

## Memorials and Semiotic Dynamics

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Three important themes recur in recent discussions in cultural and developmental psychology: How do ruptures and transitions allow us to identify processes of change? How can we observe the dynamics through which the social and the individual mutually construct each other? And how can individuals be seen as active constructors of meaning and their worlds, bridging their past to their futures? In her book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins addresses the societal world with very comparable questions. How do we identify the emergence of newness in the social and political world, and how can we guarantee spaces for its emergence? How can symbolic objects both participate in the regulation of the social and the making of individual fates? How can memories be integrated in the fabric of individual and collective changes, so as to allow both learning from the past and change for the future?

### **The Political Process in the Ruptures of the Taken-for-Granted**

Jenny Edkins calls for a proper 'political domain'—'that which enjoins us ... to acknowledge the constituted and provisional nature of what we call social reality' (p. 12). This 'political domain' is defined in

contrast with a soft 'politics'—a smooth, taken-for-granted ongoing state of the things, where debates, dissonances and questioning are impossible—as, for example, in the US and UK pseudo-debate accompanying the war in Iraq. Her call can be seen as having three faces: as a theoretical proposition; as a related methodological program; and as a political claim. The two first faces will occupy me here.

Edkins' distinction between a dynamic political domain and a smooth politics is based on a distinction between two modes of temporality—a linear time, that is, the one of safe, static politics, and a chaotic, non-linear time. The latter is a time following ruptures of linearity, which signify the entry of the political as a dynamic. Nation-states and governments might have reasons to fear such a political domain; they thus develop soothing techniques to maintain a sense of continuity, such as through the production of controlled narratives. Thus, Edkins proposes, time-breaches reveal latent contradictions, the multiple voices of the societal, and allow the emergence of the authentic political—I would say, such ruptures reveal the *polis*, the space of voiced and embodied agents of a collectivity. Finally, defining 'trauma' as a breach in the experience of linearity of time, Edkins proposes to study trauma to accede to the emergence of the political.

In order to observe the dynamic tension between the *polis* and politics, she proposes to examine collective actions of acknowledgement and the repair of ruptures in linear narratives. She studies public memorials of war, famine, genocides and terrorism as places where the trauma is acknowledged and represented: the First World War Cenotaph in London, the Vietnam Wall in Washington, memorials of famines and genocides, of Tiananmen and Ground Zero. Observing the practices these memorials trigger, Edkins identifies how representatives of politics propose a narrative that might, or might not, muzzle the diversity of the voices and the innovative strength of the *polis*. Studying practices also allows one to observe how people invent their own uses of memorials, and how they might secrete their own meaning of the rupture, non-aligned with the cover story.

In order to reconnect the person to the collective, Edkins proposes a two-step conceptual path. One is precisely to define memorials as places where the need to write a national or community history coincides with the need to confer meaning on one's life and on death. The other movement appears to negate the previous one: it suggests that a trauma—out of time and forbidding memory—is similar for the collective and for the individual. Her claim is that, finally, to preserve something of the creative potential of trauma for the *polis*, some non-linearity of time should be preserved:

I argue that the process of re-inscription into linear narratives, whilst possibly necessary for some points of view—it is argued that telling the story alleviates traumatic stress, for example—is a process that generally depoliticises, and that there is an alternative, that of *encircling the trauma*. . . . The reinstallation of time as linear and the narrating of events as history are central to the process of re-inscription. However, there are forms of memory and memorialisation (perhaps more aptly called ‘not forgetting’ rather than remembering) that do not produce a linear narrative, but rather retain another notion of temporality. These are ways of encircling the real. (p. 15)

The core of Edkins’ argument poses a challenge that the psychologist recognizes well: how to understand the political as a phenomenon in-the-making, as a process and not as an outcome. Her proposal is to reveal the diversity and the disorder of agencies that constitute the *polis* in the ruptures of societal normality. Consistent with that theoretical proposal, the fabric of the book is made of delicate observations of various actors’ and people’s uses of symbolic objects of memory. It is written as a promenade around hot points, each chapter focusing on one or two memorials; on its way, it encounters difficult issues—the fragility of the exposed person, where her humanity resides, and how catastrophes, with no reason and beyond justification, can reduce a human to a ‘bare body’.

