

SPACES OF MEMORY – “THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE” CULTURAL MEMORY AND OBLIVION MECHANISMS

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to emphasize the role of tangibility, particularly that of material places relevant for different social or interest groups in the process of preservation and the communication with the past. According to various scholars the culture of memory is frequently bounded to concrete spaces, gestures, images, and objects. In the first part of this paper the difference between the biological and neurological foundation of memory will be scrutinized as well the social aims that create relevant topoi which should provide adequate identification of different groups with their past. Furthermore, the significance of oblivion in creating the culture of memory will be recognized, likewise its importance in establishing mechanisms for remembering different aspects of the past. The second part of the paper will be dedicated to Pierre Nora's definition of the *lieux de mémoire*, as a way of reviving the past eras and place events, people, and phenomena in our memory. However, not only does Nora's definition include material spaces and places, but it encompasses the more abstract ones as well – any idea of making a connection with the past in literature, music, etc., with the purpose to avoid oblivion. In the third part of the text, Nora's ideas will be linked to Foucault's concept of heterotopia – a way of intersecting things that could or could not be

seen in the realm of the same time and space. This thesis could, on the other hand, send us back to mechanisms of cultural and individual memory. The final part of this paper will be dedicated to observing spaces of memory as a place of cultural encounters, therefore, of heritage itself, as a phenomenon that combines different cultures through the use of the past in the present and its preservation for the future

Keywords: Memory, heritage, oblivion, lieux de mémoire, spaces of memory

I. INTRODUCTION

“Les monuments et les antiquités, restes intéressants, épargnés et consacrés par le temps, que le temps semble nous donner encore, parce qu'il ne les détruit pas, que l'histoire consulte, que les arts étudient, que le philosophe observe, que nos yeux aiment à fixer avec ce genre d'intérêt qu'inspirent même la vieillesse des choses et tout ce qui donne une sorte d'existence au passé[...]"¹
Jean Baptiste Mathieu (Babel and Chastel, 2010 : 59)

The main area of interest of this paper, the basis from which the problems of cultural and individual memory are being examined, is the field of *heritology*. This discipline is focused particularly on the process of *patrimonialization* in which the objects from the past are identified as documents, testimonies of that past. After that specific, *testimonial* character of the past is recognized, this discipline points towards the preservation of those objects and towards the transmission of their content to the other people. (Bulatović, 2005 : 10-12) Memorizing is an important process directing any person to preserve its own heritage, as an irreplaceable part of its identity. In 1790, when the ideas related to the importance of the preservation of the past were being shaped in France, Aubin-Louis Millan wrote in his collection *National Antiquities* that "the historical monuments are those to which we are mainly attaching ourselves". (Babel and Chastel, 2010 : 71) One of the reasons of 'our' attachment to those material traces lies in a fact that there is something more than a mere materiality invested in them – *memories* represent an integral part of the content, meaning, of those objects. Furthermore, it is our responsibility to make the past vivid by knowing the ways in which these memories are placed in materiality, and afterwards extracted from it and transmitted to the recipients.

The notion *culture of memory* is considered as the part of the external aspects of the human memory. Memorizing is conceived, primarily, as an internal phenomenon, localized within the brain of the individual, and as such it is to be found not in the domain of disciplines related to cultural history but in the realm of neurology and psychology. However, the external factors, the social and cultural framework, influence the content which human

memory adopts. These factors affect also the content of memory: what gets to be preserved, how long it is stored for, and how it is organized. (J. Asman, 2011 : 16)

Numerous theories within the field of cognitive psychology, but related to the culture of memory as well, consider the memory as a phenomenon deposited in different spaces or places, material or immaterial. (J. Asman, 2011 : 36-37; Katroga, 2011 : 28-30) Vice-versa, those spaces or places could be regarded as the significant triggers of memories, as well. If memories are not restored and sustained, the visual and verbal documents become 'silent witnesses' of the past when the stories, or vivid memories, that were once related to them, disappear. (A. Asman, 2011 : 66) According to Jan and Aleida Assmann, when objects become separated from 'vivid' memories that a person experienced individually, the memories that remain deposited in those objects pass into the realm of the cultural memory. (A. Asman, 2011 : 58-62; J. Asman, 2011 : 49-51) Due to the separation from the individual experiences and histories, those memories have to be interpreted and transmitted. (A. Asman, 2011 : 63-68)

II. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CULTURAL AND BIOLOGICAL/NEUROLOGICAL MEMORY

The first level in relation to the constitution of human memory is the biological one. The basic precondition of memorizing is a living organism with its brain and central nervous system. (Ibid : 33) According to different theories of cognitive psychology, human memory is a pretty complex phenomenon. Within those theories, memorizing is defined as a process related to perception and

storage of information provided by our senses. On the other side, assuming that the information is deposited, its use depends on the possibility to access it at the right time once it is again needed. Therefore, the ability to bring out the information is as important as its storing. (Bedli, 2004 : 3-9)

However, the neural basis is not the autonomous system; on the contrary, for its development and maintenance, it requires various fields of interaction. To call on Aleida Assmann, the two fields of interaction that nurture and stabilize the biological memory are: a) the social interaction and communication, and b) cultural interaction supported by signs and media. (A. Asman, 2011 : 33) It is usually considered that memories are unstable until they are externalized and fixed in outer depots. As stated before, there is a difference between communicative memories (maintained by communication) and the cultural ones (maintained by signs and media). The communicative memory has its origin in the discourse of common experiences, regular interaction, and spatial proximity. (Ibid : 24) It is a memory that is being sustained by the witnesses of an event; memory that a person shares with contemporaries (J. Asman, 2011 : 49) and other members of the group it belongs to, such as family, ethnic groups, generation, etc. In addition, there is a cultural memory represented by a group of symbolic figures to which the memories are attached. This kind of memory is guided and directed – there are specific material carriers and transmitters of knowledge, apart from the living organism. The meaning of these memories could not be perceived at the first glance. (A. Asman, 2011 : 35-36)

However, both of these realms of memory represent the parts of the wider notion of the *culture of memory*, that, according to Aleida Assmann, is characterized as a

“group of forms and media of cultural mnemonics through which the groups and cultures are creating their collective identity and the orientation within the era”. (Ibid : 358) The culture of memory is a question of fulfillment of the group’s social commitment. (J. Asman, 2011 : 28) This commitment could not be transmitted naturally, like some biological or neurological phenomena related to memory; conversely, memories should be carefully directed. Hence, the external frameworks affect the content that is being memorized. Moreover, those external factors (social, political) direct oblivion according to their current needs, as well. (Ibid : 91)

The culture of memory is very different from individual memories integrating different pasts into the one collective past, which is, inter alia, the case with any collective memory. (Kuljić, 2006 : 9) However, we have to be aware that the memory created in that process does not represent a simple sum of all personal memories. On the contrary, we could relate that phenomenon with the notion of the *creolization* derived from the linguistics, assuming that the sum of different cultural discourses represents the creation of one completely new, original, cultural context. (Berk, 2010 : 154) Thus, it could be said that the culture of memory is constituted in the tension between the official (politics) of memory and the private ones. (Kuljić, 2006 : 9)

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEMORY AND OBLIVION

One of the most important characteristics of human memory is its fragmentation. What one preserves as a ‘memory flash’ is without context, lacking basic information about what came before and after it. It is due to narration and interpretation that these flashes have

subsequently gained shape and structure, thus becoming stable. Some memories change with the development of personality and related life circumstances (and the social context as well), while others fade or disappear permanently. Hence it could be concluded that memories are not closed, rigid systems. On the contrary, they always interact with other memories and oblivion impulses existing in the same social reality. (A. Asman, 2011 : 22-24)

On the other hand, there is oblivion, an integral part of the memory. It could be said that oblivion is the reason people store memories and "themselves" in external objects? It is so, that these objects speak for the person carrying the memories, after he/she has disappeared.

