurt / King's College London (UK):
Dementia and Memory Politics in Fiction: from Narrative Experiment to Plot Device

PIETER VERMEULEN, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BEL):
Homo Sacer / Homo Demens. Dementia, Bare Life, and the Memory of Violence in
Contemporary Literature

16:00 *Coffee and tea, fruit, snacks*

16:30-18:00, chair: stef lenk

IRMELA MAREI KRÜGER-FÜRHOFF, Freie Universität Berlin:
Screen Memories in Literary and Graphic Dementia Narratives

CRYSTAL YIN LIE, University of Michigan (US):
"The Demented Tense": Unspooling Time and History in Susan Schultz's *Dementia Blog*

18:00 *Catered dinner at the graduate school*

19:30, room JK 32/102

DANA WALRATH, anthropologist, writer, artist, Vermont (US):
Public keynote presentation: Transmuting Transgenerational Trauma: Dementia,
Storytelling, and Healing
Introduction: Susan Merrill Squier, Penn State (US)

Reception at Schlegel Graduate School

Friday, September 14, JK 33/112

10:00-12:30, chair: Sue Vice (*refreshments served in conference room*)

KIRSTIN GWYER, University of Oxford (UK): "The world around him was a page of alien text":
Books and Blanks in Contemporary Jewish Post-Holocaust Writing

ALEXIS BROWN, University of Sheffield (UK):
On the Natural History of Destruction: W.G. Sebald and Writing Historical Absence

JULIA WATSON, Ohio State University (US):
Dementia, Interrogatory Comics, and Somatic Revenge: Miriam Katin's *Letting It Go*

12:30 *Catered lunch at the graduate school*

14:00-15:30, chair: Nina Schmidt

KATJA GARLOFF, Reed College, Oregon (US): Reading the Korsakoff Syndrome: Holocaust Remembrance in Doron Rabinovici's Novel *Ohnehin*

SUE VICE, University of Sheffield (UK): Denial, Disavowal and Dementia in Kindertransport Fiction and Drama

15:30 *Coffee and tea, fruit, cake*

16:00-17:30, chair: Mette Biil Sørensen (FU Berlin)

NINA SCHMIDT, Freie Universität Berlin:
The Return of the 'Vaterbuch' Genre? Crossing Dementia and the National Socialist Past in Tilman Jens's *Demenz* (2009)

ALASTAIR MORRISON, University of Southern Denmark / Syddansk Universitet:
Limits of Memory, Borders of Welfare: Merethe Lindstrøm's Dementia Fiction

18:30 *Dinner at restaurant "Luise": Königin-Luise-Straße 40-42, 14195 Berlin-Dahlem*

Saturday, September 15, JK 33/112

10:30-12:00, chair: Sue Vice (*refreshments served in conference room*)

KRISTINA LUCENKO, Stony Brook University (US):
Interdependence and Rhetorical Listening in Susan Faludi's *In the Darkroom*

RAQUEL MEDINA, Aston University (UK):
Alzheimer's Disease and the Fight against Forgetting the Atrocities of the Argentinean Dirty War in *El tiempo suspendido* (*Time Suspended*, 2015)

12:15 Final Discussion, *followed by sandwiches / fingerfood*

Dana Walrath's keynote on the Thursday is free and open to all; no registration required.

Workshop convenors: Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff (Freie Universität Berlin), Nina Schmidt (Freie Universität Berlin), Sue Vice (University of Sheffield), pathographics@fsgs.fu-berlin.de.

The workshop is organised by the PathoGraphics research team at Freie Universität Berlin, Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies: www.fsgs.fu-berlin.de/pathographics