
Review

Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance

Mihaela Mihai

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Mihaela Mihai has written a daring book that transcends disciplinary, linguistic, and national boundaries. Its central question is: What is the role of art and artists in helping us think through our political responses to systemic violence? According to Mihai, the arts have a major role to play in transforming ‘official stories’, which stabilize unjust orders; they can help interrupt the vicious cycle of systemic exclusions and violent habits. Mihai illustrates her thesis by analyzing 18 novels and films in three different repressive contexts: France under Nazi occupation, Communist Romania and apartheid South Africa.

The first part of the book presents the conceptual underpinning of Mihai’s argument in a remarkably well-written introduction and two short theoretical chapters. The second and much longer part of the book consists of the three case studies that make the proposals ‘more sophisticated, more plausible, and more productive’ (p. 65).

In the introduction, Mihai critiques debates about systemic violence as astoundingly unnuanced. Discussions tend to focus on perpetrators, victims and resisters, thus ‘limiting the accounts we get of past violence...and the agents involved’ (p. 13). Perpetrators receive unmitigated condemnation, and resisters or ‘heroes’ unconditional praise. By contrast, Mihai wants us to see these groups of people on a moral and ethical continuum (p. 14). Some perpetrators become resisters or victims. Heroes are ambiguous and no stranger to fear; they may even betray.

The most original features are in Mihai’s articulation of the aesthetics of care and the three case studies. Mihai argues that works of art can ‘seductively sabotage’ our attachment to dominant-comfortable and reductive–narratives about the past’ (p. 9). She discusses the role of novels and films, some well-known and others less so, as agents of ‘hesitation’ and interruption theoretically in Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapters 4–6 she turns to three cases studies of systemic violence.

Chapter 1 introduces us to the concept of ‘double erasure’ (p. 25). There is no clean slate in spite of attempts at ‘curating political memory’. Indeed ‘the need not



to know' is profound (p. 26), and national debates obfuscate 'widespread complicity' in the perpetration of violence. This is the first erasure. The second erasure consists in idealizing the resisters, who are mostly male and exceptionally virtuous and heroic (e.g. Jean Moulin in France). In order to offer a socio-ontological sketch alternative to simplistic visions of the past due to the double erasure, Mihai draws from Pierre Bourdieu. People do not act *ex nihilo*, but are limited or enabled by their habitus, their gender, class, ethnicity and the state they live in. Most adopt the *doxa* of public opinion (pp. 33, 37). Mihai, however, argues that mnemonic processes, which Bourdieu does not discuss, impact whether people can imagine a future with hope. Considering the 'positionality and relationality of memory, hope and action paves the way for a more sophisticated understanding of the spectrum of involvement' (p. 45).

In Chapter 2, Mihai presents her concept of 'seductive sabotage'. Artworks can distract pleasurably (thus seductively) from problematic modes of remembering. Mihai acknowledges that art has been used for state propaganda, can present problematic visions of the past, and even close the spectators' minds to challenging realities (pp. 63–65). Yet she is unwavering in her conviction that art can mediate plurivocal interpretations of the past and challenge political exclusion. Some artists perform a 'labor of aesthetic care' for the health of the public space (p. 47). In Mihai's account writers and film makers undermine the need not to know (p. 49), and introduce 'affective hesitation, which breaks the routine relationship between memory and imagination, and challenges individuals' habitus. Like feminist theorist Joan Tronto, Mihai argues that democracy requires care work. Unlike Tronto, she focuses on artists as 'aesthetic care workers' of democracy. They are 'caring refuseniks' or 'dissenting mnemonic agents' who dent mnemonic *doxas* even at the cost of being attacked as traitors (pp. 58–63). They enable readers and spectators to access 'prosthethically' alternative visions of the past (p. 57).

Mihai's theoretical argument is highly complex, yet carefully outlined and explained. The three empirical Chapters, 4–6, are structured alike. Their introductory section summarizes historical facts and national debates on guilt and accountability; the second section consists of the 'official story'; the six other sections discuss works of art.

