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Introduction

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Introduction

Questioning Traumatic Heritages and Spaces of Memory

Ihab Saloul, Patrizia Violi, Anna Maria Lorusso and Cristina Demaria

This book marks the conclusion of a six-year international and interdisciplinary European Research Project "SPEME Questioning Traumatic Heritage in Europe, Argentina, Colombia" (2018-2024) in which university researchers and heritage professionals debated the role played by urban spaces in the construction and representation of events and subjectivities involved in collective traumatic experiences. The project took into consideration how a difficult past can be articulated in the spaces of museums and heritage sites, not only to represent what happened, thus freezing the past in a historical sense, but also to understand what practices and narratives are possible so that trauma can become a springboard for reflection on contemporary societies, and how countries and communities relate to an unbearable history. In the field of heritage and memory studies, debates on the narration of traumatic pasts through space are certainly not a new topic.

For example, in their work on so-called dissonant heritage, Ashworth and Tunbridge (1996) illustrated how space can be, at the same time, a nonhuman witness to a dramatic event and a tool for the narrative management of subjectivities: indeed, places communicate the often blurred boundary between those who are to be considered victims and those who are perpetrators. However, they suggest, space can also provide a starting point for communicating that same history to future generations. This is not only limited to a (sometimes utopian) reconciliatory mission that sees the realization of the motto "never again", but can provide an understanding of what social missions these places and the professionals who work in them can have in mediating the past.

In the last decade, memorials, monuments and museums have become the battlefield for competing and conflicting visions of the past and the

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hegemonic or counter memories of the so-called "difficult heritage" or "traumatic heritage". Far from being mere spaces of musealisation that freeze and fix dominant narratives of the past, spaces of memory are increasingly turning into sites of negotiations and reconfigurations of meaning in which social and political identities are debated, strengthened, or weakened in reference to the traumatic experiences of the past which they "represent". Yet, what does it mean to spatially represent traumatic heritages and memories, and what is a space of memory?

In expanding and, simultaneously, problematizing Pierre Nora's (Nora 1996) category of *lieu de mémoire,* the way we think of spaces of memory aims at an in-depth examination of the peculiar yet specific ways of re-thinking the nexus between space and memory: how do we activate, elaborate and make visible spaces for memory? This question points to the dynamic construction that underlines the production and connection of spatiality and memory, as well as to the coexistence of a plurality of meanings and experiences that characterize spaces of memory. Hence, when we refer to spaces of memory we think of both material places and sites of commemoration and memorialization, as well as sets of more immaterial semiotic constructions, representing spaces that elaborate and interrogate the (traumatic) past through ritual practices, documentaries, and artistic performance. Spaces of memory thus include museums, former detention centers and camps, monuments, and memorials, some of which are indexically linked to past traumas[1]. This is because these spaces of memory stand in the very place where violence and extermination occurred, and any intervention or artistic practice which investigates the multiple versions and their articulations that we can produce of the past, as well as the multiple ways of forming, interpreting, and experiencing the presence of the past when the latter assumes a spatial and relational dimension.

As Neyla Graciela Pardo Abril aptly writes in her article, "Art and Memory: Magdalenas porel Cauca", both the spatiality and rationality of spaces of memory is rep- resented in the understanding of spaces of memory as:

1 We refer here to the linguistic category of 'indexicality' as reformulated by Patrizia Violi in her book Landscapes of Memory (Violi 2017) to express the direct link that exists between certain spaces and the signs that have been devised to build it. Violi investigates in particular the case in which a monument, or a memorial, is located exactly at the place where a massacre or a traumatic event took place, thus expressing a direct link with that place, increasing its significance as a "trauma site". In linguistics, "indexical" is used to mean an expression whose interpretation depends on the context and varies as the context varies.

