

Research Article

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Narrating Places

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Abstract: The paper investigates the theme of narrativity by analyzing it within the spatial dimension and scrutinizing the forms it assumes, along with their ethical significance. It initially aims to elucidate the importance of this perspective through an anthropological reflection that underscores the fundamental role of the interconnection between spatiality and temporality in human existence. Subsequently, it examines how this relationship develops narratively, manifesting in the locations where human beings live. Finally, particular emphasis is placed on the questions of truth and justice raised by the forms of spatialisation of narratives, clarifying how these serve as methods of considering and critically transforming narratives towards an inclusive and respectful future – one that avoids repeating past evils and seeks to mend the wounds inflicted.

Keywords: memory; place; repair; narrative; justice; space; limit; truth; past; wrong

1 At the Intersection of Space and Time

Human beings, who are embodied consciousness, meet the world through the medium of perspectives and references (not only visual but also tactile, olfactory, auditory...); by constantly and insatiably intending the world, they experience it by traveling, crossing, proceeding, returning, and arriving, in an ongoing situated mobility. Movement does not oppose the human condition, which is characterised by an ongoing experience of dwelling. Human existence is fundamentally situated as an original movement: it enters and moves through the world, inhabiting it, constantly turning towards it even before any conscious awareness or choices about stability or change. Therefore, human beings inhabit the world in a manner characterised by constant re-orientation, a process where space and time are deeply interconnected.

In this regard, it is pertinent to note Paul Ricœur's insightful assertion that dwelling is inextricably linked to the perpetual interplay of stillness and movement, a paradoxical intrigue he has termed "*itinérance*".¹

In brief, existence involves both staying and moving beyond: it is a condition of "between." Jean Greisch² proposes that, to comprehend the intricacies of the "between", it is necessary to return to the richness of Greek, a language that exemplifies possibilities lost in modern languages. It is notable that Greek employs prepositions such as « *ana*-(anabainein: 'monter'), *dia*-(diabainein: 'traverser'), *meta*-(metabainein: 'changer de lieu', 'passer d'un endroit à l'autre'; metatakhêsthai: 'être rangé autrement', 'être transposé'), *para*-(paratrapênai: 'être détourné ou dévié'), *hyper*-(hyperechein, 'surpasser'; hyperbainein, 'dépasser,' 'franchir'; hyperbolê: 'dépassement, surabondance, hyperbole'), *ek*-(ekbebêkos: 'qui est monté au-dessus'; ekbainein, 'sortir, aller au-dehors'), *ep*-(epekeina: 'au-delà'; epanineai: 'remonter, revenir'; epanodos, 'montée, ascension'), etc.». The terms

¹ Ricœur, "*La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*", 186 footnote n.3; the English translation of the word is "traveling", see Id., *Memory, history, forgetting*, 527. The term first appeared in Italian, in the text "*Architettura e narratività*", 72, but it does not appear in the 1998 French text in "*Urbanisme*", 303, 44–51. Ricœur thus allows us to go beyond the alternative between a metaphysics of sedentariness and a metaphysics of nomadism. In addition to these, at least one more text by Ricœur deals directly with the problem of space: the paragraph dedicated to the otherness of the flesh and its original and non-objective spatiality in the tenth Study of "*Soi-même comme un autre*" (1990). On this subject, see the texts in *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* 12, 2 (2021), and Costanzo, "*Alla ricerca dello spazio vissuto*", 147.

² Greisch, *Le cogito herméneutique*, 239–240.

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emphasize both the capacity to transcend one's own limitations – often referred to as trans-ascendence (*Erhöhung*, with Levinas also employing ex-cendence) – and the inclination towards self-abnegation, which includes the concepts of *kenosis* as well as depression, as elucidated by Maldiney. On the one hand, they refer to a prior, inalterable state, characterizing it by trans-passibility (*Geworfenheit*), signifying the act of being cast or thrown into a state; on the other hand, they refer to transgression as an opening to- and of-a realm of novelties and the unexpected, expressed as trans-possibility (*trans-possibilité*, *Entwurf*).

The process of self-construction, which is also inextricably linked to the dynamics of socialization, consistently occurs within a world that evolves over time and space, both interconnected in an intricate manner. As Merleau-Ponty articulated, our relationship with the world should be regarded as something “more ancient than thought”.³ This relationship is not of an extrinsic nature and therefore cannot be dismissed; it is constitutive. Indeed, as he himself states: «We must not wonder why being is orientated, why existence is spatial, why [...] our body is not geared to the world in all its positions, and why its co-existence with the world magnetizes experience and induces a direction in it. The question could be asked only if the facts were fortuitous happenings to a subject and an object indifferent to space, whereas perceptual experience shows that they are presupposed in our primordial encounter with being, and that being is synonymous with being situated».⁴

The human body is inherently connected to these elements: human beings are not *in* space and time, nor do they conceive space and time; rather they « belong » to them, their body « combines with them and includes them ».⁵ Their spatiality extends beyond mere positionality. It is, instead, « a spatiality of situation ».⁶ Places are the conditions of possibility through which human beings' lives are constructed and in which their narratives are involved. They are socio-spatial-temporal connections.