I will highlight a few psychological theoretical questions that underlie *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, on the basis of some of Edkins’ observations of uses of memorials. However, defining individual and collective trauma as similarly as she does appears to be very problematic. This assimilation necessarily generates other problems: How to define ‘encircling the real’? What is ‘another notion of temporality’? But also, does this lead to a program where the political has to maintain individual trauma to prevent forgetfulness and enable innovation? Adopting a perspective focused on semiotic processes, I will discuss that notion before rereading the issue of articulating the person and the collective. What I will not address are the historical and political dimensions of Edkins’ discussions, which are far beyond my competencies.<sup>1</sup>

## Observing Memory

Fundamentally, at an individual as well as a collective level, remembering is a constant process, where texts and places of commemoration reshape the discourses of memory (Bartlett, 1932/1995; Halbwachs, 1925; Wertsch, 2002). But that process is guided or canalized by symbolic and practical powers in the societal that render available the

tools for the memory, or that forbid some of their uses or some of its versions.

As shown by Edkins' descriptions of practices that surround memorials, multiple agents of governments or various groups that have an interest in constituting their 'authorized' collective narrative might co-opt emerging memories through different constraints: shaping the narrative or the meanings to be designated by the memorial (e.g. transforming Kosovo refugees' testimonies into what will be the official narrative); guiding or prescribing the material form of a memorial, and its semiotic contents (and thus the memorials for the Irish famines in Boston radically differ formally from the one in Dublin); controlling the frame and the access to the memorials (by placing an army to surround the monument to the victims of Tiananmen, or permitting the London Cenotaph to be surrounded by traffic); prescribing and manipulating emotions that should be felt when interacting with that memorial (by giving an identity-card of a dead person to visitors at the entrance of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, or making the visitor enter a [fake] crematorium in a concentration camp).

On the other hand, within these constraints, individual people are actively engaged in their work of memorizing and forgetting, making meaning of ruptures, or creating links to the dead—those who bring flowers to a memorial, who leave a message in a visitors' book, or simply those who experience the space of a monument and meditate. Individual people—who constitute the bodies and the voices and the diversity of the *polis*—approach memorials with some intentions, and use them. These practices might have nothing to do with the intentions of the creators of these places (see also Perriault, 1989).

If one takes seriously the importance of studying ruptures as the irruption of voices that offer an alternative to totalizing power, then one needs methods to gather individual voices. Edkins uses various techniques to do so. She finds in secondary sources people's testimony about their experiences when confronted with memorials; she observes the objects and the things that people leave next to these memorials; she collects comments in visitors' books in memorial museums. Additionally, she describes the sequences of perceptions and impressions that a visit to this or that memorial provokes: a sense of spaces, colours and signs—an embodied, emotional and representational experience. These methodological choices implicitly acknowledge the importance of one's actual embodied participation to practices of memory. To give an idea of these practices of memory, let me relay two examples of Edkins' descriptions.

The Vietnam Wall in Washington is made of two long, black,

reflecting stone walls, connected in an open V; from the junction of the wall are listed, engraved, the names of all the fallen American soldiers during the Vietnam war. These two walls are open on a wide space. People who come to see the wall can see it from afar—and most of them stop for a while at a certain distance. When they then approach, they have to closely examine the wall to see whether they recognize names they might be looking for. The wall is shiny and reflective; looking for a name implies seeing one's own reflection.

Beyond the controversies that the conception of the wall provoked, people seem to have derived huge support from it. Edkins explains this fact as follows: the wall authorizes the person to face the reality of the dead person—the engraved name, acknowledged by the socially shared wall. This acknowledgement imposes another one—the reality of one's own life: the name is 'held' between one's gaze and one's reflected gaze. One cannot simultaneously focus on the dead person's name and on oneself: these belong to different visual spaces. A boundary is created between the space of the living and that of the dead, rejoined at that point; I would say, the experience opens also to an imaginary space, a space beyond the here-and-now.