> […] series of existential relations that guarantee dialogues and interactions related not only to strategies for context transformation, but also those ways of representation of violent events that define the condition of "victim". In spaces of memory meanings of location, territory, areas of influence, ethical and political responsibilities, power relationships, and resistance exercises are recovered. In spaces of memory, the knowledge linked to traumatic events is appropriated and socialized." (Pardo Abril, this book).

All the contributions in this book delve into the multi-layered dimensions of the nexus between spaces, spatiality, memories, and traumas that consist of, and, at the same time, put these dimensions into a productive tension in various academic and professional contexts. A more concrete, literal, and stricter acceptation of a "space of memory", as explained by Alejandra Naftal and Lars Ebert in the two articles of this book, is that of space as the product of signifying practices, as a discursive and textual device through which the concept of "memory" is worked through neither as an abstract nor fixed and codified system of knowledge.

Through the semiotic and cultural lens that we adopt here, memory is envisaged as an active force field of competing discourses within which individual and collective acts of remembrance are constantly re-negotiated, re-elaborated and recounted in often conflictual and contested narratives. As Ihab Saloul argues in his book, *Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination: Telling Memories*, "memory is a volatile concept. The work of memory in all its forms, from historical essays to personal reminiscences, legal testimonies, and imaginative recreations, is not only slippery but also inherently contradictory. On the one hand, memory posits a past reality that is recalled outside the person's subjectivity. Yet, on the other hand, memory requires a narrator who is equipped with conventional cultural filters of generational distance, age and gender, class, and political affiliations, on whose authority the truth of the past can be revealed. Memories are narrated by someone in the present but nonetheless we still use them as authoritative sources of historical knowledge" (Saloul 2012: 4–6). An important lesson that those dealing with these issues must bear in mind is that memories, both individual and collective, are always the result of a form of mediation. The meaning of what is remembered as a 'past' inevitably traverses the apparatuses that gravitate in our culture and that have allowed memory to become. These objects, which provide a vehicle for memory, inhabit the world, feeding and changing values, and shaping the identities of those who encounter them. Working on memory

and these apparatuses does not mean merely dealing with what has been, with what has happened, but rather how things are represented as having 'happened', who has the right to speak or narrate, or which histories and subjectivities have been silenced and, consequently, forgotten for political and social reasons.

This is a conception of memory not as an irrevocably deposited and defined notion but as an active and transformative force that reshapes the past as much as the future, as it interrogates the present, its politics and the subject positions that constitute forms and communities of remembrance and memory transmission. A multidimensional and multi-layered memory is, for that matter, what animates the interdisciplinary broadening field of Heritage and Memory Studies, whose most cited and recognized authors are, not by chance, constantly referred to by the authors of this book[2].

The shared assumption of this, which stands as the theoretical and analytical culmination of the work conducted during the European research project "Speme", is that for memory to be active and to have a transformative impact it must not be musealised and frozen in fixed and unquestioned forms of representation and communication. Memory and the spaces that it affects, in this sense, are configured not as static and monolithic devices that manage to offer a positivistic interpretation of what happened in the past, but as laboratories in which the process of remembering is continuously dynamic, the polyphonic result of a series of operations that involve not only those who design the space, but also those who live in and through it.

Instead, memory with its various forms of exhibition, spatialisation and transmission, must reach out to new kinds of social actors, and must develop new forms of interaction with the political, social, and cultural contexts within which it is negotiated and promote innovative forms of expression. Here we come to another nexus that helps us to further problematize the category of spaces of memory as a set of dynamic processes of meaning construction and re-configuration, especially when exploring the impact of artistic practices within a memory site as a way of building a space of memory. Nowadays, spaces of memory certainly do not entertain an accidental relationship with different forms of trauma and artistic expressions. Rather they become sites of temporary exhibitions, theatrical and artistic

2 Obviously, it is impossible to summarise here the main categories and theories of the interdisciplinary field of heritage and memory studies, animated by a series of reflections that are partly shared and partly debated. See, for example, the work of authors such as Maurice Halbwachs, Aleida and Jan Assmann, Tzevan Todorov, Marianne Hirsch, Michael Rothberg, Georges Didi-Huberman and many others.

