

*Paesaggi della memoria: il trauma, lo spazio, la storia. (Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History)* Patrizia Violi, Bompiani: Milan, Italy (2014) 360 pages. Review by Valentina Pisanty, University of Bergamo.

I've never been to Auschwitz. Nor to the other sites of trauma, apart from Dachau, where my parents took us when we were small and where, out of a sort of mindless compulsion, we went back a few decades later along with our children, still too young to draw any useful historical lessons from the experience, yet deeply affected by the desolation of the place, the November cold, and the realization that there, right there, something horrible had happened. On the evening of my first visit to Dachau we dined at the Munich Hofbräuhaus, where I learned the details of the 1923 Putsch and, to boot, we were approached by a weepy Bavarian drunk to whom I lent the identity of an old guilt-ridden Nazi. That night I had a fever that presumably was already on its way but that I attributed to the impressions of the previous day. According to the categories formulated by today's Trauma Studies, I had become a secondary witness, a witness of witnesses, through whom the trauma could propagate and pass on to future generations. Mission accomplished.

I hope the readers will forgive the autobiographical detail, but the memory of that day has resurfaced forcefully thanks to Patrizia Violi's *Paesaggi della memoria: il trauma, lo spazio, la storia*, a lucid and highly articulate semiotic inquiry of trauma sites. While remaining true to her purpose of purifying the analysis from value judgments and hasty sociological diagnoses, Violi encourages the readers to saturate her text with first-hand memories, and to reinterpret them in a critical and questioning way. Besides, the essay is itself the result of capillary fieldwork. The author takes a cue from visits to various sites of trauma: the Nanjing Memorial Hall, built in the area where in 1937 Japanese troops massacred the civilian population; the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, burned by the Nazis in 1944; the Tuol Seng Museum of Genocide Crimes in Phnom Penh, where between 1975 and 1979 Pol Pot's secret police tortured thousands of former officials accused of treason; the infamous Naval School of ESMA, in Buenos Aires, from where, between 1976 and 1983, the death flights took off and political opponents were thrown, while still alive, into the ocean. And many more.

Violi records what she sees and hears, recounts her own responses and those of others, photographs the places, describes them, reconstructs their historical background, and at the same time she interprets them with great acumen, using categories borrowed from Memory and Trauma Studies, as well as from the semiotics of Eco and Greimas. At the heart of her analysis is the complex relationship between the sites of memory and the visitors to whom they are addressed, in a play of cross-strategies not dissimilar to that which connects any text to its readers.

The visitors know that these places were the scenes of extreme violence, rapes, torture, massacres. That is why they go there. To step on the tiles on which the prisoners walked, to see the blood stains on the walls (in Phnom Penh), the burnt signboards and the destroyed houses (Oradour), or just to be there, even when there is nothing left to see, and no trace of the atrocities remains except for the culturally filtered awareness that "this must be the place". The trace is the venue itself, an embodied memory of the events. The visitors explore every corner of it in search of telltale signs: a crack, a patch, a bullet hole in the wall ... By focussing on the communication strategies inscribed in the sites' planimetries, Violi draws a distinction between "re-presentative" and "representative" sites, with all the intermediate nuances, depending on the degree of mimicry with which the traumatic experience is revealed to the public. On the one hand, "sites that 'perform' the traumatic experience presentifying it in a way that resembles an acting out": a compulsive repetition, as is the case of Oradour where

the flow of time is frozen by means of a disturbing restoration *à l'identique*. Other sites filter the event, for example by inserting explanatory plaques, screenings of documentaries, art installations, and so on. Sometimes they re-semanticize the spots of horror in a more radical fashion, in a bid to hand them back to the community for new and more vital functions.

As a result of more or less constrictive itineraries, visitors undergo emotional strength tests, from which they emerge loaded with a renewed competence. This, however, does not so much concern an objective historical knowledge of the traumatic event, which is usually mentioned just enough to place it in its narrative framework; rather, it involves the absorption of a subjective “prosthetic memory”, acquired through empathy, thus allowing visitors to relive a (fortunately pale) reflection of the distress experienced by those who, conversely, were really there. The sites of trauma encourage visitors to identify with the victims through a variety of discursive techniques: the list of the Nanjing victims, possibly an imitation of the Hall of Names at Yad Vashem; the display of hundreds of anonymous photos with which the Khmer Rouge registered the inmates before which, due to an unfortunate enunciative short circuit, the spectator adopts the same physical stance as that of the photographers/perpetrators; and so on, up to the most baffling spectacular devices (simulations of visual, acoustic, tactile and olfactory effects) with which visitors of the Museo dello Sbarco in Catania are invited to “experience firsthand the excitement” of the citizens who were bombarded by the American air force.

Becoming secondary witnesses is the official reason that drives most visitors to undertake post-traumatic pilgrimages: to pay a tribute to the victims, to compensate them symbolically, to ease their conscience through a good deed, as when going to the cemetery. Voyeuristic impulses are less explicit, but they emerge in many comments on tripadvisor and similar sites; which proves, yet again, that the sacralisation and the trivialization of memory are two closely linked phenomena. The political constraints to which the places of memory are subject, on the other hand, are completely concealed. Maurice Halbwachs explained it very well: the so-called collective memory is functional to the interests, sensitivity and agendas of those who run it. Over and beyond the official peacemaking purposes, usually invoked in a therapeutic perspective (the narrativization of a brutal event as a form of “working through” the episode in the interests of the traumatized community), the sites of trauma function as matrices of emerging or hegemonic identities. Emerging when the memorial agency is assumed by associations of volunteers, such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who struggle with the authorities for the recognition of long denied crimes. Hegemonic when the sites of memory are run by governments who use them as powerful tools of political legitimacy. The case of post-Maoist China is paradigmatic: after decades of programmatic obliviousness, in 1985 a colossal memorial was dedicated to the massacre of Nanjing, in an attempt to recast the Chinese national identity on the basis of a Redemption and Victory narrative, along the lines of the Jewish Holocaust. It is no accident that Violi speaks of the “traumatic heritage” as a greatly coveted and contested object of political investment, especially in times in which other forms of political agency are painfully lacking. One wonders if the secondary traumas that, in the name of the “duty of memory”, we inflict upon our children are truly necessary for the formation of a responsible and “memorious” citizenry. *Paesaggi della memoria* precludes any simple answer to the question.