Hence, Edkins says, the wall offers a possibility of closure of one's own trauma—recognising having lost someone—without closing a collective narrative—the wall offers no heroic narrative of the nation. This is what she calls 'encircling' the trauma. The boundary created between the dead and the living allows a creative space. The practices of memory of the people who have taken pictures of the wall, or brought messages, mementoes, and objects to it, are read by Edkins as expressions of such a creativity.

In contrast, the Dachau Memorial site is a very different form of memorial. On the site of the concentration camp itself, it combines original constructions, exhibitions that have a historical and didactic function, and a 'memorial room' for meditation. The boundaries between history and memory are blurred—what part of the museum is 'real', reconstructed, displaced? As with most concentration camps, such exhibitions are guided and oriented by conflicting interests—various political interests are in effect disagreeing on whose drama it is, what is commemorated, who were the liberators, and so on (see also Chaumont, 1997). Although Edkins' description is less vivid than the previous one, we can imagine that such a space creates mixed impressions of uncertainty, confinement and pressure, both physically and mentally. Visitors do not leave objects and pictures, but they have the possibility to write a few words in the visitors' book. Edkins reports comments of various types: the classic 'we were here'; comments of a

'never again' type; expressions of stupefaction—people writing that they are overwhelmed, or speechless; but also comments on the 'good work' done by Hitler. Some people sign, some do not. Comments appear in series: a theme introduced by a visitor is often followed by similar comments; people seem to communicate through the visitor's book, writes Edkins. People seem to engage in forms of dialogue, beyond the here-and-now, but with other living people who shared the memorial experience. These visitors' comments can be read as reinforcing one's position on the side of the living, or among the living. More exactly, these can be seen as having an identity-repositioning function: people are claiming some closeness to a Nazi position (which is a positioning in the present, not a memorial act), or distancing them from it; coming closer to other humans, or distancing themselves from the previous generations. For Edkins, it seems that this memorial has failed to offer a space for commemoration; it is a place that has been 'closed' or co-opted by institutions: people's traumas are captured, and a closed narrative of the events is imposed. The memorial contributes to the absorption of the trauma into memory and narration, to banalization and eventually to forgetting.

It is likely that most of the visitors come to such a place with very different expectations than in Washington. People are more likely to be present to learn something, or to give some reality to a history they have learned, than to work through their own losses. It might be that learning requires always a form of loss of the trauma.

However, one might also draw another conclusion from this analysis. The first memorial, which allows meaning-making processes and the creation of links with those who are absent, can be seen as restoring a time-continuity and narration, that is, as renouncing the traumatic. The second memorial appears to prevent meaning-making, and to force people to cut themselves from the past and position themselves in the present. It seems to prevent restoring continuity, and to keep the trauma alive. In the next sections, I define trauma and the work of memorial, so as to be able to account for such a position.

## **Trauma—and the Difficulty to Think**

As mentioned, Edkins uses the notion of trauma to link the notion of individual and collective radical ruptures. 'Trauma' is defined as that which stays out of time, and that which escapes language, both at the individual and the political levels. Trauma is what has not been accounted for: 'In both cases what has happened is beyond the possibility of communication. There is no language left' (p. 7). 'Language'

has here to be understood in a neo-Lacanian frame of reference, where the 'symbolic' is the social shared language, where the 'imaginary' is individual and non-symbolic, and where the 'real' is unknowable, untouchable and beyond language—in a quasi-Kantian way. It might be that Edkins chose such a frame of analysis that allows for the integration of 'trauma' in a discursive approach to politics. However, that definition introduces some difficulties.

Equating the definition of individual and collective trauma brings the following implicit *aporia*: the trauma disrupts time and is unspeakable; it is out of collective language, therefore it is in the 'real'; it is in the real, therefore it is unknowable as a social and historical reality; it is unknowable, therefore it shouldn't be examined, looked for or analyzed, because it would lose its very quality of non-unknowability.