performances, and, in some more radical cases, spaces of memory are themselves turned into works of art, making the boundaries between memorial commemoration and aesthetic experience ever more blurred. While many sites consecrated to the conservation and transmission of memory resort to art, contemporary artists seem to constantly re-elaborate and aesthetically transform several of the topics linked to (traumatic) memory. The works of Christian Boltanski and of other artists such as Doris Salcedo, Regina José Galindo, Ana Mendieta, Anna Maria Maiolino and Teresa Margolles, are but few seminal examples in this context.

Moreover, the resort to artistic expressions in memorial spaces and contexts is an attempt to answer one of the main and all-encompassing questions regarding these spaces: what do we make of places that oftentimes have been the stage of mass violence, of suffering and deaths; of places that bear the burden of collective lacerations, civil wars and conflicts between communities and actors belonging to the same country and the same culture? This question is debated in several articles in this book in which artistic practices provide a possible alternative to the paralyzing opposition between an obsessive repetition of the traumatic event and an oblivion aimed at erasing all its traces, offering a way to evoke, represent or think through "what happened" in a symbolic form. A trauma is indeed not only the wounding of bodies and flesh; it is, first and foremost, the breaking of symbolic connections, the impossibility to integrate and balance cognitive, emotional, and symbolic elements of our experiences. Within this frame, artistic practices and expressions may gain an imaginative function able to reconstruct the lost connections, and to suggest new images and alternative thinking paradigms to reduce the "hermeneutic gaps" that separate the past from the ways we have access to it in the present. The many thoughts and reflections advanced by the authors of this book revolve around the premises discussed so far, as in the two essays written by two professionals who work in museums and archives and who take us *inside* two emblematic spaces of memory in Argentina (Naftal) and in the Netherlands (Ebert), while in the essay by Leoni and Borsari, in which the authors force us to face all the contemporary challenges posed by what we could call the "enterprise" of memory making and cultural heritage in the 21st century as an endeavor defined by the constant tension between remembering and forgetting, gripped between an excess of memory and an excess of oblivion, whereby what is needed is often either to reactivate "dormant memories" or unmemorable, indescribable, ones. What is also at stake is how to retrace intentionally erased traces as was the case with Holocaust memories in Europe, and with the tragedy of the desaparecidos in

Argentina (see also Tornay et al in this book) or, else, with traces that have withered away due to the passing of time and the death of direct witnesses, while many other memories are celebrated with redundancy. Both the variety of case studies considered by the authors – for instance, in Mieke Bal's article on the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, or David Duindam's interesting reflections on Documenta 15 (2022) – and the dialogue that the various chapters engage in throughout the book express the extra-European interest in investigating the relationship between memory, art, museums and memorial spaces.

In addition, the authors in this book do not limit themselves to a mere architectonical or urbanistic description of the logic and the narratives at play in a space of memory and the many signs it displays and exhibits. Instead, the authors also discuss the practices developed and envisaged around and within a place that is thus turned into a meaningful space; often time bottom-up practices following the paradigm of an active and transformative memory as discussed above.

Some practices are also the outcomes of a programed artistic research project, as the one analyzed in the articles of Pardo Abril's and Lizel Tornay et al. Others are the result of bottom-up movements of political resistance and activism, as in the case of the Hungarian monuments investigated by Reka Deim, where the direct intervention on a site of memory aims at contesting and challenging the government's official version of the recent national past. As such, several causes for reflections emerge, starting from the already mentioned role of art as an *ethical role* that appeals to artistic practices which do not take for granted what is true and appropriate, or what is wrong and inappropriate, but rather take a stand to re-establish a direct involvement and an intimate contact with the social, political and cultural dimension of any politics of memory and its spaces as spaces of trans-generational and transcultural transmission and convergences. Thus, the role of direct, physical experience as it gets *embodied in memory* practices and the spaces they transform, defies the idea of spaces of memory as a form of the archive neither as a stack of documents nor as a series of already established and closed narratives or as a fixed set of unchangeable symbols. On the contrary, memory becomes what is lived and experienced through a subject who is and, at the same time has, a body; a subject who is both a product of sensation and feelings and a member of a community thought of as a space of belonging, of constant negotiations, conflicts, and acknowledgments. To focus on experience means also to look at all these dimensions, to reflect upon a memory that is embodied in and through the very relationship between spaces and beings that produce, cross, and

