

Issue 50, 10 May, 2017

Investigating Emotionality: Psychology, Aesthetics, and the Global Mental Health Crisis

Dominique Autschbach

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Gießen)

Contact: dominique.automschbach@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders. Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations by E. Deirdre Pribram investigates a wide range of topics, such as the psychological conception of self and the figure of the mad genius or medical diagnostics and neurological research. It thus not only contributes to the analysis of what is commonly referred to as the global mental health crisis or an inquiry into the relationship between the psy disciplines and aesthetic practice, but also – on a broader level – examines the potential of cultural theory in the study of emotions.

How to cite:

Autschbach, Dominique: "Investigating emotionality: Psychology, aesthetics, and the global mental health crisis [Review on: Pribram, E. Deirdre: *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders: Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations*. New York / London: Taylor & Francis, 2016.]" In: KULT_online 50 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.140>



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International

Investigating Emotionality: Psychology, Aesthetics, and the Global Mental Health Crisis

Dominique Autschbach

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Gießen)

Pribram, E. Deidre: *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders. Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. New York / London: Taylor & Francis, 2016. 167 pages, 90.00 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-138-01829-7

Abstract:

A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders. Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations by E. Deidre Pribram investigates a wide range of topics, such as the psychological conception of self and the figure of the mad genius or medical diagnostics and neurological research. It thus not only contributes to the analysis of what is commonly referred to as the global mental health crisis or an inquiry into the relationship between the psy disciplines and aesthetic practice, but also – on a broader level – examines the potential of cultural theory in the study of emotions.

According to a study of the World Health Organization, 25 percent of the global population will suffer from a mental disorder at some point in their life (p.1). Departing from what is widely perceived as a global epidemic of mental illness, E. Deidre Pribram explores contemporary concepts of “emotional disorders” and alternative ways of imagining them. In five relatively independent but interrelated chapters, Pribram, who is specialized in theories of emotion and cultural theory and teaches at the Communications Department at Molloy College, assesses “the historically and contextually changing normal/abnormal divide of functional versus dysfunctional emotionality.” (p. 18)

In the first chapter, she traces the role of mental illness and the asylum in modern subject formation by discussing Foucault’s early work *Mental Illness and Psychology*. Referring to his distinction between the social experience of mental illness and the culturally constructed modes of treating madness

she states, the more he turns towards analysing the latter, the less he refers to emotionality (p. 19). However, as she points out, Foucault's claim that the mentally ill simultaneously take part in the world of their illness and the "normal" world alludes an "affective connection" (p. 32). In accordance with Gauchet and Swain, she thus highlights the centrality of emotions in psychiatry, which for example is demonstrated by the humiliating moral treatment of asylum inmates.

The establishment of the psychological subject in the period between 1875 and 1925 is at the core of the second chapter. Here, the author offers a reading of essential works of governmentality studies on the field of *psy*, a term grasping different therapeutic practices and sets of knowledge. Two developments led to the formation of a psychological conception of the self: First, Enlightenment was crucial in the creation of the interior, autonomous space of the self, while at the same time contributing to the distinction of emotionality and rationality. Second, subjectivity transformed from a self-sacrificing "character" to a self-realizing "personality" (pp. 46–48). Furthermore, Pribram emphasises the role of neurosis – and, consequently, emotionality – in the formation of *psy* and the importance of the distinction between pathology and everyday unhappiness (p. 58).

Pribram observes, in chapter three, that aesthetics is one of the "relatively rare sociocultural arena in which emotions, and emotional disorders, have been viewed as productive" (p. 65). She analyses the reception of the work of Van Gogh between 1890 and 1990, which despite the disapproval of most critics had an immense popular success. This popularity was explained through the "accessible" (p. 74) dimension of emotionality in his work and the fusion of his troubled psyche and artistic work into a narrative of the "artist as exceptionality" (p. 92).

In the fourth chapter, Pribram examines the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Its third edition marked a double-shift, as it, firstly, turned towards biomedical psychiatry in order to generate "explicit, descriptive diagnostic criteria" (p. 95), and, secondly, introduced personality disorder. By distinguishing the sufferance that arises from interpersonal relations and ailments that are caused by "inflexible and maladaptive" traits within the person, personality disorder represents "a cultural move from having an illness to taking up an identity" (p. 105).

In the fifth and last chapter, Pribram shows how, in the field of emotions, scientific research builds a "tacit partnership" (p. 125) with aesthetics. She recaptures case studies on positron emission tomography (PET), on affective computing, and on animal testing in physiology. These three examples point towards the "recognition of the ill-fit of emotions in various quests for objective knowledge." (p. 135) In comparison, Pribram argues, aesthetic practices are deemed more suitable as they highlight the "qualitative aspects of existence" (p. 126).

Pribram's book is more an exploration of different aspects of a phenomenon, than the development of one linear argument. Her conclusion that it "remains an open question" (p. 149), when and to what extent emotional pain should be addressed psycho-medically, seems unsatisfying at first. But it is precisely the openness of her exploration of "emotionality's conceptual and practical potentials" (p. 8) which constitutes the productivity of this read: Against the growing body of literature of affect studies in the humanities, she argues that it is specifically the mutual suffusion of emotion and meaning which is of interest (p. 9). Rejecting the opposition between pure affect and tainted cultural signification, she shows how emotionality's "convenient equivocality" (p. 144), its resistance to dichotomization, is its strength.

She takes on some commonplace claims of governmentality studies concerning the distinction of pathological and "normal" emotionality: Condemning psychopharmacological or psychotherapeutic treatment as the pathologization of human condition suffering, she argues conclusively, deprives those affected by mental illness of their hope for a cure for their ailment. However, it is debatable whether the warning that psychological treatment might undermine calls for social change, can simply be discarded by quoting one counterexample (p. 146).

The most inspiring aspect of her work is the investigation of emotions as related to what she calls a "cultural entity" (p. 8). She stresses the internal heterogeneity of aesthetics and *psy*, the two entities she examines, by pointing at the struggle between traditional, psychoanalytical psychology and biopsychiatry, or by referring to Miriam Hansens distinction of "high" and "vernacular" modernism in the arts (pp. 83-84). She resists romanticizing aesthetics as a possible corrective or even utopian alternative to *psy* (p. 66) and hence gives a nuanced account of the respective shortcomings and interconnections of both fields. This conceptualization of the relationship of cultural entities and emotions makes the book an interesting read and a valuable call for further inquiry.

German Abstract:

Die Betrachtung der Emotionalität und die globale Krise psychischer Gesundheit zwischen Ästhetik und Psychologie

A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders. Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations von E. Deidre Pribram setzt sich mit einer Vielzahl von Themen auseinander, wie beispielsweise der psychologischen Selbst-Konzeptionen und der Figur des verrückten Genies oder medizinischer Diagnostik und neurologischer Forschung. Die Autorin trägt dabei zur Analyse der globalen Krise der psychischen Gesundheit und der Untersuchung des Verhältnisses zwischen Psy-Disziplinen und ästhetischer Praxis bei und beleuchtet darüber hinaus auf einer allgemeineren Ebene das Potential von Kulturtheorien in der Betrachtung von Emotionen.

Dominique Autschbach

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Gießen)

Contact: dominique.autschbach@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

How to cite:

Autschbach, Dominique: "Investigating emotionality: Psychology, aesthetics, and the global mental health crisis [Review on: Pribram, E. Deirdre: *A Cultural Approach to Emotional Disorders: Psychological and Aesthetic Interpretations*. New York / London: Taylor & Francis, 2016.]" In: KULT_online 50 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.140>