As Doreen Massey observes, emphasizing the inadequacy of an approach that persistently encourages binary thinking, it is imperative to transcend a dualistic perspective that segregates space and time. Indeed, «for within this kind of conceptualization, only one of the terms (A) is defined positively. The other term (not-A) is conceived only in relation to A, and as lacking in A. A fairly thorough reading of some of the recent literature that uses the terminology of space and time, and that employs this form of conceptualization, leaves no doubt that it is Time which is conceived of as in the position of 'A', and space which is 'not-A'. Over and over again, time is defined by such things as change, movement, history, dynamism; while space, rather lamely by comparison, is simply the absence of these things. This has two aspects. First, this kind of definition means that it is time, and the characteristics associated with time, that are the primary constituents of both space and time; time is the nodal point, the privileged signifier. And second, this kind of definition means that space is defined by absence, by lack. This is clear in the simple (and often implicit) definitions (time equals change/movement, space equals the lack of these things). [...] Now, of course, in current Western culture, or in certain of its dominant theories, woman too is defined in terms of lack. Nor, as we shall see, is it entirely a matter of coincidence that space and the feminine are frequently defined in terms of dichotomies in which each of them is most commonly defined as not-A. There is a whole set of dualisms whose terms are commonly aligned with time and space. With Time are aligned History, Progress, Civilization, Science, Politics and Reason, portentous things with gravitas and capital letters. With space, on the other hand, are aligned the other poles of these concepts: stasis, ('simple') reproduction, nostalgia, emotion, aesthetics, the body. All these dualisms, in the way that they are used, suffer from the criticisms made above of dichotomies of this form: the problem of mutual exclusivity and of the consequent impoverishment of both of their terms».⁷

Human beings exist in a constitutive relationship with places. In his scholarly work, inspired by phenomenological philosophy, Augustin Berque utilizes the concept of “trajectivity” to elucidate the relationship between humans and the world. Furthermore, in order to emphasise the constitutive importance of this relationship, he proposes the use of the term *milieu* rather than environment. On the one hand, he recalls the transformation of

³ See Merleau-Ponty, “*Phenomenology of Perception*”, 296.

⁴ Ivi, 293–294.

⁵ Ivi, 162.

⁶ Ivi, 115.

⁷ Massey, “*Politics and Space/Time*”, 72–73.

the view of the environment that is due to von Uexküll, who « introduced a founding distinction between environment (*Umgebung*) and milieu (*Umwelt*). Environment is a raw and universal datum, considered *in abstracto* by the look from nowhere of modern science, and accordingly valid in principle as such for any living being; whereas milieu is a concrete and singular reality, valid only from the point of view of the being concerned, and dynamically coupled with the constitution of that being».⁸ Furthermore, he references Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), who published *Fûdo* in the year following the release of von Uexküll's book. He observes that « this word *fûdo* ('windearth') means *milieu* in the sense of *Umwelt*. The subtitle was *Ningengakuteki kôsatsu*, 'a study of human betweenness' (Watsuji, 1979). The matter is indeed about human *milieux*, not *milieux* in general as in von Uexküll. [...] Whether he had heard of von Uexküll's Umweltlehre during his stay in Germany (1927–1928), or rediscovered its homologue on his own side as a practitioner of hermeneutical phenomenology, Watsuji's mesology was founded on the same principles; namely, that a *milieu* supposes the subjecthood of the concerned people, and, correlatively, that *milieu* (*fûdo*) is not the natural environment (*shizen kankyô*)».⁹

Thus, both von Uexküll and Watsuji propose a methodology for overcoming the dualistic paradigm that has characterised modern thought, specifically the division between what pertains to the object and what pertains to the subject. This novel approach forms the foundation of what Berque refers to as mesology. To understand this perspective, it is essential to recognise that concrete *milieux* cannot be regarded as entirely objective or subjective; rather, they are trajectory. According to Berque, this involves an ontological and logical shift: «The idea is to go 'beyond' (*trans*, *tra-*) the respective limits of the *object* and the *subject*, by way of a logical operation in which the physical object (i.e. the logical subject S: that which the matter is about) is taken as a certain predicate P (i.e. as something) through the senses, action, thought and eventually (in the case of the sole human) speech of a certain interpreter I, in a ternary (not binary) relation S-I-P (i.e. 'S is P for I'). The formula of this trajectory is: $r = S/P$, which reads: 'reality *r* is the subject S taken as the predicate *P*' (for graphic simplicity's sake, the interpreter I is here only implied, but concretely, the apparent binarity S/P is in fact always ternary: S-I-P)».¹⁰ If a dualistic conception leads to mechanicism, reductionism, analytism, individualism, quantitativism, capitalism, and industrialism, then, contrary to this de-cosmization, we have to re-cosmize, re-concretize, and re-Earthbind human existence. Because existing means narrating oneself, this narration must be understood as being woven into the fabric of the world of life. Not merely a backdrop, but the content of existence, it reveals itself as a horizon of interconnected relationships.

2 Narrating the Self within the Lifeworld

According to Husserl, the world should be comprehended not as the totality of things – an idea that clearly exceeds everyday experience – but as the general “name” under which to group together the open set of relationships that each individual's perceived reality establishes with its own context of experience.¹¹ In this regard, Husserl speaks of the horizon-structure of perception and observes that everything perceived is given as something that comes from the world (*etwas aus der Welt*). This means that it imposes itself perceptually in a perceptual context that extends beyond the field of vision in the strict sense.¹² The experienced meaning of every

⁸ Berque, “An enquiry into the ontological and logical foundations of sustainability”, 2; he refers to von Uexküll, “Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen”.

⁹ Berque, “An enquiry into the ontological and logical foundations of sustainability”, 2.