There is an overabundant contemporary discourse on the possibilities to represent (and educate against) horror and on the dangers of banalization, based on a very similar reasoning. Yet, as Chaumont (1997) shows, few of the participants in that debate are aware that some of its founding arguments—the impossibility to write after the Holocaust, or the radical transcendental evilness of Horror—have been produced by people whose social and political positions, perspectives on the matter, personal culture and intentions have nothing to do with the issues at stake now; hence theological arguments have paralyzed a generation of scientific historical research on the Second World war in Germany. The radical neo-Lacanian definition of trauma renders its sources unknowable, and forbids historical, sociological or psychological research on the roots of the difficulties of the meaning-making processes.

Edkins defends herself against adopting a position that would give an easy excuse to avoid such tasks. However, it seems to me that her framework necessarily brings us to that dead-end, the idea of 'encircling' the trauma being its only way out. However, it is never really defined. 'Encircling' the trauma—while preventing forgetting by a special temporality—occurs at the Washington memorial and not in Dachau, we have read; however, the paradox is that the former seems precisely to enable people to move out of their personal pain (let the pain fade out), whereas the second seems to install internal pain and fragmentation (creating a trauma?). Also, the metaphor of 'encircling' is spatial: are traumas like holes in the fabric of time? But if a trauma is what is outside the structure of language, by what can it be encircled?

There are other ways to think of trauma that avoid some of these difficulties. The one I will propose is defined in terms of a theoretical

frame aimed at understanding the semiotic nature of cultural dynamics and embodied individuals, where individual and collective memory are distinct (see Wertsch, 2002), and where, more generally, individual thinking has to be distinguished from collective dynamics (Perret-Clermont, 2004). I will, from now on, reserve the word ‘trauma’ for individual trauma, and ‘catastrophe’ for the collective. In this framework, language is only a very small subclass of semiotic forms, and semiotic processes are what allow the dynamic taking place between the social group and the individual.

At an individual level, sociogenetic psychologists as well as psychoanalysts have shown that there is a long process involved from the embodied experiences of pain and suffering, to their elaboration into shareable meanings and their integration into memory (Freud, 1914/2001a, 1920/2001b; Green, 1997/2000a, 2000b; Janet, 1926, 1928, 1934; Valsiner, 2001, 2003). The embodied quality of experiences is, in its origin, given as a brutal happening. To be apprehended mentally, these experiences have to be linked to semiotic mediations. Mnemonic traces of previous comparable experiences, in their minimal definition (Peirce 1868), or socially shared signs, either previously internalized, or available in one’s environment, have to be attached to them. Semiotic mediation minimally authorizes the grouping of fuzzy embodied impressions and then designate these groups of impressions (by a linguistic term, or also just by attaching them to any image), and eventually to include them into an articulated sequence in the flow of thinking. Thus, semiotic mediations can allow experience to become part of, and thus transform, other thoughts. Thanks to semiotic mediation, normal elaboration of experiences allows processes of linking and transformation through which they progressively fade in the flows of memories and thinking.

Clinical research shows that such processes are easily impeded. Experiences can become traumatic when incomparable to any previous experience, beyond available means for semiotic mediation—which is something different than to say it is beyond language! These experiences can also wake earlier traces of experiences, which occurred before one even had access to semiotic processes (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). Also, any experience or semiotic mediation can awake lateral association; it can be attached to thoughts that are (socially and internally) condemned, raising shame and negative feelings turned toward oneself. Experiences can become traumatic for reasons having to do with the intensity of the embodied and emotional experiences they provoke, their resistance to semiotization, but also because they create links which are dangerous to the sense of



continuity or integrity of the person herself. All in all, these experiences damage the abilities to think and to elaborate. As an 'unlinkable' zone of the psyche, traumas become manifest through repetitions, recurrent nightmares, flashbacks of violent veracity, and various forms of distortions of linking and thinking (Zajde, 1993).

Trauma clinics propose lengthy treatment to 'repair' a person's abilities to think and his or her damaged webs of thoughts. Here there is a sense of talking of 'encircling the trauma': it would mean progressively creating new links that allow the absorption and the transformation of the pain into semiotic forms (Abraham & Torok, 1996; Tisseron, 1992). It involves necessarily a form of access to mnemonic traces, their further linking, their transformations and their possible fading out. Such linking and elaboration needs to be intersubjectively acknowledged to take place (Green, 2000b; Tisseron, 2000).

