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*“Traces of Terror, Signs of Trauma”
Practices of (re)presentation of collective
memories in space in contemporary Europe*

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**VS NOTIZIE
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Segnalazioni e recensioni

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Introduction²

Traces of Terror, Signs of Trauma

Abstract

This is the introduction to a collection of articles about the spatialization processes of memory of war in contemporary Europe. It is divided in three parts. The first part proposes a transdisciplinary perspective, which includes semiotics, to tackle the relations between space, war heritage and cultural memory and to analyse memory narratives conveyed by places. An approach based on the investigation of “terrscapes” (places with a high density of traces) is proposed. The second part delves on the notion of terrscapes, focusing on the meaning of “terror” and on the shift of paradigm in European politics of memory after 1989. The third part deals with the European space of memory, questioning the possibility of construction of a shared European memory narrative on XX centuries wars. The last paragraph summarizes the contributions of the volume.

Keywords

cultural memory, spatial turn, Europe, places of memory, war heritage

1. Space and memory: toward a transdisciplinary approach

After a recently published special issue devoted to the “politics of memory” (TraMe 2013), *Versus* delves again into the rich field of memory studies, this time reversing the approach. While in that volume the selection of contributions was “methodological” (how semiotics can deal with such concepts as collective and cultural memory and what kind of analysis it can produce), this time we opted for a thematic criterion, choosing a subject that is at the same time theoretical and analytical. We now focus on the relation between space and memory, namely the symbolic dimension in the processes of spatialization of collective memories of war in Europe. The objects under investigation in the articles here presented are museums,

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² Although this introduction was discussed together by the authors, paragraphs 1 and 4 are by Francesco Mazzucchelli, paragraph 2 is by Rob van der Laarse, paragraph 3 is by Carlos Reijnen. We thank the Dutch Resource Council (NWO), the British Art & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Memorial Center Camp Westerbork, and the Netherland’s Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) for financial support, and the other fellows of the NIAS theme group Terrscapes, Georgi Verbeeck, Robert Jan van Pelt, and Karen Till, for months of stimulating debate in the dunes villa where our ideas have clashed and matured.

memorials, monuments, exhibitions, mediatic representation of spaces and places but also landscapes or simply segments of spatial environments that play a role in the shared reminiscences of a community. Though, in this volume, the topic will not be tackled solely from a semiotic approach but from different theoretical angles, including also literary and cultural studies, forensic archaeology, history, cultural geography, museology. This multiplication of points of view is not aimed at offering a mere collection of diverse possibilities of handling these themes, but rather at finding and producing a common ground of communication and translation among perspectives which sometimes perceive each other as distant and not compatible. Memory studies are, by definition, interdisciplinary, because of the complexity and multi-layering of the processes involved in collective and cultural memory: this volume aspires to stimulate a trans-disciplinary dialogue and debate to produce new sets of tools that prove adequate to investigate the complex ties linking collective remembrances and the spatial environment in which they are expressed or manifested.

Hence, such miscellaneous positions have, in this issue, a lot in common. Two main elements, as said, emerge: the spatial approach and the focus on the semiotic/symbolic aspects. The spatial approach is not a novelty: in the last decades, also the field of memory studies has been experiencing a “spatial turn”.³ From Pierre Nora’s *lieux de memoire* (although his notion did not exclusively refer to the spatial environment), the practices of *mise en scene* of collective memory in public spaces of commemoration (such as museums, memorials, monuments, etc.) have been object of study from different approaches. Moreover, places of memory, museums, memorials and monuments are becoming more and more a domain of struggle among competing political and ideological interests, in which politics of memory are expressed and applied and where the “official version” of the representation of past and identity is at stake. Memory which is today represented and recalled in such places is often traumatic, being linked to war or occurrences of political, cultural and ethnic violence. If it’s true that collective memory is also an ideological (auto-) representation of identity, the role of the so called “traumatic memories” in processes of representations of collective identities seems to be predominant today. Additionally, places of memory are also a collective and cultural “trend”, as testified by the increasing practices of heritage tourism and mediatisation of memories in the age of visualization and digitalization.

