

An ‘artistic’ approach to history

Symbolic procedures and the manufacturing of remembrance

by Zoran Terzić (PhD), Humboldt University, Berlin

Abstract: This essay advocates an active role in acknowledging the manufactured or ‘creative’ nature of historical consent/dissent. I argue that there is a whole range of tools, mechanisms, and styles that are being applied when one structures public discourses about the past. These ‘symbolic procedures’ are usually framed nationally/culturally and thus affirm the endemic nationalism/culturalism of the historical narrative. I argue that one can get a better understanding of how history ‘works’ when one resorts to contemporary art practices. One can claim that our common ideologies about the past equal ‘artistic’ creations. Consequently, I advocate a more ‘artistic’ approach in dealing with the past. Art can help us to understand political and historical phenomena more thoroughly.

Remembrance is always a completely false depiction.

--Thomas Bernhard, Heldenplatz

Artefacts and ‘memofacts’

The past is always understood. It makes sense because it *has* to make sense even if one is completely wrong about it. Luis Bunuel points out in his memoirs how false memories turn into convictions and how life becomes meaningless and unreal without them (Bunuel 1982). Historical ‘sense’ does not need accuracy or truthfulness, it needs symbolic procedures that create a meaningful order. It comes by no surprise then that in the current political arena discourses on remembrance and ‘cultural memory’ almost have the status of a religion. No period in history has been so devoted to commemorations as ours. One believes in the past like one believes in God. Festivities during commemorations have the flavour of sermons. History is ‘holy’, and its ‘believers’ are told that the welfare of their society is based on remembrance and that one cannot handle the future if one cannot handle the past, that ‘all of us’ stick fatefully together in the course of history, and that past deaths, crimes, or glory justify the current order.¹ Contrary to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s axiom “the world is everything that is the case” it appears that our world is actually everything that is *not* the case. Memory politics creates consequences and thus ‘cases’. Analogous to Bunuel’s assertion, the political

¹ As an example, Germany annually commemorates the ‘terrorist’ Stauffenberg as a pioneer of ‘German resistance’ in order to link its spirit to the current state, although this military officer was initially as a Nazi-careerist and remained an anti-Democrat nationalist throughout his life (Evans

world would seem unreal if there were no commemorations. But would it indeed? What is the underlying mechanism of this assertion and of our understanding of public commemorations in general?

Although all possible forms of commemoration can be imagined, only certain forms dominate. As virtually all current states are nation states, official commemoration practices serve to affirm their ideological foundation, i.e. their 'nationalism'.² Accordingly, Michael Billig argues that "in the established nations, there is a continual 'flagging', or reminding, of nationhood" (Billig 1995, 5). These familiar reminders are usually benign and non-violent, which is why Billig differentiates between *hot* and *cold* nationalism – *hot* being the version where political maps are being disputed or redrawn by force, and *cold* being the version where political maps are being used symbolically. Think, for instance, of Western Germany's media practice throughout the 1980's to ignore symbolically the de facto existence of the GDR. This was evident in the daily weather maps of news broadcasts that regularly invoked the political shape of a 'unified' Germany. These visual reminders are a form of commemoration that implies an ideal, e.g. primordial unity. Accordingly, German unification was called "re-unification", suggesting that the 'same' unity existed once before. All these reminders are the 'outposts' of a national or cultural *dispositif*.³ Their task is to make historic sense by making sense historically. One may also think of the nationalist inflation of historiography and the viral intrusions into the past that intellectual cadres in Eastern Europe have initiated after 1989 (Terzić 2007). Yet, it is by no means a specific Eastern European symptom, if we recall the debates that followed the German *Historikerstreit* in 1986 (Baldwin 1990; Evans 1989) or the current re-nationalization of *German Gedächtnis* – the 'branding' of the German nation – that is accompanied by various media campaigns (Anholt 2006). One may also think of Spain's painful debates about the rehabilitation of Franco-era victims, the Vatican's legacy in regard to Judaism, France's adjustments regarding the "Vichy Syndrome" and the like (Roussio 2006). All those activations of remembrance have to be seen in the context of the re-framing of a post-World War II order that was initiated by shifts in economical, political and last but not least, intellectual paradigms. The understanding of the past is adjusted according to these shifts, which does not imply that history is nowadays better or less understood than some decades ago. As I have suggested, the past is always understood. But I want to argue that its underlying mechanisms can be understood 'better' if one reasons

2009, 9-10).