Biological and psychological factors affect memorization by provoking oblivion. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, memories are affected by various imperatives imposed by different interest groups (whether political, social, national, etc.). One could say that what is regarded useless for those groups is being forgotten. (Kuljić, 2006 : 9)

Memories are, also, important components of one man's identity. By memorizing others, one is memorizing itself. Without memories we would not be able to construct our *selves* or to communicate with other people as individuals. Personal biographical memories are irreplaceable, because they represent the substance of our experiences and relations with other people, furthermore, the very image of our personal identities. (A. Asman, 2011 : 22-23) In order to perceive ourselves in relation to others inside or outside a group we often memorize something, as a part of our expected or actual identity. Like an individual who maintains its personal identity through the course of

time relaying on the strength of its own memory, so does the group succeed in reproducing its common identity thanks to collective memory.

The difference between the two is that collective memory does not have the neurological basis that individual does. Its root, instead, is *culture* – the complexity of knowledge which assures the existence of individual identities of the group's participants. It is the different myths, songs, rituals, laws, proverbs, holy texts, games, images, ornaments, signs, roads, even the whole scenery strengthening the group's identity. (J. Asman, 2011 : 91)

To quote Fernando Catroga: "man is creating histories as a sign of protest against his finiteness, because of necessity provoked by oblivion in order to preserve his individuality [...] If he had always known [...] what had been, what is, and what will be, man would not have had memories, he would not have had the ability of expectation, nor the need to leave the traces to be found." (Catroga, 2011 : 14) If what Catroga says is true, then it could be said that people are depositing, through various acts, memories about themselves in external signs, all in order not to be forgotten – thus achieving their own grasp of immortality. This striving for eternal life of any kind is common to most men, also being shared by many groups and different systems. We should remember that the *Ars memorativa*, even from the period of the poet Simonides of Ceos, in the 6th century BC, and the Rhetorics of the ancient times, has implied the visual representations. (J. Asman, 2011 : 27) Hence, the easiest way for people to memorize is through symbols and signs. For that reason, Paul Ricoeur, preceding the ideas of Plato, so as to understand the reason for the representation of the

past in memory, was writing about the *image-memory* as the representation of the *presence of absence*, an image that, therefore, has the purpose to replace oblivion. (Katroga, 2011 : 23)

IV. PLACES AND SPACES OF MEMORY

Only a small part of our memories is 'active'. Conversely, the biggest part of them, to use Proustian terminology, 'sleeps' inside of us waiting to be activated by an external stimulant. Upon memory reactivation a person becomes fully aware of it, and in most cases he/she can access it and use it whenever a need arises. (A. Asman, 2011 : 23) However, the aforementioned could be applied to the memories of events which are perceived individually, or, that are, according to Aleida and Jan Assmann, a part of the communicative memory. On the other hand, as far as cultural memory is concerned, we need a clear interpretation in order to perceive the memories related to some period, or a person, group.

As previously mentioned, various scholars agree on the fact that memories cannot exist without both external and internal traces. For, internal traces are stimulated by the external ones – whether they are material or symbolic. (Katroga, 2011 : 28-29) Furthermore, it is interesting to think about the evolution of characteristics that transform those external traces into signs. Those signs influence our internal traces, because human memory is in need of the 'material' reconstruction of what happened before in order to fill in the gap between the past and the present and overcome the inability to reconstruct the past accurately. Therefore, to make the absence present, people are using external, material, traces, to deposit their memories. (A. Asman, 2011 : 35-36) We could say

that people are placing their memories not only in the signs and objects, but in the places, spaces, cities, public squares and landscapes (J. Asman, 2011 : 91), as well as songs, persons, or ideas.