In this volume we delimited the field, asking the authors to focus expressly on a specific class of “memory places” that, following the conceptualization by Rob van der Laarse (van der Laarse 2013a), have

³ As reference to the relation between space and collective memory see J. Assmann (1992), A. Assmann. (1999); Nora (1984). For a phenomenological approach, see Ricoeur (2000); for an interesting reflection on the spatial turn on historiography (and some suggestion of disciplinary contaminations), see Schlögel 2003.

been named named *terrscapes*, to pinpoint those places “where terror, political or state-perpetrated violence has happened or was prepared – seeking to understand both what happened as well as how the space-times of terror are collectively remembered or forgotten”.⁴ Indeed, more than anywhere else, the dynamics of spatialisation of memory have led to conflicts and reactions when affecting sites where historical events of mass violence did actually take place, transforming ordinary landscapes into *terrscapes*.

The notion of *terrscapes* recalls a debate currently taking place in semiotics as well: recently, in some semiotic surveys, a distinction has been made between *ex novo*-built memorials and memorials built in sites of massacre, terror or violence (Violi, 2012; Mazzucchelli, 2010; see also Pezzini 2011). Patrizia Violi, introduced the notion of *trauma site* in semiotics to indicate those places that are “characterized by a specific semiotic trait: an indexical link to past traumatic events” (Violi, 2012: 37) and that “exist factually as material testimonies of the violence and horror that took place there” (*ibidem*). The notions of *trauma site* and *terrscope*, as defined respectively by Violi and van der Laarse, have several affinities with concepts as *traumascape* (Tumarkin 2005), *heritagescape* (Garden 2006), *memoryscape* (Appadurai 1996; Nuttall 1992; Phillips & Reyes 2011); *terrspace* (Otto 2009).

Terrscapes are, then, places with a “high density” of historical traces, which are susceptible of being monumentalized, transformed, restored, dilapidated, destroyed: in other words, memorialized or consigned to oblivion in different ways. A *terrscope* is also a site that is itself a trace, a material testimony of the violence that took place there. These considerations raise questions – relevant from a semiotic perspective – about the symbolic status of such spatial signs and texts and, more generally, on the relations between a semiotics of culture and memory (Demaria 2006, Lorusso 2013) and a semiotics of space.⁵ The mechanisms of “translations” between the discourse of history, the discourse of memory (Nora 1984, 1989, Ricoeur 2000) and other forms of “discourse” in related interdiscursive domains (such as politics, mass media, international justice, religion, academia...); the role of collective traumas in shaping cultural memories; the semiotic potential of space as a medium to express, but also “record”, transmit and communicate, shared memories; the way social practices and performances (of commemoration, tourism, education) transform and re-semantise places of memory: all of these are just some of the themes discussed in this issue and are reconceptualised by a productive feedback between semiotics and other disciplines.

The very point where the contributions converge is the notion of

⁴ From the website of Terrscapes project: <http://www.terrscapes.org/about-us.html>

⁵ See Greimas 1976, Hammad 2006. For a recent introduction to the field, see Giannitrapani 2013.

narrative, and the focus on the narrative dimension of politics of memory through space. The narrative dimension of terrormaps becomes more complex with the appearance of their constitutive element: the trace. How is memory “told” through space and especially “spaces with traces”? Indeed, different solutions of monumentalisation, preservation, transformation of sites linked to violent historical events (determined by diverse assemblages and transformations of traces) are able to convey different narratives of memory. But how and to what extent do traces limit the possible interpretations and resist “radical rewritings” of memories “contained” in space? Indeed, from a semiotic point of view, the trace is a peculiar sign with a double face. Imprints (such as the imprints left by historical events), in fact, are not signs, but according to Umberto Eco, objects which *may* become a sign, assuming all its characteristic, including the fact that they can lie (Eco 1975).⁶ A trace, to draw on the words of Pierre Nora, is always *entre histoire et memoire* (Nora 1989): on the one hand it is a relic of a past time, on the other hand it may be transformed and assume a “value” for a community, through a work of narrative transformation and reconfiguration which turn a place where something happened in a spatial narration of that event. So, operations on traces⁷ (wiping, hiding, (re)-discovering, forging, counterfeiting) and their narrative assemblages affect the ideological uses of memory, including their uses and abuses.⁸ A semiotic approach with its analytical set of tools, deeply rooted in narratology, can help to look at this set of problems, unpacking the “black box” of narrativity, a notion today largely widespread in memory studies but sometimes used in an unclear or problematic way.

2. Terrormaps and the politics of memory

This publication builds on the *Terrormaps* research project on the transnational memory of totalitarian terror and genocide in postwar Europe.⁹ In connecting memory and space, the concept of “terrormaps” reflects, for the interdisciplinary team who worked on this project, a

⁶ According to Eco, semiotics is the “discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie” (Eco, 1975: 7).