As subtly analysed by Chaumont (1997), the problem for many survivors of deportation is not so much that their experiences stayed 'beyond language'—many people had the words to describe, write or talk about at least some of what they had seen—but the fact that other survivors, or that people who had no contact with the world of the concentration camp, did not want to listen to them, or condemned their experience. It is these reactions—of shame transformed into condemnation, of pain transformed into humiliation—that prevented many of these survivors from fully articulating their experience. Progressively, it is this socially produced rejection of these attempts to talk that has been internalized by the survivors, bringing them to adopt extreme, caricatural or confused positions toward their own experiences, ten, twenty or thirty years after the events. Hence, stating, as Edkins does, that the only problem of survivors of catastrophe is the lack of language comes to absolve the tyranny of the *polis* itself, which censures, willingly or out of fear, the discourse of the one who speaks. Thinking or not thinking occurs not only at the level of the individual, or at the level of an abstract political body, but also in the social settings where people meet and enable each other to engage in the work of semiotic elaboration, and to interact with social discourses.

I do not have an answer concerning the collective responsibility to represent, remember or forget. However, only careful theoretical distinctions can prevent us from becoming prisoners of emotionally over-saturated diatribes.

## The Semiotic Prism and the Functions of Memorials

As Edkins sketches in various places, memorials can take many forms and have many functions. In this last section, employing a perspective focused on the dynamics of semiotic elaboration, I will return to the various uses that people seem to derive from them.

Semiotic studies, which are interested in how signs and objects come to carry meaning, have proposed various models to represent meaning in a sign, which generally ignore the social position of the reader of the sign (Sebeok, 1994; Spinks, 1991). On their side, social psychologists are eager to schematize triangulatory dynamics, where a person is always in relationship to a social other and to an object (Markovà, 2003; Moscovici, 2000). When we aim at understanding dynamics of meaning-making in socially located spaces, the two approaches are necessary, and have to be combined. Thus, the core of my exploration requires a *semiotic prism*, which articulates: a material object (e.g. a memorial); a person; another person, or the presence of the social, and the meaning that the object acquires for these; and the meaning of that symbolic thing for the person interacting with it (Figure 1). The 'person' and the 'meaning of the object for the person' constitute distinct angles, to suggest a space for the intrapsychical dynamic of meaning-making. The 'other' can be another person who constructs her meanings, as in interactions. The 'other' can also be a social entity, such as a given group, or the public state, generating meaning vehiculated in social representations or collective memories. 'Other' and 'meaning for other' are on the same angle, because from the perspective of the person, there is no access to these differences: the other person is known at a given moment through what she externalizes; the social representation is the actualization of the social entity. The

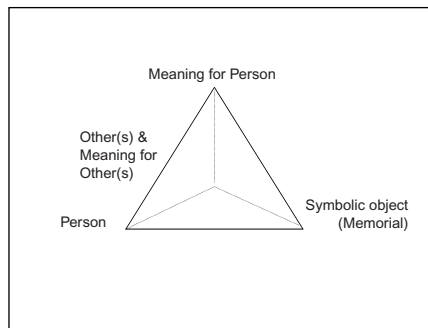


Figure 1. Meaning of object for person (memories, meanings, emotions, images . . .)

meaning of the object for the person may, or may not, coincide with the meaning admitted by the social group or the other; what counts is whether a person knows that others recognize her meaning-making of a given object.

In such a prism, the sides that relate the angles are the most important elements: these are the processes of semiotic mediation. The person interacts with the object and with the others, and the meaning it has for them. If she can relate that experience with her previous memories, she can create a meaning for the new object—that is the process of internalization. Traces revealing such semiotic dynamics can be found in a person's externalizations (talking, moving, acting, repositioning oneself, etc.) (Valsiner, 1998).

There might be temporary moments of 'collapse' of the prism—the person can be totally absorbed in the object, or subjugated by the other's meaning. If the object is public, the full meaning of the object for the person can only be achieved if she can relate it to its meaning for others. Any lack of any of these corners or of these sides prevents a full semiotic process from occurring. Interacting with an object and ignoring radically the meaning it has for others means creating an idiosyncratic language (usually a form of madness). Suppressing the distance between the object and the meaning constructed by the person results in a person equating a thing with the meaning it holds for her, such as in idolatry, or fascination. Seeing an object without its link to meaning but only to a person can be fetishist; seeing the object without any other link is what occurs in very distressed states, when the world appears empty and cold to a person.

