



## Ars Oblivendi About the Construction of Our Collective Memory System

Article for the Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2-6 September 1996. Theme: Memesis, the Future of Evolution

Tjebbe van Tijen, Amsterdam (with thanks to Ted Byfield, New York, for editing)

It is through the ageing of our bodies that the passing of time is experienced. A time experience which is neither cyclic, governed by the apparition of planets and stars, nor linear, as the modern clock that rolls over an endless rail through historical space. Time is told in terms of events of ones own life, rather than the passing of calendar dates. Change is measured genealogically in terms of consecutive generations. Memory is as a skeleton of related events joined together by our imagination in such a way that the skeleton can even jig.

Dance is probably the earliest art form through which man expresses and communicates his experience of life, from imitation of sound and movement of his direct surroundings, in voice and gestures, to articulate forms of dance and singing.

"The past gets past on to us not merely in what we think or do but literally in how we do it", the way we sit, sleep, move, walk or talk<sup>1</sup>. Memory is, first and foremost, a bodily experience: the epitaph "you will always be remembered" fades slowly from the moment it is inscribed, but the memories it refers to fade more quickly. The mortality of our bodies can not be evaded; uncertainties about the fate of our souls remain. Memory of a previous or pre-natal existence is sometimes individually experienced, but most people have difficulty in remembering their early youth and even difficulty with remembering recent events that, for one reason or another, conscious or not, they prefer not to recall.

Bodily expressed memory through traceless art forms as dance, music, song

and story telling have been handed down over generations, but as memory is progressively altered from generation to generation it is always "stamped with the ruling passion of its time"<sup>2</sup> -- and, through that process, the original forms of expression are often lost. Contemporary depictions of dancers in pottery, painting, and archaeological discoveries of musical instruments and recorded stories in early manuscripts give us some clues but they also leave much to be guessed. In such cases the analyst of history is condemned to invent: he can not reconstruct, and so must construe the past.

The transition from oral to literate culture was a slow one. In the Phaedrus (ca 375 BC) Plato quotes Socrates' dialogue on the written word: "...you would think that it speaks like a sensible being, but when you

ask for meaning, writing can only give one answer. Once fixed, each argument turns and drifts about to the four winds and finds itself with the competent and incompetent alike, because it does not know to whom it should or should not address itself". Early historians were most of all inventors of history, mingling fact and myth; as is the case with the texts of many of the famous 'historical speeches', we know now. The early historian wanted first of all to write a good story or speech, fitting what we would call now 'the facts' to his rhetorical needs. Application of the rules of rhetoric, more than what was actually said, formed the basis of such constructed orations. In a similar way, modern politicians employ speechwriters, who craft what will be said beforehand, rather than amanuenses recording their speeches afterwards. The modern historian, with an abundant body of written information available, must choose from among a proliferation of sources; and he can hardly escape the temptation to neglect that what does not fit his 'rhetoric', his argument.

Human culture has inscribed itself on the earth's surface and made it into landscape. Landscape impresses itself on the faces, bodies and memories of the people who create and re-create it. The landscape is a

collective memory device that maps stories of the past in actual space, much as the cosmological dream time stories of Australian aboriginals do. Countless generations devise such tales 'reading' them from the landscape where they are 'written' in the specific physical features and animal life of the surroundings. Tales and stories can thus be remembered as one walks along a trail. Similarly the nomenclature of streets and sites in villages and cities, and topographical naming in general have a function to remind us of the past -- of historical figures, events, and sentiments. In principle any landscape, any build environment, whether rural or urban, is a living representation of time in space. Where landscape features are eroded or erased, where the juxtaposition of various building styles from different periods has given way to a dominant form of build environment, this memory function has diminished or is lost. Then it is only remaining pictorial representations and written records that can tell what came before. One has to dig "down through layers of memories and representations toward the primary bedrock, laid down centuries or even millennia ago, and then working up again toward the light of contemporary recognition" <sup>3</sup>.

