

BUTTERFLY FROM BERLIN'S ASHES

The Ambiguity of the Cultural Expression of Emotions – A Commentary

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In the summer of 1946, one of the 26,000 British soldiers involved in the administration of the British zone in Germany created a very special object (DHM 2015: 89). The soldier's name is unknown. He crept and scrambled through the ruins of the former center of National Socialist Germany, staying close to the bunker where Hitler had committed suicide. He collected pieces of the damaged buildings all around. Afterwards he crumbled them into fine, colored dust. Finally, he took a wooden tablet and decorated it with a peacock butterfly made from this powder of Berlin's ruins. The blue of the butterfly came from the chips of tiles from a delicatessen

store on Potsdamer Platz and the red from brick remnants of a building of Wilhelmstrasse, the street where the "Reichskanzlei," Hitler's administrative center, had been located. The tablet was made to look like a harmless souvenir. It bears the inscriptions "In memory of summer 1946" and "Made of the rubbish of the ruins of Berlin." Today, the object is kept in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London and is currently in Berlin under display in a large exhibition on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Like many pieces of material culture, the British soldier's butterfly tablet offers insights into the social practices behind the making of the object. In my short commentary, I will argue that this object can provide us with a good opportunity for investigating both the cultural expression and suppression of the undesirable and unbearable.

The Cultural Construction of "Bad Emotions"

All the papers in this special issue circle around the cultural construction, expression and suppression of "bad emotions." Regina Bendix brings up the topic in her introduction: fear, rage and sometimes – between the lines – sadness and grief. I was particularly fascinated by the essays by Sam Senji and Kimberly Lau, which bring together emotional experiences and personal histories. However, I wish to look more closely at Grete Swenson's article about Norwegian prisons in the early twentieth century, as this text corresponds quite well with my own brief analysis of



Ill. 1: Butterfly tablet from the remnants of Berlin (The Imperial War Museum Archives ©IWM EPH9957). (DHM 2015: 89)

the war-rubble-butterfly. Swenson reminds us how fruitful it can be to carefully read classical socio-historical sources such as warders' protocols about prisoners' daily life. The highlight of her text is the discussion of emotions as practices (p. 44f.). While, for example, William Reddy is failing to provide a convincing analysis of emotional practices (Reddy 2001), Swenson can show how Michel Foucault's institutions and machines of discipline and punishment were subverted through the use of material devices and bodily practices.

In some sense, Swenson fulfills the plea of the future co-editor of *Ethnologia Europaea*, Monique Scheer. In 2012, Scheer published an article (rhetorically) questioning if emotions are a kind of practice. She comes to a conclusion with three very helpful statements about "emotional practices" (Scheer 2012: 220): Firstly, Scheer writes that emotions "not only *follow* from things people do, but *are* themselves a form of practice, because they are an action of a mindful body." Secondly, she states, "that this feeling subject is not prior but emerges in the doing of emotion." Thirdly, Scheer elaborates on the inclusion of the body and its function in the analysis of emotions, "not in the sense of a universal, pristine, biological base, but as a locus for innate and learned capacities shaped by habitual practices." I follow Scheer without any reservation that "thinking of emotion as a kind of practice," which creates, mirrors and empowers feelings, can help historians and cultural anthropologists going beyond the still ongoing debate about emotional norms and expectations in Reddy's definition of "emotives" as governmental strategies of emotional regimes in discourses and prescriptions (Reddy 1997). Swenson investigates exactly such "embodied emotions" and their practices as forms of resistance against the silencing dungeon of Norwegian jails built to extend the control over the prisoners' emotions. She writes: "In a place where total silence ruled, anger and frustration were channelled through the use of material devices and bodily practices" (p. 45). Referring to Scheer we can say, anger and frustration were not just expressed and "channeled" by the prisoners by making noise through piping systems and other practices of

de-silencing the prison. Anger and frustration were also generated, negotiated and developed in these actions of resistance against the disciplinary system of the jail.

Coming back to my example of the butterfly tablet from the remnants of the ruins of Berlin, I would like to elaborate on ways through which we can investigate emotions as a practice. Let us have a closer look at the object and the practices of its construction – the strolling around of the British soldier in Berlin's ruins, his collecting, crumbling, arranging and fixing, which were all undertaken when he invented, planned and finally made his materialized "memory of summer 1946."