We can consider a memorial as the 'object' of the semiotic prism. This will allow a rereading of the dynamics of remembering, or of meaning-making that it might enable. On the basis of Edkins' work, I will envisage four possible functions of a memorial: as a place of reunification of a state; as a form of linking and transmission of experience between people; as a place for mourning; and as a didactic object. As we will see, each function brings one side of the prism to the fore. Various constraints (symbolic, social, personal, situational) can be exerted on various dynamics within the prism. These can influence the use that a person will make of the memorial, or bring some collapse of the prism. A person in a situation can only activate one of these functions at a time, but she can activate various functions successively.

## Uses of Memorials

### *The Reinforcement of Trust in the Nation-State*

When the memorial intends to reassess the unity of the nation, the meaning to which one has to relate is the one that the nation tries to designate through the object itself. The prevalent side of the prism is the *meaning-for-other/object* one. The memorial will tend to be constructed in such a way that the meaning is inscribed on it, so that a competent reader might reconstruct it. Other people might mutually help each other to orient the effort of meaning-making towards the narration of the state. Hence, the person faces the memorial (*object*). The material form of the object (in marble, stone, iron, gold, etc.) constrains the reading: the person can, through the object, reconstruct the 'official meaning' for the state—the importance of a given war, or its own heroism (*meaning-for-other*). The memorial can also be constraining by obliging the person to be publicly exposed when interacting with the object and constructing his or her meaning. If the material constraints of the object are very strong, and many people are constrained to share their experiences, the memorial can contribute to create the sense that these people are sharing the same state-guided meaning, that is, the same knowledge of what the state wants them to consider as memory. Such a memorial constrains the person's use of it: as designating a social belonging, and a collective memory.

### *The Creation of Interpersonal Links*

A memorial can be a place of meeting between humans; in that case, the *person/other* side of the prism is highlighted. Edkins mentions that a man who lived in the neighbourhood of the site of a camp used to offer himself as a guide of the memorial, telling the story that he lived there. On the base of this example, we can construct two prisms, from the perspective of each person (Gillespie, 2004). From the first one, the narrator is the *person*, who uses the memorial (*object*) to support and give body to memories and feelings (*meaning-for-person*) he has to formulate. From the listener's perspective (*person*), a meaning of that discourse (*meaning-for-person*) will be easier to reconstruct in her own experience, thanks to the memorial (*object*) and the narrator's discourse (*meaning-for-other*).

The memorial here can be of any form, because there is another person who is there to formulate and externalize thoughts and feelings. In this configuration, transmission of memories is enabled by the interpersonal relation. Additionally, that relationship gives meaning to the memorial, as designating that which the two people share as being the

'past'. However, the prism can collapse. In Edkins' example, the old man who guided people in the camp appeared to have lied, not having been in the camp himself. He was, however, trying to communicate something about his experience of the war. Before this fact was revealed, it seems that the listener never questioned the accuracy of the testimonies: the listener (*person*) was captured by the images and the emotions (*meaning-for-person*) she constructed in her interaction with the narrator (*other*).

### *Mourning*

A memorial can be used as a place of mourning, where a person who has not fully elaborated and integrated the pain of a loss can find semiotic mediations enabling her to capture some of her experience, as well as a social acknowledgement of her pain and grief. Here, the *person/meaning-for-the-person* side of the prism is emphasized, but the whole prism is mobilized: both semiotic mediations *and* social acknowledgment are necessary for the process of mourning to take place.

As we have seen, the Washington Vietnam Wall is a form of memorial addressed first of all to people who need to repair a personal rupture. Here, the person stands facing the wall (*object*), which allows a linking to her memories and feelings addressed to an absent person (*meaning-for-person*), in the presence of the veterans' families (*other*). Thanks to that process, the person can re-create a link to the dead person, and start a dialogue with him or her—'as-if' he or she might be answering their questioning gaze (Josephs, 1997, 1998).