¹⁰ Ivi, 3. Berque asserts that the ancestor of the notion of *milieu* (in the mesological sense of *Umwelt* and *fûdo*) is probably the *chôra* in Plato's *Timaeus*: it is *imprint* and a *matrix*. He highlights that «in terms of Aristotelian *topos*, on the other hand, such a problem of imprint/matrix does not arise. In the *Physics* (IV), the *topos* is like an 'immobile vase' (*aggeion ametakinêton*, 212 a 15; Aristotle, 1996), which makes that the thing which occupies it, and which for its part is mobile and can change its place while keeping its own identity, obviously distinct from that of the *topos*», *ibidem*.

¹¹ See Spinicci, “Il mondo della vita e il problema della certezza”, Lesson 10, 149.

¹² See, *ivi*, 149–150.

single reality we encounter in the world is determined on this “horizon”, which manifests itself precisely in the impossibility of segregating the single perceptual given from the context of the world to which it belongs.¹³

All the realities one encounters in the world are given within an interplay of perspectives, and every manifestation is perspectival because it alludes to the possibility of developments that highlight other aspects of the “thing”. Perception is inherently dependent on the open horizon of the world, and it cannot be simplified to mere intuitive, momentary experiences. This implies that in experiencing something, space and time are fundamentally interconnected: they shape perception and, simultaneously, derive their form from it.

The intertwining of space and time is modulated differently across the multiple forms of its interpretation, each experienced in existence, which is always personal and simultaneously interwoven in the fabric of a shared life. The world of which we live is encountered in the experience of it and in the recounting of it as the horizon of many narratives. In their meeting at the perspective-point of anyone experiencing the world, the different narratives in which the world is given can be recounted in many ways, without being exhausted or immediately pacified.

Intimacy and social life intersect and influence each other without necessarily becoming confused.

However, seriously considering the fundamental concept of “being in perspective” requires acknowledging that the condition of being in the world is a constitutive being that is itself constituted.

As demonstrated by Pavel Florenskij in his work *Reverse Perspective*, «in general terms, it is a great prejudice to think that one should contemplate, in a state of immobility and while the object being contemplated is motionless».¹⁴ The conception of the world underlying linear perspective suggests a static, fixed, monocular representation. However, the dynamic experience provided by icons is entirely different. In this case, a dynamic complexity is perceptible. The proportions with respect to perspective are in clear contradiction to the principles of linear perspective; from this viewpoint, they may be regarded as significant errors in design, as the icon depicts details and planes that would not be visible simultaneously. Florenskij utilizes the terms “reversed” and “inverse” to characterize this perspective, which entails constructing the drawing as if the viewer were observing the various components while altering their position. Consequently, each element is rendered with its respective perspective center, and in some cases, with its own horizon. In this way, the observer is invited to a particular decentralization from the self. It is not, therefore, the sense of space that is absent in the absence of linear perspective; rather, it lacks a certain understanding of space as a mere ordering scheme: external, in some way, to reality, qualitatively homogeneous, infinite, unlimited, so to speak, undifferentiated. For Florenskij, this conception constitutes a denial of both nature and humanity. However, «by an irony of history they are grounded in the slogans called ‘naturalism’ and ‘humanism’ and crowned by the formal proclamation of ‘the rights of man and nature’».¹⁵ For instance, he emphasizes that, in Raphael, a harmonious balance exists between two principles – the perspectival and the non-perspectival. This balance reflects the peaceful coexistence of dual realms or spaces: as though the veil of another realm were gradually lifting before the observers, revealing not merely a scene or illusion of this world, but an authentic reality that diverges from their own.¹⁶ This phenomenon is exemplified by the painting known as *La Madonna Sistina*. Furthermore, it is important to examine Michelangelo’s fresco of the *Last Judgment*. In this composition, the higher a point is located within the artwork, the greater the perceived distance from the viewer. Conversely, when an observer looks upward, the eye perceives

¹³ See Husserl, “Crisis of the European sciences”, 162: «For consciousness the individual thing is not alone; the perception of a thing is perception of it within a perceptual *field*. And just as the individual thing in perception has meaning only through an open horizon of “possible perceptions,” insofar as what is actually perceived “points” to a systematic multiplicity of all possible perceptual exhibitings belonging to it harmoniously, so the thing has yet another horizon: besides this “internal horizon” it has an “external horizon” precisely as a thing within a field of things; and this points finally to the whole “world as perceptual world”. The thing is one out of the total group of simultaneously actually perceived things; but this group is not, for us, for consciousness, the world; rather, the world exhibits itself in it; such a group, as the momentary field of perception, always has the character for us of a sector “of the world, of the universe of things for possible perceptions. Such, then, at any time, is the present world; it exhibits itself to me in every case through a nucleus of “original presence” (this designates the continuously subjective character of what is directly perceived as such) as well as through its internal and external horizon-validities».

¹⁴ Florenskij, “Reverse Perspective”, 269.

¹⁵ Ivi, 216.

¹⁶ See Ivi, 233.

dimensions that increase in accordance with the ‘elevation’ depicted in the fresco, despite the fact that the lower figures cover the upper ones.

This perspective grapples with the dynamics of existence and its movement within the tangle of space-time. Existence is not merely an inactive participation in the spectacle of the world; rather, it is responsivity and invitation, a call to action that prompts dislocations and transformations.