Chapter 4 on France under German occupation discusses two films, *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) and *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), three novels, *Le petit canard* (1954), *La ronde de nuit* (1969), *Comme un verger avant l'hiver* (1978), and a short story *Ter le milicien* (1982). These works impel the viewers and readers to take on the complex positionality of those who collaborated with the occupier while saving a Jewish lover and her relatives, such as Lucien Lacombe. They tell stories of the betrayal of resistance comrades, thus denting the 'national hierarchy of honor and abjection'. They thematize 'unpatriotic' forms of sexual desire and love (p. 86). *Hiroshima mon amour's* main character was *tondue* at the Liberation for having fallen in love with a German soldier (her hair was shaved as a form of public



punishment). The film's director Alain Resnais performs the 'labor' of a caring refusnik as he challenges the sharp distinction between perpetrator and victim, and reveals how gender 'structured the social construction of both treason and heroism in the space of public memory, with crucial consequences for women's sociopolitical status' (p. 121).

Chapter 5, 'Romania's Horizon of Hope and Despair', takes on the double erasure in Romanian self-perceptions of complicity and resistance during the 44 years long Communist regime. Mihai reviews three novel *The Black Envelope* (1986), *The Appointment* (1997), *The Land of Green Plums* (1994) and three film *Concurs* (or *Orienteering*, 1982); *The Medal of Honor* (2009) and *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006). This last film 'seductively sabotages' the power of heroization, and undermines 'all claims to glory' (p. 177), by offering a satirical take on where Romanians were minutes *before* the dictator's escape from Bucharest in a helicopter in 1989. Were they protesting in the streets to provoke freedom? Or did they come out only to celebrate freedom later? The Romanians interviewed in the film sharply disagree about their respective roles (p. 175).

Chapter 6, 'The Spectrum of Apartheid in South Africa', starts with historical facts like the two previous chapters. The 1995–1999 Truth and Reconciliation process constitutes the 'official story' to be challenged, because it promotes imaginary notions of South Africa as the 'rainbow nation', and a primarily masculine vision of the 'noble struggle' against oppression, thus erasing the role of female resisters (pp. 198–201). Four novels, *David's Story* (2001), *Bitter Fruit* (2003), *The Innocents* (1994), and *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), and two films *Nothing But the Truth* (2008) and *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema* (2008) illustrates the 'neglect of justice', 'structural complicity and impure resistance' in South Africa, and the complexity of life choices under post-apartheid conditions. The caring refusniks' works show us 'how much is at stake in mnemonic excisions but also how difficult it is to undo them' (p. 235).

Mihai's love of fiction and films shines throughout, as she introduces her readers to an abundance of art and even gestures to many other works she could have reviewed. She shows us how fruitful such discussions are to political scholarship, as she gracefully weaves political theory with art works and lived experiences. She opens new pathways for research. Scholars with different linguistic abilities might study the 'caring refusniks' who have written novels or produced films on the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Have they been successful in seductively sabotaging hegemonic memories in the US public space? Many other 'situations' could be suggested for inquiry.

According to Mihai, art expands its audiences' 'political imaginary' and 'can feed... collective transformation' (pp. 47, 49). However, there is little empirical evidence offered that this actually happened in the three cases considered. This is not the book's central topic, but one or two concrete examples would strengthen the case. More importantly, most of the works reviewed confront



us with flawed characters, although Mihai insists on the importance of ‘hope’ to compel action. Harsh facts on the dark side of human behaviors provide little hope. Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* has been justly critiqued for its idealized vision of the Mayflower Compact and council democracy. Yet, the book continues to inspire courageous activists, also in Russia today, as Estelle Levresse (2022) writes. The critique of the South African truth and reconciliation process seems excessively harsh, though it is quite in keeping with academic *doxa*. Some studies, such as *Public forgiveness in post-conflict contexts* (2011), offer more nuanced discussions. To impel action, we need heroes we can admire and trust, political innovators as well as artists.

Regardless, Mihai’s remarkable book will remain of lasting interest to scholars and students interested in political memory, politics of reconciliation and transitional justice, and the role of art in political transitions.

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