It is inscribed information, from petroglyphs in caves to printed words and images, that makes it possible to transmit information from past to next generations. These sign systems live on long after the human body itself loses its ability to inform. In modern techniques of oral history, the two forms of collective memory systems, bodily and inscribed, fuse: as with ancient story tellers, memory and myth intermingle. This form of history-making is often criticized by those historians who give a talismanic importance to manuscripts and other paper documents, who take pride in their detached methods, which are based purely on textual manipulation. This fetishization of text-based libraries and archives, which often suggests that they are the only real source for making history, does not take in account the history of libraries and archives themselves. There should be a much wider consciousness of the arbitrary ways in which most collections came together, were dispersed, purified, or lost -- as gift, inheritance, booty, trophy, or seizure.

During the reign of King Assuerbanipal (669-626 BC), a scribe noted in cuneiform writing: "I will put in the library what pleases the king; what he dislikes I will remove". This process of deselection, or

de-acquisition, has always been an essential part of any archive and library practice. There is always the mirror image of the official collection profile, that which is consciously or unconsciously left out. It is no problem to find rare and precious bibliophile editions, or obscure academic works in public collections, but popular and 'mass products'-- for example the late medieval 'pauper's bibles' or the mid twentieth century mass circulation popular culture magazines are hard to find. 'Trivial literature', whether romantic novels for ladies or pornographic magazines and videos, have left very few archival traces. Marshall McLuhan calls this 'the library law': what is most widely circulated is often the most neglected by curators and librarians whose parochial class and cultural tastes shape what they do and do not value and collect. At best professional collectors have an interest in 'lower class' culture products when they have become historical artefacts from other centuries or far away countries. What is all too obvious will not be noted, acquired and preserved. In this sense popular memory becomes the antithesis of official written history.

Attempts to elude death through preserving the human body for afterlife, as the Egyptians did, is mimicked in archival

practices. The Mesopotamians constructed repositories that had a system of temperature and humidity control for their clay tablets much as our modern environmentally conditioned archives and library depositories are engineered to preserve paper information carriers for posterity. Crumbling modern paper products like newspapers and magazines are mummified in microfilm. But as the history of the almost mythical Library of Alexandria shows, "... destruction, ruining, pillages and fire especially hits great amassments of books that according to the rule are situated in the centres of power. That's why what has remained (of the early period) in the end does not come from the big centres but from marginal places ...and sporadic private copies"<sup>4</sup>. This historical message escaped the initiators of a new four-million-volume library being planned for Alexandria and similar information concentration projects such as the vast new building of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

If the physical safeguarding and preservation of information carriers through the centuries were the only factor, then our actual collective memory system would have been of an other magnitude entirely. However censorship, book

burning and iconoclastic practices have decimated our cultural heritage. The practice of erasing the names of decayed rulers and disgraced persons can be found as early as 3000 BC in Egypt, where names chiselled for the esteem they garnered were chiselled out when that regard was lost -- a practice similar to the 'damnatio memoriae' of Roman time when a reign of an emperor, like Nero, could officially be stricken from the record by order of the Senate and similar later practices from sixteenth-century Italy to twentieth-century Russia. The Chinese emperor Shi Huang-Ti is most noted as the originator of book burning, for in 213 BC he ordered the burning of books unrelated to practical matters or the history of his own dynasty; those who dared to cite (Confucian) texts from the past were put to death with their families. He established a tradition in which the smells of burning paper and human flesh (as authors were often burned together with their debated products) flavouring the skies of the Byzantine, Roman, Iranian, British, German, French, and Spanish empires and kingdoms. Nazi party members all over Germany and Austria, communist Chinese Red Guards, Chilean soldiers, anti-communist crowds in Budapest, Santiago de Chile, Djakarta and Bangkok, religious motivated masses in

Teheran are among the twentieth-century book burners, the erasers of collective memory<sup>5</sup>. In some libraries, such as the National Library of Austria, empty shelves created by the fascists, remained so after and are witness to these purges.