A Souvenir and a Trophy

After the Second World War, the Allied soldiers generally engaged in different kinds of amusements as a pastime in the former German Reich and in Berlin. They swam in the lakes surrounding the city, sunbathed, played cards, drank alcohol, undertook some sightseeing, had love affairs with Germans (also during the time, when it was not yet allowed to have any contact to the civilians of the former Nazi-Reich). Sometimes – obviously – they would do some handicrafts. As the inscription on the butterfly tablet says, it was first and foremost a souvenir. "Souvenir" is French and entails, semantically, remembrance or memory. A souvenir is an object a person or group of people usually acquire due to the memories the owner or owners associate with it. These sometimes "beloved objects" (Habermas 1996) can have intrinsic emotional value, which rises in importance when the souvenir was made by the owner of the memento him- or herself.

In times of extreme shortages of things, food and consumables, in a daily life characterized by military restrictions, ruins and dead bodies, a self-made souvenir is hardly just a materialized symbol of past experiences. It provides evidence for particular emotional investment and degree of importance. Being aware of the historical background, we can analyze the owner's intrinsic input and its symbolic meanings: It took some time and cleverness to stroll around through the ruins of Berlin, to collect some

useful rubbish, to shred it, to find a tablet and some glue. This task was stressful and we can assume that investing time and energy to produce the souvenir was what gave it its value. In this sense, we should not underestimate the butterfly tablet as a simple materialized memory of a post-war-summer in former National Socialist Berlin. I would argue that the British soldier's own feelings of anger, rage and hate against the German air raids against his homeland, from the "Blitz" over London to the destruction of Coventry, were not just mirrored in his object. When the soldier picked up the stones out of the ruins of Berlin and transformed them into a piece of art, he engaged in negotiating his emotions. His practices of walking around the totally devastated Wilhelmstrasse, face to face with the ruins of Hitler's Reichskanzlei, and picking up bricks and stones from the ruins can be seen as embodied and materialized emotions. In the butterfly we can recognize the soldier's personal celebration of victory, his scoffing at the destroyed former German headquarters and his hate, anger and grief over the murderous quality of the hammered down Nazi regime.

Without any doubt, the butterfly tablet was also a trophy. Staying alive in a war, and crossing through a battlefield, always brought soldiers to a point where they sought to bring home souvenirs. We can find many examples from all over the world in every period of history (cf. Kozol 2014: 127–164). Collecting pieces in and of the ruins of Berlin has to be seen in an age-old tradition of returning from a battlefield, carrying enemy weapons, flags, pieces of enemies' bodies, headhunting and many other practices which symbolize the interwoven feelings of being a victor, the inebriation of hunting, aggression and revenge (Harrison 2006, 2012). Collecting trophies from war, bringing them home and displaying them to the members of one's own society has been seen, convincingly, as a rite of passage in Arnold van Gennep's sense (Fine 2000; Gennep [1909]2005). Indeed, this rite of passage has two levels: Firstly, one can accumulate social capital which is honorable, stable and secure, when one's own war souvenir reaches display. With war trophies, a soldier can enact his rite of passage from the status of a soldier to a war

hero. He transforms his symbolic existence from a "fighting number" on a battlefield, a non-person in danger of losing his life, to an honorable, safe and untouchable veteran who can always show his visible, materialized contribution to defeat the enemy. Secondly, the collection, transportation and display of war trophies also stand for emotional rites of passage: they symbolize the transformation of agony, skepticism, fear and horror into satisfaction and triumph – again in a materialized, visible and memorable manner. When a trophy is not only collected but also improved or even fabricated and handmade, like the example of the butterfly tablet from Berlin, this emotional thrust is particularly evident. This brings me to a further point, the decision of the soldier to create a butterfly – more preciously yet, a so-called European Peacock.

The Butterfly: A Symbol of Contradictory Emotions

The symbol of a butterfly is related to the life of human beings. It stands for transformation from the past to the present to the future and for the metamorphosis of an individual human life from extreme vulnerability and times of ravenous hunger to development, expansion, freedom and beauty. From egg, to larva, to pupa, the cocoon and finally the butterfly, this animal goes through a metamorphosis, which can be seen to represent hope for a better future as well as the transformation of a fighting soldier to a free man and peacekeeper with all the associated feelings. Since ancient times, in many cultures all around the world from Japan to Russia and England, butterflies stood and still stand for the human soul or mind and for rebirth in a metaphorical sense – evidence that was assembled already in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (Cupertino 1997; MacRae 2007).

Having this mythological and metaphorical background in mind, we can interpret the butterfly made from the rubble of Berlin also as an example of materialized, negotiated emotions. The anger, triumph and hate of the soldier is transformed into hope for a better future and for the metamorphosis of the devastated Europe into a peaceful and prosperous continent.

To conclude: I hope that this brief text and its central example can inspire the ongoing debates about the quite difficult question raised in this special issue, namely how we – as historians and cultural anthropologists – can investigate the cultural expressions and suppressions of emotions or even begin to discuss the adventure such investigation entails.

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