transform them. At stake here are also *memory affects and emotions*, such as nostalgia, or indignation and resentment when it comes to traumatic pasts, but also hope as a "structure of feeling" intended to question how one can remember without having hope for the future. Finally, what is repeatedly underlined in the essays in this book is the topic of *memory and intergenerational transmission*. In this context, Marianne Hirsch's well-known concept of "postmemory" (Hirsch 2012) is put under scrutiny not so much for its lack of relevance, but because, at times, it proves to be too encompassing and generalized. As such, the reader will not find theories of postmemory in this issue but rather concrete and actual examples of intergenerational transmission of diverse traumatic pasts such as the Argentine "dirty war" and state terrorism; the European Holocaust in the Netherlands and Italy, as well as the armed conflict that has been lacerating Colombia for more than fifty years. Therefore, the questions we must ask are: how do we attract new and young generations to spaces of memory? How do we talk about and recount a (traumatic) past to subjects who are neither familiar with this past nor lived or experienced it? How do we develop alternative forms of knowledge that can trigger new ways of thinking around the often-overused slogan, "nunca mas" (never again), as a deeply felt commitment through narratives and images that unpack and balance discussions of concepts such as "guilt", "complicity" "responsibility" and the "victim-perpetrator" dualities and paradigms? How do we make something visible that has become invisible, of which no more traces are left?

It would be overly ambitious to claim that this book offers definitive answers to all these questions. Rather, the book aims at re-formulating these questions, thus adding clarity and, at the same time, raising doubts on the many implications that surround the intertwining of space, memory, and artistic practices by giving concrete examples of how memory works, and of how spaces of memory may trigger relevant processes of identification, socialization, working through and possible forms of reconciliation. As we have attempted to argue, it is not only appropriate, but also necessary, to find new ways of thinking about the transmission of knowledge of the past to new generations, and to overcome the silences, repressions, and embarrassments that the traumas of the 20th century have produced. Furthermore, it is urgent to reflect on *active and participatory* processes of memorialization and heritagisation to bring back to the center of any discussion on memory building the importance of enhancing the sense of *response and responsibility* of both individuals and local, national, and transnational communities with respect to both "what happened" in the past, and to what *will* happen.

What follows is a short itinerary among the chapters that compose this book. Alejandra Naftal presents us with a concrete and exemplary case of a site of memory located in Buenos Aires – the *ESMA-Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights* where in 2015 the *ESMA Museum and Site of Memory* which Naftal directs was inaugurated. In this space of memory, the former *Casino de los Officiales* is now turned into a museum, a space during the Argentine military dictatorship where thousands of people were tortured, imprisoned and from there "prepared" for the flights of death in which prisoners were thrown out from planes to drown in the sea. Naftal recounts the many steps and the heated debates that preceded the opening of the museum, which is a space that represents concrete legal evidence of the crimes that have been perpetrated by the military Junta, and asks how should the former detention centers be treated? Most importantly, how do we conserve the traces and how do we exhibit them? And when facing traumatic events encompassing the torture and disappearance of hundreds of people, how do we turn this site of suffering, horror, and tragedy into a space for memory transmission and the preservation of testimonies for future generations? These questions haunt every attempt to musealise a trauma site, starting from how to differentiate acts and practices of documentation and preservation from the audience interpretative, and sometimes very diverse reactions. In her chapter, Naftal engages with these debates and discusses how to conceptualize effective and respectful modes of representation of a recent traumatic experience that is still part of the living memory of a large part of Argentine society.

