

MEMORY THEATRE: A CASE STUDY¹

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The article deals with the issues of cultural memory, memory as a commitment and ethical and artistic aspects of remembering (including memory and oblivion of Shoah victims). The author presents these issues in the context of Robert Fludd's concept of "ars memoriae" and discusses them on the example of artistic, social and educational activities of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theater" Center in Lublin (Poland).

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The handful listening to us deserve beauty
but also truth
meaning – terror

*Zbigniew Herbert*²

1

Memory is transient and mortal. It fades out and vanishes, washed away in the course of years. Memory dies with us. What endures remains in written records, images and stories floating through time, in more or less perceivable forms given to the presence of things long gone. Such records – the traces of traces, the memories of memories – are mortal as well, but they are the ones which constitute human reality. They become accumulated in us, shaping the space for our existence, defining its horizons. It is for such reasons that our world, in essence, is itself a form of memory and a peculiar kind of commitment.

2

Memory becomes an obligation especially when it serves as a shelter for things existing and kept alive only through memory – saturated with

¹ Transl. into English by Monika Metlerska-Colerick.

² Herbert Z. A postcard from Adam Zagajewski. Transl. into English by M. Metlerska-Colerick. Another translation: "The handful listening to us deserves beauty / but also truth / that is – danger" [Herbert 2008, 483].

emotions, rendered a story, entrusted to imagination, salvaged. It is in the intimate gesture of embracing that the essence of *ars memoriae* is revealed – the art of memory, which in some ways resembles both mnemotechniques and the theatre, simultaneously remaining a mystery.

3

At the onset of the XVII century Robert Fludd – a mystic, physician and philosopher exploring the questions of the human psyche – formulated the concept of “memory theatre” [Huffman 1988]. His idea – drawn from the Hermetic-Cabalistic tradition – was related to the practice of *ars memoriae* being an occult mnemonic system translating the enigmatic grammar of mystery into syntagma which form a symbolic orchestration of the world. In the centre of all the component representations of this system a theatre stage is situated serving the function of a meeting point for contradictory elements. On the one side: geometrical precision, networks of affinities, esoteric correspondences, representation of the zodiac sky. On the other: images and events from ancient tragedies, the metaphorically abridged dramatic realism of life. The stage of this theatre is unveiled by the *oculus imaginationis* – the eye of imagination. Its glance – as Fludd puts it – pierces the “memory places” which thanks to *ars memoriae* become arranged into an ongoing performance, a story happening right on stage. This performance is the life of memory, which creates the backstage for our presence in the world and, at the same time – just like the reversed theatre – turns “behind the scenes” into the stage proper. Theatre designed in such a manner becomes a figurative device representing the world itself – pointing to the mystery of its profound nature. And it also serves as a vision of art: being intimately attuned with the mystery of memory³.

4

What is more, Fludd’s ideas suggest that memory always runs the course of associations and thus inhabits an intricate web of connotations which forms its innervation. It is through this peculiar nervous system that the past continues to exist on the stage and is given the possibility to become a story, to reveal itself to our gaze. With the decay of the associative network, the fragile tissue of accessible past also withers.

³ Cf.: Godwin 1979.

Such progressive atrophy is a form of advancing dementia which indistinguishably narrows down the field of vision and eventually obliterates everything, including the traces of oblivion itself. There is very little which can stand in opposition to such desolation. This is precisely why abiding by memory is of such significance and why it is essential for memory to keep becoming an ever novel form of experiencing – be it existential, cultural, or artistic.

5

The figures of the “memory theatre” and the “associative innervation” allow for comprehending memory as something originating in actual reality: it needs support from the blurred traces of presence, the tangible topography of factual locations, remaining at the same time a form of imagination, which – in a quasi-theatrical gesture, while constructing the imaginable space – gives room to what is irretrievably gone, but simultaneously lasting, kept alive by the imaginative act of remembering. Thus, memory is understood as both the “stage” and the “gate” – it represents as well as unlocks. It also bears a resemblance to a mystery play in which remembering – guarding things thoroughly real and remaining for ever a commitment – occurs as a form of experience, being also an encounter with the mystery of “absence” appearing in the form of “presence”⁴.

6

All of the above is focalized in the activities of Tomasz Pietrasiewicz and the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre, Lublin – in the way they work to build the “memory ark” or “read the city” (being forms of remembering), in their mapping and documenting of Lublin’s multiculturalism, recognizing the figures and imaginative manifestations co-creating it (paying special attention to the role played by Józef Czechowicz), in their cultural animation efforts drawing on the “power of free speech” and to the 1980 Lublin July strikes, in the variety of their endeavors taking the form of the “mysteries of memory”, in commemorating and striving to reveal the areas of oblivion, in addressing the

⁴ Douwe Draaisma inquires into the wide historical context of questions indicated here in a study I deem extremely significant [Draaisma 2000]. Originally published in Dutch as *De metaforenmachine – een geschiedenis van het geheugen* (1995).

memory of the murdered inhabitants of Lublin and Majdanek as a true depository of this memory. All of these activities – documentary or artistic in nature, to a great degree socially marked, sensitive to tradition and firmly grounded in the present day, fluctuating between the questions of “remembering”, “location” and “presence” – are components of the phenomenon which this institution is – thoroughly unique on a Europe-wide scale. The phenomenon of the “Grodzka Gate” Centre is a sum of the various forms in which it handles its work on memory as well as the effect such work brings: starting with archival documentation, collecting historical data and gathering accounts as “oral history” records, through transforming the archives and testimonies into a multidimensional “stage set” for the “memory theatre”, and finally using all of the undertaken activities to compose a “theatre script” thanks to which everyday work becomes an ongoing performance of actuated memory – responsible, factual, well-researched, connected to the world wide web, at the same time remaining mystery-like and receptive to the unknown⁵.