People offer letters, messages, flowers, and objects to the Vietnam Wall. These externalizations indicate that the wall has allowed some internalization: people seem to have been able to recognize a pain, to give it a semiotic form and to integrate it to their memories and emotions. The price of such a process is the loss of the personal 'traumatic quality' of the event.

The person uses the memorial to access her own thoughts, but also to link herself to the community of the grievers. For these needs, *any* quasi-symbolic form of the memorial is acceptable, as long as it allows for the representation of the dead in a shared way. This might explain the gratitude expressed by families of survivors of the Second World War after seeing *Schindler's List*, or the success of various memorials described by Edkins. The object's form is not important, as long as it enables the person to re-link her present self to memories and feeling about the past, in the presence of others. The question is of course

whether some material forms of memorials can prevent such an operation.

### *Learning*

A memorial can be used for its didactic functions. A person can visit it with the intention of learning something about the past: events she has not seen, not experienced, and which have not necessarily been talked about by people. *Meaning-for-person/meaning-for-other* is the salient side of the semiotic prism. However, if the person has no memories and emotions associated to that past (as when mourning) with which to start the interaction, or is not engaged in an emotional interaction (as in interpersonal uses), what can she draw upon to construct a representation of a catastrophe?

It is probably through a slow building of an understanding, through multiple discourses, in interaction with various others, that something meaningful about the catastrophe can be constructed and mentally apprehended. However, conceivers of 'didactic' museums often prefer not to bet on people's ability to construct representations, but to ground their transmission in strong embodied emotions. Edkins shows how the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was conceived to provoke very strong emotions in visitors—through the adoption of the identity of a dead person, the exposure to distressing images and experiences of prisoners, before being relieved by confrontation with happy pictures of the 'US liberation' of the camps. The memorial is co-opted by the politics: people go through a prescribed sequence of impression and emotions, canalized and organized into a pre-existing narrative.

Additionally, if not discussed, shared and commonly elaborated, such experiences can cause mini-traumatic effects. Children in Rome who had been exposed incessantly to such forms of discourse had been starting to adopt totally deformed readings of their socially surrounding realities (Zittoun, 1996). Hence, it seems that a person can use a didactic function of a memorial if the memorial offers some semiotic guidance for constructing meaning. If the memorial constrains the experience to be an emotional one, the didactic function cannot be achieved. The *meaning-for-others* as well as the object ultimately disappear out of the prism; the person stays prisoner of her emotions, without trying to reconstruct where these come from and what these are about. To move out of this overwhelming emotional experience, the person will have to find a way to mourn, and then to acquire the information that would allow the construction of some shareable meaning of the object, that is, history.

Let us come back to the forms of externalization to which people's uses of memorials have led them. I have mentioned the visitors' book of the memorial sites of Dachau; the question was how to understand the externalizations that took a form of repositioning towards living people. We can now try to give an answer. A person who comes to Dachau constructs a representation of the past with the mediation of the memorial, drawing on her intelligence and on the emotional impact the place has on her. The representation she constructs, thanks to, and in the limits of, her own imagination, memories and emotions, is necessarily a representation she has to violently reject. She has to desolidarize herself from the meaning she might construct and the content she might internalize. But she is a captive of it (because of the construction just done). If a person becomes prisoner of the side of the prism that she wants to reject, she will have to destroy or to transform it. She can destroy it by collapsing one side (rejecting the object or the meaning it might possibly have). She can transform the prism, most likely by modifying the relationship to *other*. We can thus see the visitors' book externalizations as aimed at transforming the prism by creating a distance between the *person* and *meaning-for-others*, so as to say, I disapprove of this past, and therefore cut myself off from this history or these other groups of visitors. The semiotic prism thus allows us to see that the person does not stand alone with her trauma; remembering or forgetting takes place in complex configurations including symbolic objects and changing social others.

