

Claims to truth:

Authenticity in aesthetic paths to justice and public memory

Irit Dekel and Anna Lisa Tota

“The past, as historians constitute it, is the result of negotiation and debate. Final as it may seem once written down, however, the past frequently turns out not to be settled. In fact, some pasts never achieve a final historical form, but may be subjects for constantly renewed arguments. Why do some pasts have a persistent capacity for creating contention?” (Vera Zolberg, 1998, p. 565)

.This special issue honours the memory of Vera Zolberg, Professor of Sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York, who died on November 15 2016. Her work on the intertwinement of memory and the arts broke ground in its theoretical and historical depth and has been a source of inspiration for scholars working in the sociology of culture. In this issue, we, her colleagues, students, and friends, study the relations between artistic representation, and political articulation with the aim of adding new dimensions, especially with respect to the question of reaching historical truth and reconciliation. The tradition of critical interpretive analysis that considers structural and cultural aspects of institutions, memory and the arts, for which Professor Zolberg is an influential voice, is the shared intellectual and theoretical basis of the articles that make up this special issue.

Zolberg's study of the Enola Gay Affair (1995, 1998) is among the most decisive in the field of understanding the intersection of the arts, historical representation and public memories of a difficult past. She argues: Final as it may seem once written down, however, the past frequently turns out not to be settled. In fact, some pasts never achieve a final historical form, but remain subjects for constantly renewed arguments (1998, 565). This, we will see, is the core finding that inspires and unites the articles collected here, diverse as the cases they study and tools with which they are studied may be. Zolberg's pieces documented the controversy surrounding the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with regard to the exhibition of the Enola Gay bomber which carried the bomb to Hiroshima, at the Air and Space museum of the Smithsonian Foundation in Washington DC. As she wrote: "I analyse the role of the museum as an institution involved in the construction of national narratives in two countries, the political controversies unveiled, and the lost opportunities for innovation in the museum's relationship to its public as politicians intrude upon professions" (Zolberg, 1995: 69).

That exhibition represented according to Zolberg, a lost opportunity to recall the "truth" of violent warfare at the end of the Second World War between Japan and United States, and developing a sociology of collective memory that moved away from the boundaries of a single society. In this study, the museum is highlighted as a privileged political and aesthetic arena for the *mise-en-scène* of one of the darkest events in modern history. Zolberg's bold claim about a missed opportunity for the

museums' relations to its public is paramount in understanding what art and its institutions can achieve in representing and deliberating the past in an open society.

The contributors in this special issue study the social construction and mediation of authenticity and its relations to historical truth in sites, events and within groups that are marked by an unresolved or difficult past. Authenticity is defined here first as the believed quality of the real, and is a necessary but insufficient condition for deliberation of historical truth. It is also necessary for the deliberation of other forms of acquiring knowledge that could bring about recognition of wrongdoing in their truthful resonance of collected memories and representation of the past and of groups carrying it. As in the case of the Enola Gay controversy, and with a few of the cases discussed in this issue, listening to the voices which attempt to silence diversity and reconciliation by using other arguably more pressing 'ur-sache' is also crucial to the sociological understanding of power relations and structures which bring them about. In all cases, rather than suggesting that authenticity is a mimetic representation of the past, or some replication of it, the authors in this volume study the modes through which relationships to certain eras are constituted as meaningful to people's national (or cosmopolitan) identity (Gable and Handler 2007).

Literature on the unspoken, and on silence in social memory stressed the importance of cultural forms of art and literature in addressing that which one cannot otherwise directly address (i.e Erll 2011, Passerini 1986, , Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 2010, Winter 2010, Zerubavel 2007, Tota and Hagen, 2016, Dekel 2013). While we are not claiming that authentic depiction of the past is entirely

possible and that it is 'real' (this would entail an ontological conflict with regards to the possibility to comprehend an event), we do stress the epistemological as well as the deliberative possibilities of studying the intricate relations between aesthetic and artistic paths to justice, which provide modes of obtaining knowledge of the past that has not or could not be accessible otherwise, as Goldfarb suggests in his contribution to this volume.

