

Constraints of Creativity

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School of Arts,
Languages and Cultures

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The Centre for
Interdisciplinary
Research in the
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Negative Empathy, Fear, Catharsis: An Intermedial Itinerary

Public Lecture

5 October, 5-7 P.M.

University Place, Room 6.210

Literature on empathy has enormously increased in the last decades, especially from the point of view of neuroscience and neuroaesthetics. Scholars, however, have been focussing especially on the ethical dimension of empathy: on the identification with the victims which is also highlighted by the political use of this concept (the famous Obama speech). This paper focuses instead on the empathy with negative characters, which can have a strong cathartic and social function, as a discharge of destructive drives, and is often linked to the representation of fear and other strong emotions.

The paper will analyze the intersection between negative empathy and fear through various examples taken from different historical contexts, literary genres and media: Shakespeare's Macbeth and its rich reception (especially Verdi's operatic adaptation), Dostoevsky's The Possessed, Michael Haneke's The White Ribbon, the high quality TV fiction Breaking Bad, highlighting their focus on the themes of power, war, social terror and anxiety.

The Object-Fetish: From Memory to Alterity

Seminar

6 October, 11 A.M. - 1 P.M.

University Place, Room 5.211

After an introduction on the complex critical debate on fetishism and on objects, the paper deals first with the mythopoeic force of objects-fetishes, their parallelism with artistic creativity, exemplified by two passages from a novel (Madame Bovary) and a movie (The Last Tycoon). In the second part it will analyse two opposite patterns of thematization: the object-fetish with a memorial function, that is able to exorcise the trauma of a loss; and the modernist attraction to their pure materiality, to the inorganic. This polarity exemplifies the two contrasting attitudes towards objects: on one hand to animate them, and to project on them emotional, psychological, symbolic values; on the other hand to exploit inanimate matter, and its nude mystery.