The human perspective of inhabiting the world is therefore one of grasping the world through adumbrations (*Abschattungen*), whilst simultaneously being aware of our entanglement in the fabric of the world. This dismantles any claim to be able to bring the world into being independently, despite the fact that we ourselves open that horizon. Living is fundamentally connected to the act of experiencing it, a process that involves a complex interweaving that precedes its formulation in language. The way human beings move through space and time influences the formation of their identities, of places, and of human biographies. These are processes in which relationships, often asymmetrical, of interdependence, service, and power are at stake, in which social differentiations also manifest themselves as impediments, slowdowns, difficulties of access, and the multiplication of controls. Experience (*Erfahrung*) is therefore already an intrigue, in which what is lived (*Erlebnisse*) is organized into a plot that connects what would otherwise remain scattered and isolated into a meaningful whole (Walter Benjamin speaks of *Erfahrung* as narrativized experience). This does not mean that every experience is necessarily positive.

Because the experiences we live through also shape us, the problematic nature of experience raises the question of how we should handle our experiences. Firstly, it is essential to recognise that biographical conditions are interconnected with structural factors. Second, just as many elements of the weave of which they are made are not fully accessible to those who should respond, the conditions of possibility for the modes of narration are similarly conditioned. On one hand, the capacity for narrative can only be developed within the contextual frameworks of existence and articulated in accordance with the variations permitted by these contexts. On the other hand, the elements involved are ‘given’ to the interplay as always already imbued with meanings that also encompass other existences.

3 Narration and Spatiality

Human narratives, inherently connected to the world, manifest through discourses, practices, customs, institutions, dispositions, and artefacts. These elements are situated within the spatial and temporal contexts of socialisation, thereby providing a basis for the development of renewed self-narratives that shape personal existences. Consequently, the assertion that humans engage with the world in a narrative manner does not imply a reduction to verbalization or discourse about the world: narratives manifest in various forms, encompassing connections between practices and “things”.

Therefore, considering the significance of spatiality in human existence, it is imperative not only to narrate spatiality but also to address both the expression of spatiality within narration and the manner in which spatiality takes place narratively.¹⁷ Furthermore, the temporal aspect is also comprehended within a spatial context framework.¹⁸ The concept of narrativisation of spatiality encompasses more than the mere allocation of action scenes. If places are not merely scenarios but rather constitute the very fabric of existence, the concept of narrativising spatiality entails a more profound understanding of space as an integral element of the sequence of events, in which actions are intricately intertwined. Since information about the spatial elements in the actions is included, it becomes clear that spatiality is also expressed textually. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the narrative framework is not wholly realised through textualisation alone. It pertains to the intricate interweaving of performances, practices, and atmospheres, which collectively contribute to the unique identity of particular locations.

¹⁷ Utopian reflection presents very interesting examples, as urbanity is a central theme within the European literary and conceptual tradition of utopia; see Pezzoli Olgiati, “Utopian and Dystopian Cities at Work”, par. 1.

¹⁸ See Schlögel, *In space we read time*, XVII.

Urban areas, for instance, can be conceptualised as repositories of narrative, with these very narratives becoming an integral part of the city's fabric. Cities are stones that transform into stories, and stories that turn into stones.

This becomes evident in events characterised by the deliberate and systematic destruction of urban infrastructure, which has been termed “urbicide”. The material devastation affects both the tangible and intangible aspects of urban life, encompassing the constructed environment and urban practices. This phenomenon is exemplified by armed conflicts characterised by efforts to perpetrate ethnic cleansing, a prime example of which is the Bosnian War of the 1990s. The destructive strategy targeted both tangible and intangible assets that conveyed the narrative of the city's identity and its inhabitants, thereby facilitating the development of a sense of belonging to the urban community.

Let us remember the city of Sarajevo,¹⁹ which has been marked by tragic events such as the destruction of the Vijećnica and the Institute for Oriental Studies. Azra Nuhefendić, a journalist and author from Sarajevo, offers a personal account of the library's importance to the local community, noting that «the destruction of Vijećnica was experienced as “the end of the world”».²⁰ This building served as a meeting place for young people in multi-cultural, multi-religious Sarajevo. The Oriental Institute had also evidently been deliberately targeted; according to interviews with eyewitnesses, it had been hit with a barrage of incendiary munitions, fired from positions on the hills overlooking the town centre, and no other buildings in the densely built neighbourhood were hit. The Institute, situated on the upper floors of a four-storey office building at the intersection of Veljka Cubrilovica Street and Marshal Tito Boulevard within the Sarajevo-Centar municipality, was entirely destroyed by fire, leading to the total loss of its collections. The former Ottoman provincial archives were among the conserved repositories, comprising a collection of over 200,000 documents. Additionally, the cadastral registers, documenting land ownership in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the end of the Ottoman period, were also preserved. The country's most extensive collection of Islamic manuscripts was included, numbering 5,263 codices in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and Bosnian. Many of these manuscripts were unique and represented five centuries of Bosnian Muslim cultural history.

The destruction was an extraordinarily grievous act, as Helen Walasek (2015) emphasizes that the «concerted attacks on Bosnia's cultural heritage crystallized a more definitive discussion and recognition in international humanitarian law that the destruction of a people's cultural heritage was an aspect of genocide and was to feature in indictments for war crimes issued by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and its subsequent prosecutions».²¹ Due to its intrinsic significance as a repository of narratives pertinent to both personal and social construction, cultural heritage, encompassing both tangible and intangible forms, is engaged in the complex interaction of power dynamics, which are further reflected in the manner of its re-narrations. The Ottoman bridge in Mostar, known as Stari Most, serves as a pertinent example of this phenomenon. On 9 November 1993, the bridge was destroyed by Croatian artillery fire, an event which is commonly documented in school textbooks in the Croatian part of the city as an accidental collapse.