⁷ From this point of view, oblivion is not the contrary term of memory and it is not simply related to erasure of traces nor memory is merely related to their preservation: ideological and political uses and abuses of oblivion as well as of memory are the semiotic result of a dialectic between conservation and deletion of traces. See Mazzucchelli 2013, Mazzucchelli, Vitale 2014.

⁸ For a semiotic reading on abuses of memory (with regard to the Holocaust), see Pisanty 2012.

⁹ Terrormaps project (2010-2014) was funded by NWO, NIAS, Memorial Centre Camp Westerbork and AHRC. It was hosted by CLUE (VU University, Amsterdam) and NIAS. For more information on the prospect and researches which participated in the ideas expressed here, see <http://www.terrormaps.org/>

common ground for innovative approaches to the study of the origin, meaning and context as well as the traces, afterlife and memory of modern European terrortscapes. It has surrounded with weary suspicion not only the mostly biased, partisan national histories of the European nations, but also the invented traditions that transformed these histories into public performances: all that history and lived heritage proved so useful in building up mutually exclusive national or ethnic identities, and fuel the mutual enmities that connect Verdun, Auschwitz, and Srebrenica.

Tough for most of today's politicians Europe's dynamic transnational space seems solidly rooted in the peaceful attraction of a common market and a cultural idea that proclaims uniquely "European values" of humanism, democracy and citizenship, the case can be made that the wars and mass terror that characterized half of the twentieth century – coined as "the Age of the Extremes" (Hobsbawm 1996) and "a Century of Camps" (Bauman 1995)¹⁰ – was the defining experience that inspired a former generation of post-war statesmen to prepare the current European process of integration. For the geopolitical and cultural conditions that produced the destruction, terror and fear of the years between 1914 and 1989, and more particular the period between the early 1930s and the 1960s, seem not to have ended with the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

Post-1989 Europe witnessed a double paradigm shift with regard to the heritage and memory of the twentieth century world wars. In the first place, after a period of commemorating the Second World War by national war monuments and museums, Auschwitz and other WWII terrortscapes have become critically important icons of modern European identity (Van Vree 1995, van der Laarse 2013c), and the recognition of the Holocaust operates from a Western-European perspective as a moral entry ticket to "Europeanism" (Assmann 2012), both for the new European member states and for new migrant communities. As a result the Stockholm Declaration of 2000 became a new paradigm for transnational memory – and hence identity – politics. It declared that "the magnitude of the Holocaust, planned and carried out by the Nazis, must be forever seared in our collective memory", and that the international community shared a solemn responsibility to fight the evils of "genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia."¹¹ In the wake of Stockholm many European states established Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27th, the day that Auschwitz was liberated. After the shock of the Srebrenica massacre (1995) many hoped for a truly united, humanistic and peaceful Europe founded on the negative birth myth of "Auschwitz, never again!" (Van der Laarse 2013b).

¹⁰ See also Mazower 1998.

¹¹ Stockholm Declaration (January 2000). International Forum on the Holocaust. <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/about-the-itf/stockholm-declaration.html> (accessed January 26, 2013).

Yet the redefinition of Europe's cultural space as an answer to the return of the horror of ethnic conflict and genocide at the frontiers of "Fortress Europe", was soon challenged by the Western War on Terror after the events that occurred on September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington as well shortly thereafter in London and Madrid. This undermined the hope for peace as well as the universal globalization of the Holocaust paradigm. The real threat, however, was the geopolitical turn in European politics after the eastward enlargements of the European Union in 2004 (the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and 2007 (Bulgaria and Rumania). This challenged the idea of a "Holocaust-centered European mnemonic community" (Kansteiner 2006) within the EU itself, as shown by the rapid rise of a fear of Islam and a populist criticism of multiculturalism, the emergence within "old Europe" of Euroscepticism after the 2004 and 2007 expansions, and in the newly admitted countries the legacy of communist dictatorship and totalitarian rule began to undermine the self-imposed "western" narrative of guilt and regret (Barkan 2000; Olick 2007), so closely related to the Holocaust paradigm. Thus on the one hand, the policies of official forgetting, which had shaped the attitude to pasts marked by fascist rule and/or civil war in Southern and Eastern European countries, began to unravel by including new types of European and colonial mass terror into the Holocaust paradigm,¹² while on the other hand the geopolitical turn stimulated a rethinking of the Holocaust, or better said a culmination of holocausts, as the outcome of an interacted, mutually escalated policy of terror in the Polish, Ukrainian and Belarus 'bloodlands', where Nazism and Communism clashed for over a decade (Snyder 2010, Samang 2010).