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

We typically conceive of the information carriers that support our memory as paper, film, tape or digital media. Artefacts, from totem to historical monuments, being material images for reflection and recall, are of the same order. The commemorative plaques, statues, buildings and 'historical sites' strewn all over the world tell us about the past. Erecting and preserving these objects is a constant process. André Malraux's idea of a 'museum without walls' (in the fifties) seems to have expanded so much that whole towns, regions or countries will be turned into museums, frozen in the grip of the crypto-feudal conservationists until the kiss of a young prince... "We turn inanimate matter into 'monuments' whether it is the Winter Palace or the Eiffel Tower, the ruins of Herculaneum or the reconstruction of Old Warsaw, the Night Watch, or Our Lady of Vladimir," and these objects are given meaning "that would have astounded their originators." Objects never intended to commemorate anything have been transformed into monuments of meaning<sup>6</sup>. Krzysztof Pomian, speaks of a division of the world in the visible and invisible, whereby the invisible is projected on or into the visible world by means of rare objects taken from nature itself and any form of handicraft or art, be it painting,

sculpture, modelling, carving, needlework or finery. On the one hand, there is the world of useful things, objects that can be consumed, provide means of livelihood, can turn raw materials in eatable substances, that protect against changes in the environment: all these are in regularly use and produce or undergo physical changes, most notably wear. On the other hand, there are things that Pomian calls 'semiophors,' objects not used in any practical sense, which represent the invisible -- to which a certain meaning has been ascribed. They are to be shown, to be put on display<sup>7</sup>. This function is by no means limited to objects created for that purpose; on the contrary, objects that have lost their practical function -- for example, those saved from the waste heap -- are transformed from utensils to collectibles. As they become ever-more 'scarce,' we attach increasing meaning (and economic value) to them. In this economic and aesthetic process the understanding of the original context of the object -- the object that is supposed to be the vehicle for meaning -- is often weakened. Complex practices are reduced to stylistic streams, opposing views are reconciled by the cultural hierarchy that museums tend to represent, and these commodified objects will point to a past that never existed.

Ironically these misinterpretations resemble the ways in which our 'personal' memory system seems to function, constructing representations quit independent of the past. "It is often more important that our memories seem real than that they are real" <sup>8</sup>. We oscillate between historical memory and imaginative construction: "People are willing to recognize, as their own, memories that are not theirs and do so with increasing frequency as the events become more and more remote from and more and more similar to actual occurrences in their lives."

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

The parallel with the construction of 'therapeutic truth' by historians that model our collective memory system is striking. To reconcile people with the society they live in, the historian has to discover which haunting image, which 'Urszene' is disturbing the patients. "A historian gathers and, at best, corrects collective recollections" and for this disheartening task psychoanalysis can offer important help, because it does not only analyses what people want to remember, but also reveals what they had to twist or forget" <sup>10</sup>. Manoeuvring in shadowland between forgetting and remembering a primal scene has to be construed that has enough authentic information and enough 'unauthentic' imagination that the constructed story is plausible and consistent (as with autobiographical literature). It need not be veridical on all levels, but its verisimilitude, its seemingly truth, is essential.

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

1 Jon Urry; "How societies remember the past"; p.49; in: "Theorizing museums"; 1996; Blackwell/The Sociological Review.

2 Raphael Samuel; "Theatres of memory"; 1994; Verso; p.x.

3 Simon Schama; "Landscape and memory"; 1995; Alfred A. Knopf; p.16.

4 Luciano Canfora; "La Véritable histoire de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie"; 1986; Edition Desjonquère.

5 Herman Rafetseder; "Bücherverbrennungen, die öffentliche Hinrichtung von Schriften im historischen Wandel; 1988; Bühlau.

6 Donald Horne; "The great museum, the representation of history"; 1984; Pluto Press; p.29.

7 Krzysztof Pomian; "Der Ursprung des Museums, Vom Sammeln"; 1988; Klaus Wagenbach; p.49.

8 David C. Rubin (ed.); "Autobiographical memory"; 1986; Cambridge University Press; p.4.

9 Ned Lukacher; "Primal scenes, literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis"; 1986; Cornell University Press; p.31.

10 Peter Gay; "Freud for historians"; 1985; Oxford University Press; p.181 (Dutch edition).