Within the framework of a postmodernist worldview, it could be argued that “all stories are equally valid, and no single narrative should prevail.” Nonetheless, it is essential to consider whether it is adequate to simply reject a “realist” perspective or a correspondence view of truth due to its perceived naivety. In her seminal work *Truth and Politics*, Hannah Arendt elucidates that «the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed. And for this trouble there is no remedy».²²

The assertion that “narratives create truth”²³ is one that merits closer examination. It is evident that narratives shape the world humans inhabit, and this is of performative value. However, do the narratives not

19 See Riedlmayer, “Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992–1996”.

20 Nuhefendić, *Le stelle che stanno giù*, 92–93 (my translation).

21 Walasek, *Bosnia and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage*, 1.

22 Arendt, “Truth and Politics”, 257.

23 Johnstone, “Stories, Community, and Place”, 126, quoted by R. Finnegan, *Tales of the city*, 166.

reach their limits in the critical consideration of the world they enable, through the manner in which they treat the facts they give form to?

Is it truly indifferent whether narratives inspire humans to adhere to the principle of truth or the principle of control? Arendt observed that the erosion of the distinction between truth and falsehood signifies the dissolution of a sense of limit in the context of political life. Instead, it should recognise that « it is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises. Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky».²⁴

It is also interesting to note that Ruth Finnegan, in her discussion of the issue, makes the following observation: «[...] Rosenwald and Ochberg broadly argue for non-realist interpretations of life stories but continue: “At its limit, however, this line of reasoning can be taken to support the notion that social life counts for nothing outside of discourse. On this tack the improvement of life can be accomplished if one tells a better story about it. But life is not merely talk; inequalities of opportunity, for example, are not redressed if individuals, or even whole classes, tell more ‘agentic,’ optimistic autobiographies. (1992 p. 7)” The narrators themselves would also claim their stories to be true rather than false or fictional – an important point that it is surely patronising to brush aside by insisting that all stories are essentially the same in this respect».²⁵

Storytelling exerts a significant influence on the shaping of experience, and it is important to recognise that narratives are facts in themselves. However, it is precisely because facts aren't devoid of substance that they can be reinterpreted within the framework of new narratives. The rejection of any concept of falsehood results in an inability to distinguish among the various functions of narratives. The act of storytelling has the capacity to serve as a medium for both the legitimisation and contestation of social realities, while simultaneously upholding or challenging established power structures.

Destruction is problematic, and reconstruction poses issues as well.²⁶

Indeed, reconstruction does not invariably result in restoration. In certain instances, it may overlook wounds; in others, it may entirely deny their existence. Occasionally, destruction is accompanied by replacements that impose new meanings and present themselves as renovation. However, this raises the question whether such acts constitute arrogance, oblivion, misrecognition, or domination. Some reconstructions spatialize narratives, thereby generating new forms of victimisation, as the destruction of a way of life is overlaid with a new history that is indifferent and misapprehends the value of what has been lost, potentially even placing blame upon it.

4 Bringing Justice and Telling the Truth in Places?

The spatialisation of memory is therefore a question of great importance.

²⁴ “Truth and Politics Arendt,” in *Between Past and Future*, 263-264.

²⁵ Finnegan, *Tales of the City*, 167. The volume is of notable interest as it investigates the role of storytelling processes in the creative construction of urban experiences. It effectively combines academic abstract narratives with vivid stories pertaining to a specific city, Milton Keynes, alongside the often moving self-narratives of its residents.

²⁶ For instance, Drita Haziraj considers the newly constructed mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In “Le nuove moschee della Bosnia Erzegovina” he interviews Amra Hadžimuhamedović (International University of Sarajevo, PhD in architecture; a leading expert in the process of implementing Annex 8 of the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, managing various projects related to integrating cultural heritage into post-war recovery) and documents her statement: «Traditional mosques are not constructed in elevated locations. Bringing mosques down to the valley and elevating houses to the hill signifies humility before God and pride before everything that is not God. This sacred and traditional principle of situating mosques within the urban fabric has been overlooked and misrepresented by contemporary mosque architecture. New mosques are often constructed, where possible, on the highest point in the town. Consequently, they are no longer integrated into the city as a whole. Such mosques become symbols of the use of religion as a means of asserting pride and dominance. [...] Traditional mosques in Bosnia have historically featured no more than one minaret. The minarets of new mosques are not used to call the faithful to prayer; rather, they serve as architectural features that have lost their functional and symbolic significance. The minarets of new mosques are generally tall, designed to project power through their height and to communicate a message even to those who do not attend the mosque. None of the minarets of the twenty mosques analyzed fulfill the essential criteria» (online no page, my translation).

Within the context of space, memory assumes an externalised narrative form.²⁷ The historian Pierre Nora has introduced the concept of “lieux de mémoire”, which he defines as including museums, archives, specific geographical locations, distinguished individuals, artefacts, and natural features of the landscape. These are not simply elements to be remembered, but rather sites where active memory resides.²⁸ They serve as the laboratories within which tradition can be engaged. Laboratories of potential new narratives.