What is terror? Few words have been used more to describe and analyze the politics of violence ever since Robespierre's invention of *la Terreur* (1793-1794) up to Stalin's 'Great Terror' (1934-1940), a term coined in 1968 by the American historian Robert Conquest with reference to the Jacobins reign of Terror.¹³ In contrast to terrorism, the closely related second buzzword to describe political violence, that defines actions of revolutionary groups or persons against a state, terror may be defined as a modern kind of state-perpetrated, organized or supported policy of violence against groups or persons purged from societies as "enemies of the people".¹⁴ Unlike terrorism, terror seeks not for an optimal media

¹² See Verbeek 2001, Aguilar 2002, Baer 2011, Olusoga & Erichsen 2010.

¹³ Interestingly, inspired by Robespierre's policy of *la Terreur*, the term "Great Terror" was introduced by Robert Conquest in 1968 as the title of a book, later revised as *The Great Terror. A Reassessment* (Conquest 1990). The earlier concept of "The Great Purge" showed that most attention before that went to Moscow trials of party officials instead of the use of mass terror, or "repression" as the Soviet authorities named the purge of "counter-revolutionaries" from the party organizations and state apparatus.

¹⁴ Even though traced back to Robespierre's reign of Terror, terror and terrorism are in Anglo-Saxon literature often seen as synonyms, with meanings changing in different periods

effect; it works in secret, isolated, in hidden places as well as in hidden expressions. Terror is not directed against the state, but uses the state for a maximizing of effect and power. Even though often related to revolutionary regimes governed by parties with a terrorist origin, terror is meant to defend the interest of many against a few, instead of the other way around. As supposed “counter-revolutionaries”, the enemies of the people were supposed to be also enemies of *history*, accused of threatening the virtue of equality, the will of God, or that of the nation. As such, terror could be conceived as the twentieth-century outcome of modern Europe’s longing for purity (van der Laarse et al. 1998). But it was the fusion with totalitarianism that transformed the political use of terror into a permanent instrument for exercising state power in Mussolini’s Italy, Stalin’s Russia and Hitler’s Germany. New state organizations, like the NKVD and the SS, exercised systematic power to concentrate, imprison and destroy whole populations and competing elites in the interest of economic progress, territorial expansion, or the utopian hope for the ending of history. In addition to pogroms and massacres, “terror famines” (Conquest 1986; Berkhoff 2005)¹⁵, the “terror societies” of the Nazi ghetto- and camp system (Sofsky 1999; Benz & Distel 2006) and the Gulag slave labor camps (Adler 2001), as well as the ethnic and spatial cleansing operations of the German-Russian “total war”, produced an unrivaled homogenization of populations both in the home countries and in the occupied territories (Rudling 2012), so that the past literally had become another country.

The Terrascapes project aims to contribute to our understanding of European new topography of memory and processes of memory making, which includes forgetting and the negotiation of contested memories between different (ethnic) groups and nations. Carrying the echoes from one of the few Dutch nouns that shaped a worldview, *landschap* (landscape), the term “terrascapes” indicates both the spatial and man-made aspects of the traces we survey, and our visual perception of them as places of terror. For landscapes are mindscapes (Lofgren 1999), and what we perceive as a “guilty landscape” – to use the famous expression of the Dutch artist Armando for the site of absence of the former concentration camp Amersfoort,¹⁶ that anticipated Claude Lanzmann’s “spatial” representation of loss and silence in *Shoah* (1985) – is the indexical link of such “places of pain and shame” (Logan and Reeves 2009) to past traumatic events (Violi 2012). As, in our approach, we seek

as swings of the pendulum instead of fundamentally different in meaning (Hoffmann 2006: 1-42).

¹⁵ Strongly biased though ground-breaking, Conquest 1986, and for the same region ten years later focusing on another famine and perpetrator, Berkhoff, 2004.