We are seeking cases in which tangible aesthetic codes do represent the past not merely through the theoretical lens of remembrance vs. silence or forgetting but rather through that of deliberate, if artistic and curated claims to truth in the forms of their creation, reception or political outcomes. We examine cases in which access to a certain world view is made possible and in this sense create an authentic path to understanding and possibly to empowering minority voices marginal to grand national narratives. Sometimes reconciliation and an authentic relation are impossible because social memory, in both hegemonic or critical expressions, simply silences marginal voices, leaving essential elements of a difficult past unspoken. On such occasions, the cultural shapes of the past do offer the additional opportunity to respect the processual nature of how "truth" emerges. If a social memory has become silent, there are also structural and political reasons that have to be considered together with the modes with which they were coded and can be presented and experienced (Macdonald 2013). In this sense, the arts seem to offer an autonomous sphere, a suspended, third space, where the fragments of memories can be recomposed in a new form where the ambiguities can be exposed without offering one decisive solution. Sometimes arriving at some truth in itself is not possible, not just because of the ontological problem of its existence or the diversity of perspectives and

stakeholders, but also because of the political and social implications of the emergence of a certain public knowledge of a controversial past, as has been explored and theorised in Zolberg 1998 around the Enola Gay exhibition, as well as in studies by Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002 and Wagner Pacifici and Schwartz 1991.

Authenticity as a concept and a condition pertaining to a phantasy of the experience of the backstage reality was illuminated in anthropological writing on tourism (MacCannell 1973 Wang 1999, Maccannell 2008). As a performed condition, it can play various interchangeable roles in different historical contexts and is intersubjectively created and shared (or not) within specific institutional and discursive settings and times. This is paramount to understanding mega investments in reconstructing old buildings which stand for older times in major European cities, as Rebecca Dolgoy explores in this issue through the case of the newly reconstructed *Stadtschloss* in the center of Berlin. Leaving aside the discussion on essentialism and true reality, which we earlier claimed is not relevant to our theoretical approach, we address authenticity as a possible access point to a difficult past, and recognize the need for ambiguous ways in which cultural artefacts are transformed as well as the ways they are used to obtain justice or represent a difficult past.. Ambiguity and ambivalence will not be seen as blurring or standing on the way to truth but rather as some of the effective mechanisms that often make them possible. Ambivalence mix and converjance between different aesthetic codes and the ways the past was represented is part and parcel of the conversation carried out in and between the pieces that follow. Finally we ask who is in a position of access or entitlement to speak in a voice that is rendered authentic. The authors then ask which institutions, subjectivities, subjects and

intersubjectivities are created and maintained in those paths, what are the roles of victims, moral entrepreneurship of memory work and representation, contingency and change over time.

Forchtner and Kolvraa analyse the symbolic claims to authenticity made by today's German extreme right as the true national socialists, in their lifestyle demonstration banners and calls and aesthetics, presented and shared via social media. By focusing on the visual aesthetics of extreme right social-media presence, the authors show how a bricolage of symbols is created by adopting left wing aesthetics and claiming authenticity through it, allowing them ask how these images negotiate and communicate the connection between contemporary (youth) cultures and National Socialist ideology, and how the potential tensions between these are handled through the medium of images.

Forchtner and Kolvraa explore the themes of history, nature and gender roles. Their analysis reveals that the negotiation between classical National Socialism and contemporary (youth) culture is achieved by the extreme right through the production of images belonging to two very different and distinctive *imaginaries*; one of 'authority' and one of 'intimacy'. Internal contradictions between the themes and their representations, the authors show, do not lead to a weakening of the subjectivities and ideological positions of these groups. By looking at the cultural artifacts used and created by these groups, the authors allow us to better understand the existential imaginary that drew and draws people to fascism by looking beyond the latter's organisational forms, institutional structures or concrete aims and policies. The authors bring into the discussion of Extreme right their treatment of environmentalism and climate change, veganism and animal rights.

Jeffrey Goldfarb's main argument is that dilemmas and ambiguities in remembering and forgetting are somehow "natural consequences" of the human condition. In the social they cannot be solved once for ever, but in art these dilemmas confronting with highly contested pasts, even if they cannot yet be solved, can be reverberated in new lights, through a new perspective. The author goes further to claim that precisely in the aesthetics that the challenges of memory become "important instances of the social condition" (ibid.). According to his perspective, in contemporary societies without the arts it would be almost impossible to successfully "work through" the traumatic and controversial pasts. To document his hypothesis, Goldfarb examines this claim in three exemplary cases: slavery and racism in America as seen in Morrison's *Beloved*, The murderous actions of Poles against their Jewish neighbours in the case of Jan Gross's path breaking study of Jedwabne, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial designed by Maia Lin in Washington DC. In all these cases remembering is made possible through the aesthetic lenses and space opened by arts to use new methods of inquiry as well as modes of intervention and commemoration, together with addressing the impossibility of reaching some decisive historical truth on which all parties can agree and unite around. The crucial lesson of his piece is that while art does not solve any dilemmas, it articulates them. This articulation, or making clear the structure of the dilemma, offers new possible ways of understanding historical ambiguities and silence. This is exactly the reason, we claim with Goldfarb, why the contribution of the arts to process of remembering and forgetting is crucial both for the social condition and to understanding it.

