

Our Neurotic Culture, Reclaimed

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Abstract:

The mission of this essay collection is to uproot neurosis from its original medical and psychoanalytical bedrock and embed it within contemporary critical cultural and literary discussions. Through reading neurosis in culture and fiction, it tests its subversive potential for stretching the boundaries of normalcy. The eight chapters encompass an impressive range of texts, and a sizable portion thereof investigate neurosis in a post-colonial context, especially through the work of Frantz Fanon. Still, it is the chapters that decipher a poetics of neurosis in political discourses of neoliberal governmentality and right-wing populism that deliver an important interpretative and culturally relevant punch. Overall, *A Poetics of Neurosis* paves new roads for the medical humanities and delivers successfully on its goal to disturb notions of normalcy and deviation in our global cultural climate.

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Furlanetto, Elena and Dietmar Meinel: *A Poetics of Neurosis: Narratives of Normalcy and Disorder in Cultural and Literary Texts*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2018. 203 pages, 35 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-8394-4132-9.

Abstract:

The mission of this essay collection is to uproot neurosis from its original medical and psychoanalytical bedrock and embed it within contemporary critical cultural and literary discussions. Through reading neurosis in culture and fiction, it tests its subversive potential for stretching the boundaries of normalcy. The eight chapters encompass an impressive range of texts, and a sizable portion thereof investigate neurosis in a post-colonial context, especially through the work of Frantz Fanon. Still, it is the chapters that decipher a poetics of neurosis in political discourses of neoliberal governmentality and right-wing populism that deliver an important interpretative and culturally relevant punch. Overall, *A Poetics of Neurosis* paves new roads for the medical humanities and delivers successfully on its goal to disturb notions of normalcy and deviation in our global cultural climate.

“Where have all the neurotics gone?,” asks Benedict Carey in a 2012 *New York Times* article that registered the 21st-century growing obsolescence of ‘neurosis’ as a psychological diagnostic marker. Yet, he notes that the neurotic as a cultural archetype would feel at home in our current “era of exquisite confusion” (“Where Have All the Neurotics Gone?,” *The New York Times*, 31 March 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/sunday-review/where-have-all-the-neurotics-gone.html>). This juncture in scientific terminology, on the one hand, and cultural and literary phenomena on the other serves as the argumentative lynchpin of *A Poetics of Neurosis: Narratives of Normalcy and Disorder in Cultural and Literary Texts* (2018), edited by Elena Furlanetto and Dietmar Meinel. The volume’s mission is to uproot neurosis from its original medical and psychoanalytical bedrock and embed it within critical cultural and literary discussions, especially those associated with the experience and discourse of trauma. Moreover, through reading neurosis in culture and fiction, it tests its subversive potential for stretching the boundaries of normalcy.

The eight chapters encompass an impressive range of texts, from novels, short stories and poetry, through rap lyrics and music videos; newspaper and social media content, and recorded political speeches; to globalized everyday practices and routines. Dietmar Meinel's introduction builds on Carey and examines the layers of neurotic disorders manifested in the characters of *Finding Nemo*. The animated film strikes one as a salient choice: it is familiar and accessible, as well as awash in subtexts that question notions of masculinity, memory, repressed violence, hyper-technologization, and the affirmative potential of embracing neurotic idiosyncrasies.

With regard to theoretical underpinnings, a sizable portion of the articles investigates neurosis in a post-colonial context, especially through the work of Frantz Fanon. In this vein, Jarula M. I. Wegner reads Fanon's concept of "colonial neurosis" in the rap lyrics of 'Street Corner' by Masta Killa (feat. GZA and Inspectah Deck). Colonial neurosis marks the crisis of alienation and subsequent reification of the Black individual when confronted with the White, colonizing Other. However, in 'Street corner' Wegner also traces modes of transcending this pathological ontology by e-/invoking past "failed and successful transcultural alliances" to "envision [. . .] resistance, and importantly, change" (pp. 89, 88).