The less the memory is experienced from the inside, from the person's point of view, the more it persists through the external "scaffolds" and signs. What we call *memory* is in fact an enormous storage space of various information which would be impossible for us to memorize, and later, to recall. (Nora, 1989 : 13)

French historian Pierre Nora, the editor of the famous series of books, *Les lieux de mémoire*, dedicated primarily to the problems of collective and national memory, had a very large impact on the problems previously expressed. According to him, the main purpose of the *lieux de mémoire* is to create those kind of places² in which we could anchor our memories. "The museums, archives, festivals, anniversaries, agreements, written records, monuments, sanctuaries, monastic orders – these all are the border lines of some other period, the illusions of eternity – and this is exactly what is making them special as the *lieux de mémoire*." (Ibid : 12) Nora's idea begins with a postulate that there is no spontaneous memorizing; on the contrary, we must deliberately create those 'realms' (*lieux*). If the commemorative flywheel related to them did not exist, they would be wiped out long ago by history. We are supporting our identities due to those bastions; however, if we do not preserve what they are protecting, it would not be necessary to create them. Vice-versa, if the memories that those bastions encompass would vanish, those *places* would become useless. (Ibid : 12) Pierre Nora considers that a will to remember something has to be present as well. Therefore, the memory is perceived as a vivid phenomenon, created by the living societies, ever evolving. (Ibid : 8)

V. A CASE STUDY – CEMETERIES AS SPACES OF MEMORY

The main case study, regarding my previous research connected to the previously exposed ideas, was related to cemeteries perceived as the spaces and places of memory³. The presumption is that the cemetery space represents the juncture of the individual memories, family memories and the memories related to different interest groups. However, another kind, or more precisely – *level* of the memory existing on cemeteries is historical memory, related to historical epochs, or even to different parts of the whole cultures and civilizations. These memories are signs and aspects through which we can perceive the testimonial character of the monuments of the past.

The individual memories that a cemetery holds are, for instance, our personal ones which stem from the relationship the person memorizing had with the deceased. An enormous amount of memories is triggered by the grave itself, as well by the tombstone, the epitaph, the picture of the deceased, etc. Furthermore, through family or group memories we could learn not only about the departed, but a family or a group, too. Likewise, through different examples we learn about the culture of various periods as well – different artistic styles, social relations, fashion, etc.

People who identify themselves with a religious group, for example, are placing the adequate symbols related to that group's identity (cross, crescent, Magen David, etc.). By its appearance a burial site can also be telling of the social strata a person or a family belonged to – wealthier classes are creating monumental tombstones, even whole family chapels. Busts and sculptures on their gravestones are often done by famous artists. Even the placement of someone's burial place on the cemetery represents the reflection of the social differentiation.

Furthermore, the oblivion mechanisms could also be detected when analyzing tombstones' negligence, particularly when it comes to people who are not essential for the maintenance of the group identity. On the other hand, the tombstones of 'heroic figures' are clearly marked.

VI. HERITAGE AND SPACES/PLACES OF MEMORY AS HETEROTOPIAS

By being aware of the existence of these different layers of the past, different layers of various cultures, we come to the Foucault's idea of heterotopias – the 'other spaces', as the problem that could be interesting in the discourse related to heritage, on the one hand, and memory, on the other. The idea is that there is a layer of active memories in every space/place of memory – the layer tied to a group that is currently sustaining the activity and the use of those memories, often through strengthening the group's identity. Apart from the active memories within the spaces of memory, other memories exist as well, but they could not be perceived without additional interpretations, whether because they are only partly obvious or are related to the group that once existed. This kind of memories changed the context of their existence or appearance alongside with the disappearance of the group they were related to, so now, they have to be examined with the assistance of other historical documents, which is again related to the notion of cultural memory. Memories are representing a possibility for the interpretation of space/place in a multitude of different keys, whether they are visible, invisible, therefore completely virtual or 'other'.