As they take shape as spaces, narratives of memory allow the conflicting issues that inhabit them to take their place as well. Frequently, this occurs in manners that deny the existence of “difficult memories”²⁹ and permit only a singular narrative. “Sites of memory” act as central points where interconnected stories from different periods come together, reflecting deeply intertwined and often conflicting relationships. They include power relations, complex fights for legitimacy, and acts of resistance.

Three instances from Tito’s former Yugoslavia can be regarded as exemplary. These are monuments commissioned by Marshal Tito as educational installations and, in his intentions, performative declarations of “brotherhood and unity”.³⁰ One such example is the Stone Flower located in Jasenovac,³¹ Croatia. The monument is located in an area that was once the site of one of the most infamous extermination camps during the Second World War. The location bears witness to a tragedy, with the deaths of Jews, Roma, anti-fascists, and a substantial number of Serbs. In addition to Nazi perpetrators, the site was also targeted by the Ustasha, Croatian fascist nationalists. Tito entrusted Serbian architect Bogdan Bogdanović with the design of the memorial, which takes the form of a flower conceived to honor the memory without evoking trauma, instead emphasizing the cessation of hostilities between Serbs and Croats. The second is the Mrakovica Tower, a structure designed by Croatian architect Dušan Džamonja. He was entrusted with the commemorative responsibility of creating a monument dedicated to the massacre of Yugoslav partisans on Mount Kozara. Finally, the Sutjeska Columns, designed by the sculptor Miodrag Živković, were erected to commemorate one of the most brutal confrontations between the Nazi-Fascist armed forces and the partisans led by Tito himself. In the contemporary era, these three “sites of memory” are subject to neglect, lacking maintenance and attention. They no longer serve as a catalyst for “brotherhood and unity”, as alternative narratives have emerged that challenge the narrative originally intended to be symbolized by their actions’ construction. They continue to be perceivable but have evolved into feeble narrative devices, whose significance remains uncertain.

In this setting marked by deeply rooted nationalistic divisions, a monument honoring Bruce Lee was erected in Mostar in 2005, with the aim of circumventing the divisive impact of political and religious symbolism. Proponents argued that he was an iconic figure symbolizing advocates for justice. The monument can be interpreted as a compromise, resulting in a warning that lacks remembrance. The statue was subjected to acts of

27 See Danani and Pezzoli-Olgati, “Public Memory under Construction”, 255–257.

28 Nora, “Preface to the English Language Edition”, in *Realms of memory*, says: «If the expression lieu de memoire must have an official definition, it should be this: a lieu de memoire is any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community», XVII. Nora clarifies that in strictly quantitative terms, these Realms of Memory represent a third of the Lieux de memoire, the overall plan has been modified in significant ways, and the English-language version is a microcosm. He affirms that it offers a simplified, purified structure, but one that is quite representative of the spirit and style of the original edifice, it is ordered differently, but it accomplishes the same mission.

29 In 2008, Sharon Macdonald published *Difficult Heritage*. Since then, the term “difficult heritage” has become widely used to refer to traumas that have profoundly altered a place’s and community’s identity, and continue to hinder resolution today. What should be included in the context of Difficult Heritage? Macdonald’s texts never mention including European colonialism.

30 See the excellent documentary Rossini, “Circle of Memory”; see also Mazzucchelli, “Semiotiche dei confini e narrative spaziali della memoria”, 13.

31 The account of Jasenovac, Croatia, has recently been accompanied by an alternative narrative, of contrasting political persuasion, concerning the events of Bleiburg in May 1945. Mazzucchelli, *ivi*, 17–18, observes that in recent years, a Croatian association has acquired land on which a monument has been erected. This site has become an annual destination for pilgrimages by Croatian citizens, far-right movements, and individuals nostalgic for the Ustaše regime. For several years, the monument also received a form of patronage from the Croatian government. Currently, in some respects, Bleiburg is regarded more as a place of national memory than Jasenovac, whose remembrance remains somewhat uncomfortable. Mazzucchelli further notes that the example of the Bleiburg memorial is especially illustrative of a type of “narrative boundary” of a place of memory, rendering it a sort of “narrative exclave”. In this regard, he states that the Bleiburg case exemplifies the “extraterritoriality of memory”, which functions to reinforce a “narrative boundary” and a value system by projecting these onto sites of memory beyond its own borders space.

vandalism, including painting, dirt, and defacement. It was then restored, subsequently stolen, and later recovered.³² The stories involving all these monuments, which are narratives in themselves, effectively confirm the challenges associated with establishing a framework for the coexistence of conflicting memories.³³

Spatialisation is inherently an exposition, and exposition in turn evokes plurality. The memorial potential can be robust or dismantled by the prevalence of oblivion and erasure, which weakens any symbolic value. Because of their significance and performativity, the places of memory raise questions about justice. As posited by Ricœur, «if, in fact, the facts are ineffaceable, if one can no longer undo what has been done, nor make it so that what has happened did not occur, on the other hand, the sense of what has happened is not fixed once and for all».³⁴ The arduous work of recollection-memory is also a key factor that prevents repetition and can help ensure that the harm that has occurred does not continue to cause further damage.

