
EVA PICH-PONCE

Université de Séville

doi:10.1093/fs/knv277


Matter is at the forefront of current theoretical considerations in the humanities, especially in the context of posthumanist and new materialist theories. This volume explores specific junctures of matter, time, and space in twentieth-century French culture. Lisa Jeschke and Adrian May bring together a diverse set of contributions in order to propose ‘some new orientations for a properly materialist thought’ (p. 5; emphasis original). They wish to offer a ‘meteorology of the times’ (p. 4), that is, to give an account of the shifting cultural and political climate throughout the last century in respect to temporal and spatial materialities (see also May’s contribution on ‘méteorologie’), and to offer fractured trajectories of the matter–time suture in order to bear witness to ‘the breaks, interruptions and disillusionments in the movement of history’ (p. 13). They usefully link their volume to some important current tendencies in theory that are not, strictly speaking, French, but are intimately connected to and inspired by French theory: neomaterialism and the work of Peter Sloterdijk. Jeschke and May rightly point out that new materialists should be wary of repeating the ‘ahistorical celebration of matter’ of the 1960s (p. 8), because this approach has already been seen to be effectively reintegrated by neoliberalism (see also Jennifer Johnson’s contribution). The question of politics is central to this volume. Martin Crowley’s article on human finitude, and its possible connection to egalitarian politics in Jean-Luc Nancy’s work, investigates the relation of ontology to politics, and considers the possibilities of thinking matter in political terms. Alexandra Paulin-Booth’s contribution posits the conceptualizations of time (past, present, and future) as ‘contested terrain’ (p. 27) and a battlefield for the left-wing thinkers of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. The relation of art to material temporality is also given considerable space in this volume. Painting, cinema, theatre,
and literature are each treated as singular points in time and space where matter and time enter a fraught relationship. This volume will be of interest not only to scholars of contemporary French studies but also to those who work on the current theoretical shift towards rethinking matter and the question of temporality.

IWONA JANICKA
UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK
doi:10.1093/fs/knv241

Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance. By Debarati Sanyal.

The proliferation of studies of cultural memory in recent years, especially related to traumatic events such as the Holocaust or colonialism, can induce ‘memory fatigue’. This book, however, stands out from the crowd. Debarati Sanyal is a nineteenth and twentieth century specialist and a major theorist of the protean nature of memory. Her approach in this book, which she sets out in a wonderful Introduction, is to challenge the notion that memories are specific, singular, and separate and reveal, instead, the mutability of memory as it circulates between different sites and times. Yet Sanyal is careful to counter the claim that the blurring of lines between different memories results in a confusion of events and, consequently, a distortion of history. Her definition of complicity is one that acknowledges connections between Holocaust remembrance and memories of extreme violence elsewhere, specifically the Algerian War of Independence, but refuses to conflate one with another. For Sanyal, dangerous intersections are always to the fore. We are implicated in global patterns of violence and are contaminated by guilt and shame, but we must not lose sight of the differences between perpetrators and victims, witnesses and spectators. Hence, Sanyal rejects viewing history either as trauma (we are all victims) or as the continuous unfolding of the paradigm of the camp (we are all perpetrators). Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman are taken to task for the former, Giorgio Agamben for the latter. Sanyal prefers to talk, instead, of an ironic complicity, reflecting not a universal condition but an ethics of ambivalence. According to this model, the limited national framing of Pierre Nora’s ‘lieu de mémoire’ is replaced by the multiple intersections of the ‘nœud de mémoire’ (p. 60). The figure of allegory becomes Sanyal’s trope of choice for tracing the shifting contours and unexpected legacies of Holocaust memory in works by Albert Camus, Alain Resnais, Ousmane Sembène, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jonathan Littell, Assia Djebar, and Boualem Sansal. In Benjaminian fashion, she reads the figural landscape of these works — the plague in Camus’s La Peste and Resnais’s Nuit et brouillard, the fall in Camus’s La Chute, crabs in Sartre’s Les Séquestrés d’Altona, the city of Strasbourg in Djebar’s Les Nuits de Strasbourg, and so on — as multilayered sites in which different moments of terror are in dialectical tension. These readings through the prism of allegorical, ironic complicity are remarkable for their nuanced analysis, the complex model of history they propose, the erudition of the author’s insight, and the lucidity of her prose. In the Afterword, Sanyal cites Hannah Arendt’s famous condemnation of Adolf Eichmann’s role in the Holocaust as a failure of imagination and the ability to think from the standpoint of someone else. Complicity (not identification) between one and another holds out the prospect, instead, of replacing the bureaucratic mind with an ethical approach to the Other. Ultimately, the power of Sanyal’s reflection on the poetics and politics of cultural memory today is the ethical lesson we might draw from conceiving different pasts in complicity.

MAX SILVERMAN
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
doi:10.1093/fs/knv269