The second contribution is by Mieke Bal. The scholar deals with the role that artistic creativity plays in the construction of the past. In particular, dealing with the works of the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, and their very materiality, Bal shows how art can help to overcome trauma, trying to build an imaginary link between what happened and the present. For example, studying Salcedo's installation *Palimpsesto* (2017), Bal investigates the distinctions and tensions between still and moving images, and, for visitors, between inside and outside. Through the concept of cultural memory, Bal grasps the profound meanings that bring matter and thought together.

The chapter by Lars Ebert deals with another concrete case of a space of memory, that is of Herengracht 401 (H401) located in Amsterdam, the former house of a hermetic community of artists and scholars that was funded during the years of the Nazi occupation of the Nether- lands (1940–1945) and that was offered as a hiding place for a small community of Jews, some of whom managed to survive. Ebert follows the evolution and transformation of a place that witnessed different traumas and ar- gues that artistic

research and practices continue to play an equally, yet different, and surely not confined and hermetic role, today. This is so because the space of H401 has become an archive engaging with artists who, during their periods of residence and thanks to their sensitivity and experience, try to fill the "hermeneutic gap" that still separates the present from the past that is constantly re-invented and fictionalized without losing its power and its force, yet departing from any pre-conceived ideas of truth and authenticity.

In its two distinct yet dialogic parts, Giovanni Leoni and Andrea Borsari starts with a critique of memory tools and aids, and the paradoxes produced by the excesses of memorialization on one hand, and the tendency towards oblivion, on the other. Leoni and Borsari explore new forms of remembrance that mix the experiential dimension and the urban public sphere, and hence, open up new pathways for the reactivation of dormant memories, counter-monumental strategies and uncoded amnestic traces. Moreover, by highlighting how the experience of political and racial deportation during World War II drastically changed the idea of memorial architecture, the article elaborates on the specificity of architecture as an art craft that not only represents but also builds places which do not only recount experiences but rather *generate* them. The article thus proposes to develop a new conception of "concentratory" architecture, along with its constructing or deconstructing potentialities that can rethink the relationship between the architectural work and the existing surroundings, and to bring the body and experience back to the center of the project.

Pardo Abril's chapter starts from a broader conception of spaces of memory whereby audiovisual representations of memory can become spaces of remembering and healing. The author analyzes a video production that is closely linked to a physical space, namely the Cauca River, where various hideous crimes were perpetrated between 1986 and 1994, within the framework of the yet-to-be-resolved armed conflict in Colombia. The video not only reproduces, but also participates in what became a ritual of memory on the river, thanks to the organization of an exhibition and procession that mobilized many of the people who struggled and suffered in that place. Through a discursive analysis of the audio-visual restitution of this performance of, and on, memory, the chapter explores the narratives, the semantic nuclei and the deep underlining values marking the difficult re-elaboration of the memory of this very recent, and for some still ongoing, trauma.

Mario Panico's chapter proposes a reflection on the idea of the implicated subject as proposed by Michal Rothberg (2019), using the new permanent exhibition of the Verzetsmuseum in Amsterdam as a concrete example.

Through the analysis of the different narrative strategies adopted there, he studies the meaning effect that is produced, in particular around the idea of collaborationism. Panico deals with how the museum exhibits micro-histories and personal lives to represent and discuss a collective event like the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Drawing from contemporary debates in Memory Studies, Panico considers how the binarism between victim and perpetrator can be called into question, not so much in order to justify one or to downplay the commemoration of the other, but to enable a more dynamic and realistic understanding of forms of violence.