The Italian linguist and semiologist Patrizia Violi emphasizes the particular importance of the “sites of trauma,” which provide a privileged perspective for examining the various ways in which spatiality constructs narratives. Conversely, she explores how different forms of spatialisation can be constructed by various narrative means. The development of this form of memorials is predominantly post-Second World War, with Auschwitz exemplifying the prototypical case. Violi states that space as such is inherently linked to memory, and it serves as a medium for the production, rewriting, interpretation and, on occasion, erasure of memory.³⁵

According to Marcelo Brodsky,³⁶ quoted by Violi, buildings hold substantial significance for memory, due to their materiality, that surpasses the more subdued and cerebral recollections facilitated by literary works. Furthermore, he emphasizes the issue of who is authorized to decide the future of sites linked to trauma, who holds the authority to make such determinations, and who ought to be entrusted with this authority. Connected to the question of justice *within* the narrative, and *of* the narratives, there are also conflicts *for* the narratives. Decisions concerning, for example, the repurposing, museification, or concealment of sites associated with trauma.³⁷

Brodsky refers to the position of the Asociación Buena Memoria regarding the ESMA case – that is, the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada in Buenos Aires, a barracks transformed during the dictatorship into a detention and torture centre in Argentina. In their perspective, «constructed spaces – such as buildings, corners, streets, and cities – facilitate an experiential journey through the five senses. They enable individuals to gain an understanding of how life was lived and what these spaces were like, an experience unavailable through maps or photographs. Such visual representations merely appeal to the eyes, necessitating intellectual interpretation and prior familiarity. Conversely, physical structures are tangible; they can be observed, entered, and touched. These structures possess texture, scent, and color, thereby imparting a more profound experience. This richness fosters a deeper sense of identification with our history and cultural identity».³⁸ The Asociación expressed its support for

³² See Markovina, “Mostar: addio a Bruce Lee”.

³³ Memory is also spatially represented through toponymy: the names of streets and squares, whose significance in remembrance, celebration, and symbolic legitimisation becomes particularly apparent when these names are replaced.

³⁴ See Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 381. Moreover, he affirms: «Whether it be fixed space or space for dwelling, or space to be traversed, constructed space consists in a system of sites for the major interactions of life. Narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription, the one in the endurance of time, the other in the enduringness of materials. Each new building is inscribed in urban space like a narrative within a setting of intertextuality. And narrativity impregnates the architectural act even more directly insofar as it is determined by a relationship to an established tradition wherein it takes the risk of alternating innovation and repetition», *ivi*, 150.

³⁵ See P. Violi, *Landscapes of Memory. Trauma, Space, History*.

³⁶ See M. Brodsky, (ed.), *Memory under Construction*, 216, quoted by Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 265.

³⁷ Andermann, as cited by Violi (*Landscapes of Memory*, 257–258), distinguishes three types – although in practice they often overlap: a testimonial option, a performative option, and a museum option. These propose narratives that engage with memory in various ways. For further details, see Andermann, “Returning to the Site of Horror”, 76–98.

³⁸ Brodsky (ed.), *Memory under construction*, reported “De la propuesta de Buena Memoria, Asociación Civil”, 216 (my translation): «los espacios construidos: edificios, esquinas, calles, ciudades; que permiten una experiencia vivencial atravesada por los cinco sentidos, donde una persona puede tener una idea de cómo fue y cómo se vivió en esos espacios; cosa que no puede hacerse a través de un plano o de una foto; que en tal caso, entrará por los ojos, requerirá una elaboración intelectual y, además demandará un entrenamiento previo. En cambio, el edificio está ahí, se puede ver, se puede entrar, se lo puede tocar; tiene una textura, tiene un olor, un color. En definitiva, transmite una vivencia mucho más fuerte, la cual permite una identificación más plena con lo que constituye nuestra historia y nuestra cultura».

a multifaceted narrative, open to interpretation, which will promote reflection and learning: «A narrative that incorporates diverse voices, founded upon an agreement on fundamental principles. This narrative integrates documents, testimonies, and art. It is not achieved by recreating the horror, as doing so may hinder effective communication of the events. Reconstructing scenes of torture can be incapacitating. Similarly, reconstructing a space of horror may prove counterproductive, as it seeks to freeze time in order to derive an instructive example. [...] Constructing a multiple narrative is much more difficult than constructing a homogeneous one».³⁹

With regard to ESMA, Violi⁴⁰ also references the position of CELS (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales), advocates of a critical and educational museum which, while maintaining meticulous conservation standards concerning buildings, testimonies, and history, does not, however, constitute a museum of horror. She recalls one of the most contentious and widely debated propositions put forward by CELS: the dissociation from the “victimisation” of the site, which regards survivors and family members as the sole social actors entitled to determine the modalities of historical remembrance. In contrast, CELS advocated for an inclusive space that is receptive to all facets of Argentine history, arguing that the military should be involved in the process of reevaluating its own history. Violi notes that this does not imply any alleged reconciliation, but rather the intention of fulfilling the museum’s educational and transformative objectives, as well as the establishment of armed forces that exemplify respect for democratic values. However, a key question arises: is it truly possible to include former persecutors in a democratic and participatory educational effort? How can they be integrated into building a collective narrative? It is evident that all the narrative which proposes reparation is inherently constrained by its inability to give back the preceding world. However, the question remains: how can a narrative intended to facilitate healing encompass those who inflicted the initial wounding? Under what conditions would this occur to enable restoration?