However, the volume receives its greatest argumentative and cultural study momentum through the chapters that decipher a poetics of neurosis in political discourses of neoliberal governmentality and right-wing populism. The former is exemplified by Ariane de Waal's incisive re-interpretation, from a cultural studies angle, of traditional Freudian neurosis. De Waal closely attends to the phenomenon of the quiet complicity of the British citizenry in obsessive adherence to constant watchfulness, securitization, and militarization of public and private space. Namely, she views this as a practice of 'neurotic citizenship', called upon by the discourse of counter-terrorism and come to serve as a foil for a "deeper, underlying, existential anxiety" that "characterizes neoliberal culture" (pp. 106, 110). The end result of this neurotic mechanism is policing other subjects and thus preventing potential demands for systemic change.

Furthering the debate on political rhetoric grounded in sentiments of anxiety and fear, Derya Gür-Şeker studies the printed and social media discourses surrounding the emergence and development of the far-right populist German movement Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident). She demonstrates how the movement establishes its power by associating immigration, Islam, and cultural diversity in Germany with feelings of public fear of social change and illegal settlement. Paralleling De Waal's take on neurotic citizenship, Gür-Şeker demonstrates that, in the hands of populist political structures, neurosis could become a powerful tool of governmentality and population control, effected through pathological attachment to a (perceived) threat to the established sociopolitical order.

Last but not least, one of the carriers of the volume's theoretical orientation towards trauma studies and beyond is found in László Munteán's employment of psychasthenia, the diagnostic precursor of neurosis, as a literary trope and mnemonic device in Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005). In a meritable theoretical leap away from the rest of the contributions, Munteán deploys a version of psychasthenia that explains it as an assimilation into the environment amounting to depersonalization. In the case of Cunningham's novel, the engulfing environment is that of an intertext (Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*) that the main protagonist recites compulsively. At its core lies an unassimilated traumatic experience of loss, and the intertext becomes "the language through which his trauma manifests itself" (43). Extending the trope, this psychasthenic relationship aids the readers in conjuring memories of the mass-mediatised traumas of 9/11 without an overt reference to the attacks.

Ultimately, *A Poetics of Neurosis* fulfills its goal, and with gusto – it disposes of diagnostic exactness to embrace terminological vagueness yet successfully diagnoses many fundamental ailments and discomforts of our present-day culture. Given the breadth of case studies it dissects, however, it does make one bemoan the relatively narrow scope of theoretical thought in which it is grounded. It would have been intriguing, if not fruitful, if the volume had engaged in a conversation with the issues raised in *Cultures of Neurasthenia: From Beard to the First World War*, edited by Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2001). Additionally, the chapters could benefit from a more rigorous linguistic scan, as collocations and idioms at times appear cumbersome, despite the commendable lexical richness of the articles. Yet, these shortcomings do little to cast a shadow on its overall merit in disturbing notions of normalcy and deviation in our global cultural climate, thus treading important ground for further interrogations of the concept of neurosis in other emerging fields, such as the medical humanities.

German Abstract:

Unsere neurotische Kultur, zurückerlangt

Diese Aufsatzsammlung gibt sich den Auftrag, die Neurose aus ihrer ursprünglicher medizinischen und psychologischen Grundlage zu entwurzeln und stattdessen in zeitgenössischen kulturwissenschaftlichen und literaturwissenschaftlichen Diskussionen zu verankern. Durch das Lesen von Neurosen in Kultur und Fiktion wird ihr subversives Potenzial, die Grenzen der Normalität zu erweitern auf die Probe gestellt. Die acht Artikel umfassen eine beeindruckende Auswahl an Texten, von denen ein beträchtlicher Teil die Neurose im postkolonialen Kontext, insbesondere durch die Werke Frantz Fanons, untersucht. Dennoch sind es die Artikel, die eine Poetik der Neurose in politischen Diskursen neoliberaler Regierungsgewalt und Rechtspopulismus entschlüsseln, die wichtige interpretative und kulturell relevante Schlagrichtungen vorweisen. Insgesamt eröffnet *A Poetics of Neurosis* den medizinischen Geisteswissenschaften neue Wege und erfüllt erfolgreich sein Ziel, Vorstellungen von Normalität und Abweichung zu hinterfragen.

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