Foucault's hypothesis related to that 'other places' insists that the 20th century was the century of the space – people were living in the epoch of simultaneous, parallel, epoch of close and distant, the near and scattered. The idea is not to deny 'time', but to discuss about what we call time and what we call 'history'. (Fuko, 2005:29) By describing the character of the 20th century understanding of space, Foucault introduced the notion of arrangement, therefore, the idea is that a space is defined through the relations among things. We always arrange something bearing in mind the idea of something else, of another element. Between different arrangements, heterotopia is a phenomenon that has an unusual quality to be linked with all other arrangements with the purpose of abolishing, invalidating or reversing the set of relations created in it. (Ibid : 30-31) Once again, we are coming to the idea of *creolization*. In my opinion, these places are related to other places, simultaneously creating one totally new appearance that is virtual and could not exist without the other relations. Discussing the external space Foucault emphasizes that "[...] we do not live inside a vacuum colored by various shades of brightness, we live inside an assemblage of relations defining the positions that are irreducible to each other." (Ibid : 30-31) Ergo, the idea of heterotopia represents a way of intersecting various places (and ideas as well) that are not joinable, in one actual, real place.

Heterotopias are often related to various fragments of time, what we could call by pure symmetry *heterochronias*. We could say that these spaces are combining different, virtual, recontextualized spaces that find their origin in various aspects of the historical time. (Ibid : 34) Monument itself (and every building in a city), created for some purpose at a certain moment, represents both het-

erotopia and heterochronia because it exists in our time and space but usually has some symbolic purpose (it is a mere symbolic representation of the 'other place'). All of these aspects are slightly different from the time and place in which the monument was created. The idea is, therefore, to collect the different times at some place – which is the case with the cultural development of a city. Times and places under consideration exist for themselves, possessing their own interpretation, but at the same time they could be perceived as a fragment in the representation and interpretation of the whole. Those places, therefore, are intersecting and collecting various contexts within themselves. Heterotopias have the role to create a space of simulacrum, another kind of reality. For that reason we could perceive any historical monument as a heterotopia, any space of memory as well.

VII. CONCLUSION

"Steps the man uses to go forward, are bound with the traces from the period before his existence. Through time, his walk leaves the marks on the white screen of Chronos, which, the Lethe, river of oblivion, takes in, which is even worse than death; or these traces continue in the suppression of every existence, even when they are forgotten or undiscovered, as the reserve of the memory and history." (Katroga, 2011 : 13)

As Pierre Nora points out, "the main purpose of the existence of the *lieux de mémoire* is the will to preserve memory, to stop time, to prevent oblivion, to establish order, to transform death into immortality, to materialize immaterial." (Nora, 1989 : 19) Therefore, everything opposed to the cult of death, everything related to heritage, everything that directs the past to the pre-

sent could be regarded as the place (or space) of memory. (Ibid : 20) Those places represent the conscious, but also the unconscious organization of collective memory. By using memory we are in the position to give the meaning to the world and to emerge out of the world full of ruins. Those ruins could be mental ones as well, in other words, any blank in the temporal or historical chain that could confirm our identity.

On the basis of all previously mentioned, we can perceive the obvious similarities between the concepts of heritage being the part of our past used in the present and guarded for the future, and the spaces of memory. The purpose of both concepts is to recognize the content of the past with its numerous memories stored in places, and to make them proper to various uses.

ENDNOTES

- [1] "Monuments and antiquities, interesting remains, that are saved and consecrated by time, the phenomenon which time is still providing to us. Time does not destroy what history consults, what is studied by the arts, what a philosopher observes, what our eyes like to be focused on with this kind of interest provoked even by the old appearance of things. Time does not destroy everything that gives some kind of existence to the past [...]"

- [2] Apart from places, in his definition of the *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) Pierre Nora includes spaces, objects, persons, events, ideas, etc.
- [3] According to the distinction attributed to Aleida Assmann, space, as an abstract notion, implies the involvement of man and his interventions through planning, building, etc. On the other hand, she interprets the exact places as the representation of those actions. In this sense, I would like to stress the use of the memorization concept understood as a part of the exact places, furthermore, of the symbolic space as an idea. The reason for it is that memories are not always materialized. They are in fact the part of the symbolic spaces as well. (A. Asman, 2011 : 283)

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