To guarantee inclusion within the narrative, a degree of “com-promise” might be necessary. Nonetheless, to prevent any distortion of the truth and uphold the demand for justice, it is essential to avoid confusion and mystification, acknowledging conflict as a potential tool for reconstruction. This approach does not involve omitting the evil that has occurred; rather, it aims to foster a recovery process that averts its repetition. As Paul Ricœur asserts, «it is along the path of critical history that memory encounters the sense of justice. What would a happy memory be that was not also an equitable memory?»⁴¹

It is precisely their narrative capacity that makes places extraordinary devices of mediation of memory and therefore of the production of meaning in the present and of expectations for the future. Different narratives are expressed through various configurations of place; moreover, the same place is configured differently depending on how it is used and experienced.

Although its physical morphology may be preserved (Violi employs semiotic terminology and refers to it as “substance of expression”⁴²), the connection between specific expressions and particular contents may, nonetheless, vary. It is not always easy to identify ways to redefine meanings.

The events that have been designated as “cancel culture” – the Black Lives Matter movement’s systematic attack on statues of Columbus in 2020, for instance – are a good example. Indeed, during periods of political upheaval, there has been notable destruction of images representing fallen power: cases of this phenomenon include the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad on 9 April 2003 and the subsequent dismantling of Lenin statues in Ukraine (which took place in four stages, the final one occurring between 2013 and 2014 during the Euromaidan protests). During this period, no one characterised the event as a revolt by ignorants aiming to erase history through such a destructive act. The media refrained from describing the process as a rewriting of history, instead referring to it as the rebirth of these nations. The recent destruction of statues of historical figures

³⁹ Ibidem (my translation).

⁴⁰ Violi 2017, 266-267.

⁴¹ Ricœur, *Memory, history, forgetting*, p. 500.

⁴² Violi 2017, 15.

such as Christopher Columbus, Edward Colston,⁴³ and Rhodes⁴⁴ has elicited different reactions, due to different imaginaries and different power relations at stake.

According to Tomaso Montanari,⁴⁵ the primary aim was not destruction but rather re-semanticisation. The destruction that occurred, he states, was merely the most intense response to the persistent willingness to preserve the symbols of domination unaltered not only in form, but also in meaning.⁴⁶ Beyond the loss resulting from the destruction and beyond the silence of complicity, it is a matter of finding a path to new meanings that transform the narrative into a reparative one. It can be posited that «the primary source of contention is not the judgment of the past, but rather the project for the future. [...] the aspiration for an alternative future – one that is finally human, free, and just – is embodied by those who congregate in the streets to challenge the symbols of a long-standing and barbaric injustice. Their struggle signifies a refusal to permit the future to be merely the continual extension of the past».⁴⁷ Montanari proposes the following formula: «Preserve the monument, but subvert its meaning».⁴⁸

Public space may sometimes necessitate reinterpretation to address concerns of amnesia, facilitate the healing of overlooked wounds, and prevent the unintentional perpetuation of distorted narratives. The limits of narration can thus be appropriately understood not only as *limes*, which sanction its narrowness, but also as *limen*: representing a threshold, an entry point, or a margin through which the encounter is established. They can perform as a “measure”, the names of which are justice⁴⁹ and truth.⁵⁰

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⁴³ The reference pertains to the destruction of the statue of Edward Colston, a Bristol merchant and slave trader involved in the Atlantic route (1636–1721), which took place in Bristol in 2020.

⁴⁴ The reference is to the movement characterised by the hashtag RhodesMustFall, which began in 2015 with protests against the statue of Cecil Rhodes – Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896 and theorist of the apartheid system – on the campus of the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

⁴⁵ Montanari, *Le statue giuste*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2024, 29; here he says: «The semantic density, evocative power, and ability to penetrate everyday life possessed by monumental heritage and public memorials are extraordinary: we can raise generations that are blind to all this, accustomed like apneists to rushing through the squares and streets where they learn to love life. Or we can commit ourselves to ensuring that our daughters and sons let all this into their hearts, as if by ‘osmosis’, as Simone Weil said. But in this second, more desirable case, we must ask ourselves what message is reaching them and how it relates to the Constitution». In the previous pages, referring to the results of the MiRiconosci? association, which carried out the first census of female representation in statues, and recalling that in Italy there are only 171 monuments dedicated to women out of a total that is not quantified but must be in the order of tens of thousands, he observes: «What should a girl today think as she walks through her city? What does the Republic expect of her, what models does it offer her, what idea of society does it propose? And don’t young Italian males risk seeing, in the monumental apparatus of memory that marks the public space, yet another confirmation that they are the masters of history by right of gender? And won’t Italian girls think that public space has always been and still is dominated by male bodies, well dressed and in positions of command, whereas their own bodies are only good for being photographed on publicity posters? There, they are in the majority, but they are almost always naked bodies, objectified bodies, bodies offered up to a predatory male gaze», 28 (my translation).

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Ivi, 120–121 (my translation).

⁴⁸ Ivi, 93 (my translation).

⁴⁹ The question of what it truly means to “be just,” “do justice,” and “undo injustice” warrants further investigation, though this has only been briefly touched upon here. The inspiration behind these pages stems from a perspective that seeks not only to critically examine whether a deconstruction of the “justice of the victors” remains meaningful and not relativistic – thus capable of addressing injustice – but also to move beyond the inadequate but predominant merely retributive, understanding of justice. Instead, it aims for a conception of justice that “knows how to repair the world”.

⁵⁰ The theme of truth unquestionably warrants additional investigation; however, within these pages, our discussion has merely scratched the surface. It is essential to examine it from various perspectives: its verification process, its communicability, its tolerability, and the potential risks associated with its ‘use,’ which may be ideological and violent rather than reparative and liberating.

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