² It is important to understand that nationalism is endemic to nation states, it is part of their 'logic', and thus it is not reserved to political extremists, right wing ideologues, warmongers, or the like. The practice of playing the national anthem or celebrating a national holiday is nationalistic, but not many people do mind because it is part of the reality of meaning.

³ The practice of flagging (i.e. claiming a symbolical space) is an analogy to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation (Althusser 1971) as it constitutes a retroactive ideological subject. There is no 'inner beginning' of having an identity. You 'have had it already' once you come to it. Flaggings remind you of what you have always been, once you are.

about the strategies of historical representation.

As Jacques Rancière has pointed out the problem of representation intertwines the political and artistic discourse (Rancière 2009). Representational objects, such as monuments or ‘Grand Genre’-paintings, for example, address formal *and* political matters simultaneously. The artist’s point of view is not solely the awareness of form but also the awareness of *political form*, whereas politics always implies *symbolic form*. There is no politics without form, and vice versa. Accordingly, the space that a monument claims is not only a ‘symbolic’ space but it is a miniature model of the power structure it represents or mirrors. Thus, it is also a statement about this authority, not necessarily about the monument’s reference. The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, for example, is mainly a statement about the willingness of the German nation state to deal with ‘its’ past. Its sheer existence displays the willingness to create a cut between a ‘Nazi past’ and a ‘German presence’ (Hawel 2007; Kirsch 2003; Leggewie & Meyer 2005). From an artistic point of view we may challenge the political form. We may ask: Wouldn’t we have been as much historically stimulated if the *Führerbunker* had been rebuilt – as a kind of evil reminder comparable to the *Reichstagsgelände*? What is it that we actually want to be reminded of by representative objects? Our generosity or the evilness of the other – or something else? Why are certain representational forms accepted and others not? How does the form of an artefact relate to the ‘memofact’ i.e. the substantiation of the content of remembrance?

Productive remembrance

The core of imagining the past and thus of historical representation is not to represent the past in the sense of subjecting oneself to its authority and translate this authority into form. The past has no authority, authority uses the past. The point is to acquire the past as if you are transposing or translating yourself in a past situation, thus internalizing (and not externalizing) the past as a past present, i.e. as something entirely profane. For that reason many current artistic activities apply transformational procedures that address typical public representations of the past (and the example above is no exception). To name just a few of these ‘symbolic procedures’:

- personification
 - escapism
 - relationalism
 - transposition/inversion/intrusion
 - critical inquiry
 - destruction/erasure
 - mimicry of power
 - historical ‘therapy’
- etc.

It is not a conclusive list of symbolic practices, and some remarks are appropriate: The artistic strategy of **personification** uses witness accounts of historical events, personalises remembrance via authorship, or individualises public space, which sometimes is analogous to scientific accounts of micro-history (Levi 1991). Grand narratives are juxtaposed with the existential condition of individuals, the individuality of the narration transcends historical narration. Anonymous, forgotten biography is brought back to life and rescued from hidden archives (e.g. Christian Boltanski), or the personal responsibility and authorship of individuals is inscribed into the public space. As Jochen Gerz puts it: “The places of remembrance are people, not monuments.” (Gerz 1997)

Escapist strategies refuse to fulfil an act of remembrance via art work by either displaying the impossibility to remember at all, or by distracting from the actual subject of remembrance.

Relationalist approaches address not only a political subject but also the conditions under which it is addressed (Borriaud 2002). This approach holds that only by relation and context remembrance becomes substantial. There is no linear approach to remembrance, only networks of narratives exist that have to be joint together in order to create a viable commemorative act. And this act is not presented to the subject but the subject engages in it, is part of the structure.

The strategy of **transposition** dis- or relocates the act of remembrance by juxtaposing various symbolic levels and narratives. Martha Rosler’s series of collages ‘Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful’ (1967-72) reflecting on the Vietnam war is an example of this approach. Also, some works by Hans Haacke, such as the temporary installation *Und ihr habt doch gesiegt* in Graz, Austria, during the annual festival Styrian Autumn in 1988, should be mentioned here. Haacke rebuilt a slightly altered Nazi installation and placed it in midst a public square in Graz in order to comment on the hypocrisy of Austria’s official dealing with its collaborationist past. A lesser known approach by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou from the 1960’s reflected on the First World War: Filliou suggested to switching national monuments so that one nation would display the former rival’s memorial and vice versa.

The strategy of **inversion** can apply formally, as is the case with Rachel Whiteread’s cast sculptures: she inverts the interior space of (usually historical) buildings, which also represents the time signature of the lives of people who lived there, and casts it as a concrete form. Robert Musil once has noted that monuments are invisible, but their signifiers are visible. Whiteread turns the temporal signature of interior space into a visible signifier of remembrance. Her memorial for 65.000 murdered Jews in Austria at the Viennese *Judenplatz*, for instance, uses the same technique to display a cast of an imaginary library or archive of names.

In a narrow sense ‘**intrusive**’ artistic strategies, like, for instance Gunter

Demnig's stumbling blocks (Stolpersteine) access the public sphere subtly. These memorial stones are installed into the pavement of German (and other European) cities to remind of the people deported and killed by the Nazis. As this project intrudes the daily life and is not restricted to exquisite places for commemoration it was confronted with criticism: in some cases people opposed the idea of being daily reminded of World War II atrocities – which, however, is precisely the point of these monuments.⁴

Other artists' strategies include **documentations** of critical inquiries in form of exhibits that resemble journalist or scientific approaches (usually as mixed media presentations), the strategy of erasure or **destruction** that emphasises forgetting rather than remembrance, or the mimicry of power and a deliberate hypertrophic attachment to state representations (like with the Slovenian art collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst*). Related to this, particularly in Germany some artists use a '**therapeutic**' approach that adopts traumata or stigmata from the past and plays with its radical references – in its 'epic' form advanced by Anselm Kiefer or recently Jonathan Meese. In the early 1970's Kiefer visited places in Eastern Europe that once had been occupied by German *Wehrmacht* and performed Hitler salutes, while – in a gesture of false pathos – pulling down his trousers and exposing his lower body (Brock 1984).

It would be wrong to regard all these artistic approaches as 'final solutions' for commemorative practices. These approaches – and there are many more – reflect on the various possibilities of objectified remembrance. Although an artefact cannot cohere completely with a 'memofact', the failure to objectify remembrance does not produce empty signifiers. One has to realize that there is no other way than to continue with repeated formal attempts and the (potential) failure of coming to terms with the past. That is: on one hand, you cannot impose effects on political reality by applying and enforcing symbolic procedures, but on the other hand, experience teaches us that this is precisely the only way history evolves: by permanently producing imperfect or 'impossible' atopic signifiers that one day may bear consequences. As William Isaac Thomas suggests in his famous theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (Thomas & Thomas 1928, 571-572). Accordingly, it would be a mistake to take certain symbolic orders for granted and dismiss others. A monument never 'fails' even if it is destroyed or removed. Everything that is produced may have an effect on society. One only has to learn to read and re-create the various traces of production.

As Adorno once noted in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, all reification equals forgetting the subject of reification (Adorno & Horkheimer 1973). However, that does not mean that this kind of 'forgetting' is unproductive in itself: as we have implied above, it is only a transformed form of remembrance. There is no pure

⁴ See: www.goethe.de/kue/bku/thm/idd/de78940.htm and: www.stolpersteine.com/start.html

and immediate remembrance, *mneme*, as Plato has called it, there is only reification (*hypomnesis*). There is only forgetting, and by indicating that there is only forgetting, we remember.

A non-historic past?

The discourse of remembrance is related as much to issues of power as it is to issues of art. Think of the mythical anecdote that Zeus, the symbol of ultimate power, and Mnemosyne, the goddess of remembrance, slept together for nine consecutive nights and thereby created the nine Muses. However, Greek mythology is all about results. No scripture tells us about these nine nights, the procedure of creation, the procedure of power. What the subtext of the anecdote tells us is that power structures strive for eternal rule. Because an eternal empire is impossible due to historical circumstances – life span, enemies, resources etc. –, one finds a symbolical empire to overcome history: either by founding religions or by installing a system of insignias, dynasties, historiography etc. Symbols are the consequence of a strive for eternity. History is the result of the attempt to achieve it. If symbols are attacked or erased, this strive is addressed: once a Roman emperor's reign ended in tyranny, like with Caligula, the successor erased all of his predecessor's insignias (*damnatio memoriae*). One answer to this "history of Roman type", as Foucault has called it, is a cultural rebellion against the cause and course of history, a rebellion against Zeus, a rebellion in the sense of an 'alternative' history, history that does not create monsters or muses, history that does not know itself, history that does not take place but *gives* birth to place. This, altogether, could be described as an artistic approach to history.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodor W. & Horkheimer, Max. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [Trans. John Cumming]. New York: Continuum, 1973.
- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* [Part 2, transl. by Ben Brewster]. Monthly Review Press : New York and London, 1971.
- Anholt, Simon. *Competitive Identity. The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Baldwin, Peter. *Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians Dispute*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990.
- Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Borriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002.
- Brock, Bazon. "The Quest for the Total Art Work. Pathetic formulas and energetic symbols of the unity between thought, will, and savoir-faire." In: Kunsthau Zürich (ed.) *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* [Ausstellungskatalog]. Aarau : Verlag Sauerländer, 1984, <http://www.brock.uni-wuppertal.de/Schrifte/English/Totalart.html> (retrieved 22.05.2009)
- Buñuel, Luis (with Jean-Claude Carrière). *Mon dernier soupir*. Paris : Éditions Robert Laffont, 1982.
- Evans, Richard. *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past*. New York, NY: Pantheon, 1989.
- Evans, Richard J. „Sein wahres Gesicht.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, Heft 04 (2009), 9-10.

- Gerz, Jochen. Rede an die Jury des Denkmals für die ermordeten Juden Europas. 14. November 1997, <http://www.dickinson.edu/glossen/heft4/gerzrede.html> (retrieved 22.05.2009)
- Hawel, Marcus. *Die normalisierte Nation. Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Außenpolitik in Deutschland*, Hannover : Offizin, 2007, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/dos/dos/ern/vgp/en2756351.htm> (retrieved 22.05.2009)
- Kirsch, Jan-Holger. *Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer? Der Streit um ein zentrales 'Holocaust-Mahnmal' für die Berliner Republik*. Köln : Böhlau-Verlag, 2003.
- Leggewie, Claus & Meyer, Erik. 'Ein Ort, an den man gerne geht'. *Das Holocaust-Mahnmal und die deutsche Geschichtspolitik nach 1989*. München : Carl Hanser Verlag, 2005.
- Levi, Giovanni. "On Microhistory." In: Burke, Peter (ed.). *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Oxford 1991, 93-113.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. New York : Continuum, 2009.
- Rousso, Henry. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. Harvard : Harvard University Press. 2006.
- Terzić, Zoran. *Kunst des Nationalismus*. Berlin : Kadmos, 2007.
- Thomas, W.I. & Thomas, D.S. *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs*. New York : Knopf, 1928, 571-572.

Author's Note:

Zoran Terzic (PhD) teaches political aesthetics at Humboldt University, Berlin. He studied Fine Arts in New York and non-normative aesthetics in Wuppertal. His recent monograph *The Art of Nationalism* (Kunst des Nationalismus, Kadmos, 2007) deals with the cultural semiotics of war.