### **Creating Uses of Memorials: The Space of the *Polis***

Nation-states and other representatives of politics have intentions—often conflicting—when they decide to construct a memorial. People approach these memorials with their own intentions. They use these memorials as they can, even if memorials exert some constraints on these uses. We can thus imagine the difficulty that a person might encounter when visiting Dachau intending to mourn a lost person. She might come with the need to elaborate her relationship to her memories and emotions (the *person/meaning-for-the-person* side of the prism), with the acknowledgement of another. However, the site obliges her to concentrate on its truth status (*person/object*), or to distance herself from other visitors—say, young skinheads—or from official discourses of liberation (*meaning-for-person/meaning-for-other*). The site engages the person in a symbolic dynamic that obliges her to distance herself from her memories and feelings, and from social others—that is, the opposite of the dynamic required to dialogue with one's lost ones.

On the other hand, it might also be that a visitor needing to mourn does not use the memorial as it had been planned by its conceivers. He might ignore the visitors' book (which *per definition* positions a visitor as a spectator of a past show) and find his own space in the memorial site. For example, in the Auschwitz memorial site, also arranged in a very directive way, Jewish visitors still find spaces in which to place little stones as a sign addressed to the dead, as tradition prescribes when faced with a tombstone. They create another prism, where the little space and the stones become the *object*, with which they create a link to the missing ones, who are thought of as knowing the meaning of the stones (*meaning-for-other*), and, in turn, work on their own emotions and memories of these absent others.

Even if politics tries to prescribe uses of memorials by creating symbolic dynamics, people can generate their own semiotic prisms. It is through these individual creations and transformations of semiotic prisms that we see the *polis* being made.

As we have seen, Edkins claims the importance for memorials to be 'encircling', as the Vietnam Wall in Washington is shown to be. From the perspective I have proposed, this 'encircling' quality can be qualified twofold: in the limits of its constraints, it encourages the functions of personal memory and intrapsychological dialogue (*person/meaning-for-person* side of the prism), and encourages interpersonal relationships (*person/other*). It has very limited pretensions in terms of collective narrative and didactic aims. Many interpretations of the semiotic content of these memorials are possible. People can communicate about these, and the memorial opens a space allowing a person to integrate her embodied experience. As a sign of the success of that invitation to be actively memorializing, we see people engage in many forms of externalization, indicating that inner changes have been enabled.

Edkins sees memorials that are no longer visited as having probably been co-opted by the totalizing narrative of the power in place. She also notes, surprised, that she saw groups of young people at the Vietnam Wall much more preoccupied with themselves and their loud ghetto-blasters than with the wall itself—even if the wall appeared as enabling voices of the *polis*.

In effect, memorials are located in time and space. They are constructed with intentions addressing one of these symbolic functions (didactic, mourning or national), and at some point in history, people no longer need to use the object for that function. Intentions of people that approach them can change, and move from the need to reconcile their inner world, to the need to learn about another time and another place.



More generally, the prism model suggests that when two persons approach the same symbolic object with different memories, emotions and expectations, two different semiotic dynamics are generated. The young people at the wall do not read it as something that might link them to the memory of lost ones, because they do not have such memories or emotions to be activated, or because they do not share an experience with a mourning visitor. However, the young people might also have the memorial enter in new semiotic prisms. It might acquire a meaning by becoming the memorial mark of the creation of new friendships in the class. Or, perhaps, it might trigger a young person's curiosity, so to bring her to question a grandfather about his experience of the war, thus modifying that relationship.

In the end, the strength of a memorial as participating in the *polis* appears to be dependent on various dimensions: whether it admits more than one symbolic function; how inviting to creation of new semiotic dynamics it is; whether it can resist contradictory effects of people's uses; and how resistant it is to people's changing uses through time. And even then, memorials are, after all, mortals.

## Notes

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1. I will also ignore another debate, that is, the juxtaposition of historical events of a very different kind. The cover of the book illustrates it. Two pictures are lined up: one of a young Italian girl raped during the war in 1948; the other of a girl of about the same age, having lost someone in the World Trade Center attack in September 2001. Both girls are facing the camera as if looking the viewer straight in the eyes; both have that terrible look that we have learned to read as shocked, or traumatized. We will accept that the author treats various catastrophes as 'equivalent' in that these are equally traumatic for the person involved, and in the fact that these impose a rupture on historical continuity.

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