7

The activities directed by Pietrasiewicz – held at the “Grodzka Gate”, but also in the open space of the city of Lublin, as well as at Majdanek – serve as an exceptionally forceful reminder that one of the dimensions of the mystery encompassing us all is the chilling, darkness-scarred, horror-

⁵ Multifaceted, rich in the variety of issues it addresses and forms it takes – the activities of Tomasz Pietrasiewicz and the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre have not been – as of yet – fully discussed. A pioneering attempt at depicting and analysing the achievements of the “Grodzka Gate” Centre in a monograph form comes with the special issue of the *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* quarterly released by the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences [Konteksty 2017]. The endeavours of the “Grodzka Gate” and effects thereof are presented at the Centre’s official website: teatrnn.pl. The site successfully maps the activities directed by Pietrasiewicz, managing to reveal in a very lucid way their synergic multidimensionality and – even more importantly – it does all that while simultaneously providing access to the vast archives stored at the Centre which include (free of charge and mostly under the Creative Commons license): documents, annotations, listings, excerpts, historical witnesses accounts, an immense database of text resources (often otherwise unavailable), abundant selection of iconography (including unique photograph collections), audio and video records, as well as up to several thousand internet entries and several hundred thousand interlinked database internet results compiled on the basis of carefully researched historical sources. The digital database held by the “Grodzka Gate” Centre is one of the biggest collections of its kind in Poland and the website is visited daily by approximately 2,000 so-called unique visitors (the virtual theatre viewers), who are allowed free access to 72,000 records pertaining to people, 12,000 records describing places, 126,000 records on specific events, and 66,000 records linked to historical sources. What is more, the on-line *Lexicon* contains approximately 4,500 entries, and the *Multimedia Library* allows access to over 96,500 publications, including 49,800 photographs and 4,800 hours of recorded stories and accounts shared by 2,535 historical witnesses (based on the figures for the year 2018).

breathing breach in existence left by the disaster of the Shoah. We are still unable to comprehend what happened during the Holocaust. We lack words to recount the annihilating surge of death. Today, after so many years, we are similarly unable to speak of what remains: the absence, the traces, the empty shells which once held living beings. All of the above is challenged by a sensation – articulated by Pietrasiewicz in a variety of ways – that we are obliged to tell stories, that it is through stories we should create a resonant space for that which searches for our words, striving to break through our muteness, while simultaneously drowning in the deathly hush and manifesting itself in the silence of the ashes⁶. Without stories our identity is incomplete and crippled, our memory becomes shallow and sultry, because in its darkened vision things begin to suppurate and we – being unable to speak about the pain – often reduce it to the commonplace or else seal our lips. In the endeavours of Pietrasiewicz – his “memory theatre” and carefully elaborated “intimate forms” – the elementary duty to remember and to narrate becomes fulfilled, and with it the obligation to listen closely to the silence of the ashes, to enter the darkness inhabited by the annihilated life, the night of the world. It is exactly how the significant form – the story that is *the Gate* – comes into being. On its stage – in the archway – the intimate performance of the memory theatre takes place, the performance of existence open to the night of the world, to the suffocating breath of terror⁷.

8

Tomasz Pietrasiewicz stands on the stage of night and looks into the darkness. He knows that the darkness returns the gaze, swells, rising up to the eyelashes. It is in this recognition that the tremor of his art takes origin, the tremor of the mystery – acute, painful, reaching the very core of darkness, which resides in each and every one of us. But his art is of the kind that takes the side of survival, the side of light breaking within us, and it is for this that it strives to find shape: a process almost evangelical in nature. It is honest, courageous, and intrinsically free – simple as shaking hands, as looking deep into another’s eyes. Such is the essence of its truth, as well as its wisdom.

⁶ Cf.: Hudzik 2018.

⁷ An important strand of this performance comes with the interdisciplinary academic seminars held at *the Grodzka Gate* (for details go to: teatrnn.pl/seminaria), among others the symposia on the semiotics of art (inspired with the ideas introduced by George Steiner), as well as the semiotic aspects of the issues concerning the Shoah (most recently: *To narrate / annihilation – absence – traces*; seminar materials available on-line, released as video at: teatrnn.pl/opowiedzciec).

The art of Pietrasiewicz, the art given form by *the Gate*, springs from an insightful, wisdom-filled vision which is brave, sober, and moving in its sincerity. It entails staring into the dark, into the horror, but also necessitates the courage to take responsibility for one's place on earth – its presence and its past, for the stray, ailing memory, and for what is still looming in the future. In this way art gains an additional educational and social dimension in that it reclaims the world – teaching us to commune with what is painful in reality, with what is still festering, and brings to light what was discarded and abandoned in the shadows. The motion of creative imagination understood thus finds its shape in the “mystery of remembering”, in its “intimate form”. It takes place on the stage set behind the scenes. And it goes on – in the open space of *the Gate*, in the gateway of memory.

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