¹⁶ It was the title of Armando’s series of paintings of the demolished camp Amersfoort in the early 1970s, and inspired the VPRO TV documentary of Armando and Hans Verhagen, *Geschiedenis van een plek* (1978).

to understand both what happened as well as how it has been collectively remembered, instrumentalized, or silenced and forgotten, the term *terrordscapes* seemed more appropriate than its psychological equivalent “*traumascape*” (Tumarkin 2005). For the “*politics of trauma*” (Withuis and Mooij 2010; Alexander 2012) concern not only the emotions of survivors, but also (and more and more) the commoditized experiences of postwar generations, consuming the past by visiting places. Trauma in that sense has become the mnemonic outcome of a mediated “*politics of terror and loss*” (Kaplan 2005) in the “*Age of Postmemory*” (Hirsch 2012; Van der Laarse 2013c).

3. A European space of memory?

Memories of terror are by no means a strictly European phenomenon. Commemoration of terror – state perpetrated or organized by other groups – can be seen throughout history and across the globe. In fact, colonialism and two World Wars have even produced forms of global memory. Therefore a spatial approach to memories of terror, as proposed in this issue, is obviously not limited to Europe. However, there are some specificities to the European *terrordscape* that justify a focus on Europe.

First of all, European narratives and practices of commemoration have become influential models for memories of terror throughout the world. In fact, tendencies of a connection between discourses of universal human rights and memory (Levy and Sznajder 2010) have roots in Europe. The universal human rights discourse predominantly feeds from representations of the Holocaust, and is therefore strongly connected to Europe. In recent years, of course, we see attempts at integrating other, non-European forms of terror and violence into this discourse, mainly as a result of postcolonial approaches to memory.

Secondly, and more importantly, memories of terror in Europe are intertwined with new events of violence and terror in Europe and in the world. Not only are the causes and events of the First and Second World Wars strongly interconnected, but this holds true even more so for the second half of the twentieth century, most notably in the Yugoslav Civil Wars. Places of terror have not remained passive witnesses of crimes, but have invited new forms of violence. This again is not necessarily exclusively European, but specific for Europe is that these events have become constitutive elements of European politics and of deliberate attempts at constructing a collective European memory. The post war process of European integration, with the European Union and its predecessors and the Council of Europe or the OSCE, has been the center, though not sole locus, of this development. This process has been largely revolving around concepts of solidarity and reconciliation (Guisan 2011).

Interestingly, the construction of a European narrative has also

produced conflict and contestation. The places of memory that are discussed in this issue have all participated in the contestation of memories of terror. This has caused them to remain undisclosed or oppositely to become hegemonic places of memory. As has been stated before the core of the narrative of European and to a lesser extent also global memory has been representations of the Holocaust. The visibility of places of memory and the interpretations of their relevance has been largely dependent on the opportunities of these places of reference to the Holocaust paradigm. The landscape of memory is highly hierarchical.

Currently the dominant Holocaust paradigm is being questioned, both from a global perspective and, more relevant for this collection of research, from within Europe. The rethinking and reorganization of Europe after the fall of communism has triggered counter movements against the Holocaust paradigm that will potentially result in yet another understanding of European places of memory. This new dimension in European memory is also intimately intertwined with geopolitics (Bottici & Challand 2013). The end of communism in Eastern Europe renders an exclusive focus on the Second World War in the approaches to European memory obsolete. Since 1989, Central and East Europeans have brought new attitudes toward discourses about Europe. In the first decade after the end of communism this was largely limited to a more cultural and moral approach to the European community (e.g. Václav Havel), but more recently this has been transformed in a call for recognition of communist past.

The most powerful rejection of the Holocaust paradigm from Central and Eastern Europe was the presentation of the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism in 2008. The declaration was signed by a vast list of prominent Central and East European politicians and intellectuals, many of them with solid reputations as opposition leaders against communist oppression. The declaration included an explicit call for an equal approach to Nazi and Communist forms of totalitarianism, more concretely for the 'recognition that crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity'. Parallel to the political manifestations of this call for recognition of communist crimes in most countries of the region, new museums about the communist past were installed, of which many presented communist crimes and predominately equal to Nazi crimes or at least intimately related. The Museums of Occupation(s) in Riga and Tallinn, and particularly the House of Terror in Budapest are paradigmatic examples. The declaration also called for an installation of a European platform of European Memory and Conscience in order to bring the communist past to attention on a European (EU) level. The platform is most active in Central and Eastern Europe and within EU circles, though its politicized nature prevents it from finding EU funding.

Interestingly the competition between East and West in Europe about