Reka Deim's chapter examines the top-down dialectic of Hungarian national memory politics, taking into consideration, on one hand, the national policies that either impose, rewrite, or celebrate a certain vision of homeland history and public memory, and on the other hand, the practices of civil resistance to national memory expressed through forms of grassroots activism. The memory on which Deim reflects is that of Hungary during its periods of transition from the country's independence to its membership of the Soviet bloc, to the gaining of national autonomy from communism and the so-called "Third Republic" (1989-present), up to the establishment of Victor Urban's national-conservative government which many people consider either as authoritarian or as a government with 'undemocratic' features. According to Deim, the coexistence of several contrasting memories, expressed in symbolic monuments and museums that have triggered numerous demonstrations and bottom-up practices of resistance and opposition around them, has not always had effective and productive results. Moreover, the so-called "multidirectional memories" (Rothberg 2009) don't always have a positive outcome but rather often fail to build a collective and shared awareness. For Deim, multidirectional memories have an element of paradoxicality because while they manage to render different visions of the past explicit, they nevertheless increase conflict and internal turmoil that may even solicit the drive to silence them.

The chapter by Lizel Tornay et al focuses on the transmission of memory to the new and young generations. Choosing not to resort to the concept of 'post-memory', they focus on two heritage sites linked to the traumatic memory of the dictatorship ('the Park for Memory and Human Rights' and the "El Olimpo" memory site, a former Clandestine Detention Center) by looking at two artistic projects hosted by these two spaces and designed specifically for a young audience prompted to creatively "interpret" and represent them. Thanks to these two examples, the chapter reflects on how the recourse to an artistic reworking (be it with posters and drawings or with the use of poetry) produced by some of the youngest visitors of the Park

of Memory and the "El Olimpo" may, on the one hand, keep the traumatic memory alive by highlighting lived and concrete aspects of these places, and, on the other, how it can stimulate further and broader reflections that go beyond the single traumatic event of the state terrorism, opening up to a more general discourse on the ongoing local and global violation of human rights.

Sarike van Slooten deals with the representation of colonialism and the memory of slavery by looking at two concrete cases: the Cape Castle in Ghana and the International Slavery Museum in the UK. The author conducted a series of interviews and a display analysis of these spaces, mainly taking into consideration what kinds of narratives were implemented in the construction of the traumatic past. In addition to highlighting the different perspectives adopted to represent the trauma of slavery in these two very different contexts, she focuses on the emotional involvement of the viewer and how the spaces propose a re-signification for those who experience them.

Valentina Pisanty's chapter deals with how artists working on the memory of the Holocaust should take into account a double bind: that of the duty of remembrance and that of the unrepresentability of trauma. While in the first case, the artist has the obligation to remember what happened, transforming the Holocaust into a universal dogma, in the second, they are faced with the paradox of having to mediate something that cannot be recounted, something that is beyond the limits of human imagination. Starting with this reflection, Pisanty offers a very convincing account of how these two (often contradictory) dynamics have fundamentally characterised the culture of post-Holocaust memory.

David Duindam's chapter delves into the controversy sparked by the artwork "People's Justice" at Documenta 15 in 2022. Created by the Indonesian art collective Taring Padi, the piece portrays Indonesia's communist history and the subsequent authoritarian regime under Suharto. International outrage erupted when two antisemitic figures were discovered on the banner, prompting criticism of the festival and its organizers. Duindam contends that German media reactions reflect Historikerstreit 2.0 and Europe's exclusionary memory politics, marginalizing both Jewish voices and Indonesian memories. By studying Taring Padi's activism and transnational visual culture, and challenging the metaphor of travel, Duindam ultimately foregrounds the relevance of proximity rather than distance in globally dispersed memory cultures.

In closing, Patrizia Violi's chapter considers the role played by material objects in the construction of the memory of traumatic events. Referring to

the objects of the victims and prisoners of concentration camps, which are often displayed in museums and memorial sites, Violi proposes a distinction between serial and singular objects. The first case refers to those objects that are displayed in museums through a dynamic of repetition: for example, countless shoes in Holocaust museums. The second case refers to those objects that were not taken away from the victim but, on the contrary, were created by the victims themselves, therefore assuming a value associated with a form of resistance.

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