Rebecca Dolgoy explores the newly constructed Humboldt-Forum in Berlin as a *diorama*, an invented scene and approximation of the 'authentic'. Diorama's claim to truth usually rests with its ability to

convey a particular worldview – that of the time in which they were assembled together with the time of the visitors' gaze. But, Dolgoy shows, in the case of the Humboldtforum, the whole museum becomes a diorama. The glass frame disappears and the visitor becomes complicit in the simulacrum, an exact copy with no origin, or a falseness that is closer to the truth in the relations to it it produces in the viewer. The reconstructed *Stadtschloss*, and to some extent the mandate of the *Humboldtforum*, Dolgoy argues, revive certain nineteenth-century tropes, including universalism, unification, and cosmopolitanism. This reconstruction, both literally and metaphorically functions like a contemporary expression of a nineteenth-century means of structuring perception, specifically the diorama. In watching the diorama, the unmoved visitor shifts from being spectators to becoming witnesses, and thus become complicit in the illusion and the worldview frozen in it, albeit tacitly. However, and this is the novelty of Dolgoy's analysis, the *Stadtschloss* differs from dioramas in that it takes away the ability to see through this image and obliges the viewer to see something as if it were objective and spontaneous. Here the artificial becomes the real: and spectators move from being complicit witnesses to being implicit in the illusion. Berlin can be great with some elements of imperial history, and the *Stadtschloss* works hard to get the order of the story "right".

Dolgoy shows that by casting reconstruction of the stadtschloss as healing a wounded city, it erases the city's past, renders it less relevant to the city today. The newly reconstructed Schloss, in other words, bases its legitimacy on a claim to truth that erases the historical truth that is difficult. This, Dolgoy makes clear, is not an attempt to manipulate history but rather one to make the stadtschloss seem 'natural'. Or relatable, more than other pasts.

This claim helps us in this special issue to advance our understanding of claims to truth as laying within a tension between authentic as original and authentic as enabling a true experience.

Irit Dekel and Vered Vinitzky Seroussi write precisely on this question of how present actors engage with curated spaces in order to “reconstruct” history through the case of visits to home museums in Israel and Germany. They offer a sociology of atmosphere to study how homes are presented as authentic and therefore telling true stories about famous persons who lived in them as well as about their time. Dekel and Vinitzky-Seroussi ask how those seemingly mundane domestic scenes are made to appear authentic through mediation of objects, and stories, which make them real and relatable to the visitors. In observing the organization of home space they offer a typology of home museum objects that build “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1973) and illustrate the quality of feeling that constructs an expressly “uncanny” atmosphere. Atmosphere, they claim, is built around the condensation of time around specific home stories and the special situatedness of visitors in relation to them. In this way, the home presents a historical moment, which may or may not include the time that the protagonist occupied the space now exhibited. Finally, they show how and under what circumstances the familiarity of home becomes unknown or dreadful and how this determines the particular construction of authenticity in these museums.

The articles in this volume expand the scope of research of elite and secondary elites shaping collective memory narratives. In contributing to the analysis of the central role played by state, private and public institutions in shaping and transmitting shared narratives, we also contribute to a

discussion that studies intentionally harmful discourses as in the case of the extreme right in Forchtner and Kolvraa's essay, where one can see that the claim of authenticity and authority originates in an era of dramatic geo-political transformations in Europe as well as in the US anti-elitist and anti-internationalist movements of 2016. We thus see a return to and an expansion of certain historical moods in relation to nature, gender and history. These are not searching for the 'true truth' but a return to a mode of commonality that enables the extreme right to flourish, which involves additional modes of being that are informed by today's consideration of the environment protection and gender roles.

Whereas in tourism and museum studies authenticity derives authority from the meticulousness of its details and its potential to facilitate pedagogy (Gable, 1996), memorial, historical and advocacy museums today (Arnold-de Simone 2013, Sodaro 2013, Dekel and Katriel 2015, