

Ars Oblivivendi

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It is through the ageing of our own bodies that the passing of time is experienced. A time experience which is neither cyclic, governed by the appearance of planets and stars, nor linear, as the modern clock that rolls along an endless rail through historical space. Time is told in terms of events in one's own life, rather than the passing of calendar dates. Change is measured genealogically in terms of consecutive generations. Memory is as a skeleton of related events joined together by our imagination in such a way that it can even dance a jig. Dance is probably the earliest art form through which man expresses and communicates his experience of life, from imitation of sound and movement in his direct surroundings, in voice and gestures, to articulate forms of dance and singing. "The past gets passed on to us not merely in what we think or do, but literally in how we do it", the way we sit, sleep, move, walk or talk [1]. Memory is in the first place a bodily experience. The epitaph "you will always be remembered" fades after a few generations. The mortality of our bodies cannot be evaded and uncertainties about what happens to our soul remain. Memory of a previous or pre-natal existence is sometimes individually experienced, but most people have difficulty in remembering their early youth and even difficulty with remembering recent events that, for one reason or another, conscious or not, they do not want to recall.

Bodily expressed memory through traceless art forms such as dance, music, song and storytelling have been handed down over generations, but as memory is progressively altered from generation to generation it is always "stamped with the ruling passion of its time" [2]; in which process the original forms of expression are often lost. Contemporary depictions of dancers in pottery, painting, archaeological discoveries of musical instruments and recorded stories in early manuscripts, give us some clues but leave much to be guessed. In such cases the analyst of history is condemned to invent, he cannot reconstruct but must construe the past.

The transition from oral to literate culture was a slow one. In the *Phaedrus*, approximately 375 BC, Plato quotes Socrates' dialogue on the written word: "... you would think that it speaks like a sensible being, but when you ask for meaning, writing can only give one answer. Once fixed, each argument turns and drifts about to the four winds and finds itself with the competent and incompetent alike, because it does not know to whom it should or should not address itself".

Early historians were most of all inventors of history, mingling fact and myth; as is the case with the texts of many of the famous "historical speeches" as we know them now. The early historian wanted first of all to write a good "literary" story or speech, fitting reality to his needs. Application of the rules of rhetoric, more than what was actually said, formed the basis of such constructed orations. In a similar way modern politicians have ghostwriters to write their speeches, only they do so beforehand. The modern historian, with an abundant body of written information available, must deselect and hardly escapes the temptation to neglect that which does not suit his "rhetoric", his argument.

Human culture has inscribed itself on the earth's surface and made it into landscape, and the landscape impresses itself on the faces, bodies and memories of the creators of that culture. The landscape is a collective memory device that maps stories of the past in actual space, as the cosmological dream-time stories of Australian aboriginals do. Countless generations recreate such tales, "reading" them from the landscape where they are "written" and can be remembered, as these tales are linked to specific physical features of the surroundings and

animal life. While Aborigines are walking along a trail, stories and songs are recalled. This can be associated with street names in villages and cities and topographical naming, whereby names of historical figures, events and places are purposely given to recall the past. In principle any landscape, any built environment, be it rural or urban, is a living representation of time in space. Where landscape features are eroded or erased, where the juxtaposition of various building styles from different periods in towns has given way to one dominating form of built environment, this memory function has diminished or is totally lost. Then only remaining picture representations and written records can tell what was before. One has to dig "down through layers of memories and representations toward the primary bedrock, laid down centuries or even millennia ago, and then working up again toward the light of contemporary recognition." [3]

It is inscribed information, from petroglyphs in caves to printed word and image, that makes it possible to convey information from the past to following generations. Long after the human body itself stops being able to inform, these sign systems live on. In the modern technique of oral history the two forms of collective memory systems, bodily and inscribed, fuse. As with the ancient story-tellers, memory and myth intermingle. This form of memory-making is often criticized by those historians who give a talismanic importance to manuscripts and other paper documents, who have pride in their detached methods purely based on textual manipulation. This fetishization of text-based libraries and archives, proposing them as the only real source for the making of history, does not take into account the history of libraries and archives themselves. There should be a much wider consciousness of the arbitrary ways in which most collections came together, were dispersed, cleansed, or lost: as a gift, an inheritance, booty, a trophy, or seizure. During the reign of King Assurbanipal [669-626 BC] a scribe noted in cuneiform writing: "I will put in the library what pleases the king; what he dislikes I will remove". This process of de-selecting or de-acquisition has always been an essential part of any archive and library practice. There is always the mirror image of the official collection profile, that which is consciously or unconsciously left out. One has no problem in finding rare and precious bibliophile editions, or obscure academic works in public collections, but popular and "mass products" like the late medieval "paupers" bibles" or the mid-twentieth century mass circulation popular culture magazines, "trivial literature" such as romantic novels for ladies, or porn magazines and videos have left almost no archival traces. Marshall McLuhan calls this "the library law": what is most widely circulated is often the most neglected by curators and librarians who tend to dislike the "lower class culture" of their own lifetimes. In this sense popular memory becomes the antithesis of official written history.

The attempts to escape death through preserving the human body for afterlife, as the Egyptians did, is mimicked in archival practices. The Mesopotamians constructed repositories that had a system of temperature and humidity control for their clay tablets much in the same way as our modern air-conditioned archive and library depositories try to preserve paper information carriers for posterity. Crumbling modern paper newspapers and magazines are mummified in microfilm. But as the history of the almost mythical Library of Alexandria shows, "destruction, ruin, pillage and fire especially hit great amassments of books that according to the rule are situated in the centres of power. That's why what has remained [of the early period] in the end does not come from the big centres but from marginal places [...?] and sporadic private copies." [4] This historical message escaped the initiators of a four million volume new library now planned for Alexandria and similar information concentration projects like the gigantic new building of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

If the physical safeguarding and preservation of information carriers through the centuries were the only factor, then our actual collective memory system would have been of a different

magnitude. Censorship, book-burning and iconoclastic practices have decimated our cultural heritage. Erasing the names of decayed rulers and the disgraced can be found as early as 3000 BC in Egypt where chiselling out unwanted names from stone was practised, a habit similar to the "damnatio memoriae" in 16th century Europe. The Chinese emperor Shi Huangdi [200 BC] is mostly mentioned as the originator of book-burning as he ordered most of the books that were not related to practical matters or the history of his own dynasty to be burned. Those who dared to cite texts from the past were to be put to death together with their families. He set a tradition for more than two thousand years with the smell of burning paper mingling with that of human flesh, as authors were often burned together with their debated products, causing a stench in the skies of the Byzantine, Roman, Persian, English, German, French, and Spanish empires and kingdoms. Nazi party members all over Germany and Austria, communist Chinese Red Guards, Chilean soldiers, anti-communist crowds in Budapest, Santiago de Chile, Djakarta and Bangkok, religiously motivated masses in Teheran are among the twentieth century book-burners/erasers of collective memory [5]. In some libraries, like the National Library of Austria, shelves emptied by the fascists remained so afterwards and are witness of such purgations.

The recent phenomena of "cyberclast" started with anti-militaristic actions in Canada and the United States in the early seventies when students stormed the administrative buildings that housed computers for draft registration for the Vietnam war, threw millions of punch cards out of the windows and smashed some hardware. Sabotaging "big brother's" control system was on the agenda of political radicals for most of the seventies and eighties, with a few cases actually carried out, mostly bomb attacks directed against military computer centres. The metamorphosis of this military computer information system into what became the Internet has created new forms of cyberclast at opposing sides of the power spectrum: the individual sabotaging hacker fighting "the system" and the governmentally controlled agency that bans, or is planning to ban, unwanted information.

Information carriers that support our memory are mostly conceived of as being of paper, film, tape or digital. Artifacts, from totems to historical monuments, being material images for reflection and recall, are of the same order. Strewn all over the world commemorative placards, statues, buildings and historical sites tell us about the past. There is a constant process of erecting and preserving these information carriers. The idea of a "museum without walls" originated by André Malraux in the fifties seems to have expanded so much that whole towns, regions or countries will be turned into museums, frozen in the grip of the crypto-feudal conservationists until the kiss of a young prince ...

"We turn inanimate matter into "monuments", whether it is the Winter Palace or the Eiffel Tower, the ruins of Herculaneum or the reconstruction of Old Warsaw, the *Night Watch*, or *Our Lady of Vladimir*, and these objects are given a meaning "that would have astounded their originators". Objects never intended to commemorate anything have been transformed into monuments of meaning [6]. Krzysztof Pomian speaks of a division of the world into the visible and the invisible, whereby the invisible is projected in the visible world by means of rare objects taken from nature itself and any form of handicraft or art, be it painting, sculpture, modelling, carving, needlework or finery. On the one hand there is the world of useful things, objects that can be consumed, provide a means of livelihood, can turn raw materials into eatable substances, that protect against changes in the environment. All these are in regular use and produce or undergo physical changes, wear out or down. On the other hand there are things that Pomian calls "semiophors", objects that are not used in the sense as described before, that represent the invisible, to which a certain meaning has been ascribed. They are not for practical use, but to be shown, to be put on display [7].

Not just objects that have been created with the purpose of being art have this semiophore function, but also objects, often saved from the waste heap, that have lost their practical function and are transformed from utensils to collectors' items. The scarcer they become in the course of time, the more economic value is attached to them and the more new meanings will be given to them. In this economic and aesthetic process, understanding the original context of the object that is supposed to convey meaning is often weakened. Complex practices are reduced to stylistic tendencies, opposing views are reconciled by the cultural hierarchy that museums tend to represent and the commodified objects can only point to a past that never existed.

Ironically such misinterpretations are very close to the way in which our personal memory system seems to function. Our memories tend to have constructive abilities that are independent of memories related to the past. "It is often more important that our memories seem real than that they are real." [8] We oscillate between historical memory and imaginative construction: "People are willing to recognize, as their own, memories that are not theirs and do so with increasing frequency as the events become more and more remote from and more and more similar to actual occurrences in their lives."

A similar process of interplay between memory and fantasy can be found in Freud's method of psychoanalysis whereby, on the basis of scarce and fragmented recollections that are haunting a patient, a primal scene [Urszene] of "what might have happened" is constructed by the analyst. Through a process of "anamnesis", of inner listening, a forgotten past is constructed by the therapist. It is a risky method and "only with great difficulty can such an interpretive exercise be translated into effective therapy." [9]

The parallel with the construction of "therapeutic truth" by historians that model our collective memory system is striking. To reconcile people with the society they live in, the historian has to discover which haunting image, which "Urszene" is disturbing the patients. Manoeuvring in a shadowland between forgetting and remembering, a primal scene has to be construed that has enough authentic information and enough "unauthentic" imagination that the constructed story is plausible and consistent. It need not be veridical but its verisimilitude is essential.

Do we know what we want to forget or are we simply forgetting? Do we know what we want to remember or are we remembering what others want us to remember?

[1] Jon Urry, *How societies remember the past*, p.49, in *Theorizing museums*, 1996, Blackwell/The Sociological Review

[2] R. Samuel, *Theatres of memory*, 1994, Verso

[3] Simon Schama, *Landscape and memory*, 1995, Alfred A. Knopf, p.16

[4] L. Canfora, *La véritable histoire de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie*, 1986, Edition Desjonque

[5] Herman Rafetseder, *Bücherverbrennungen, die öffentliche Hinrichtung von Schriften im historischen Wandel*, 1988, Böhlau

[6] Donald Horne, *The great museum, the representation of history*, 1984, Pluto Press, p.29

[7] Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums, Vom Sammeln*, 1988, Klaus Wagenbach, p.49

[8] David C. Rubin, *Autobiographical memory*, 1986, Cambridge University Press, p.4

[9] N. Lukacher, *Primal scenes, literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis*, 1986, Cornell University Press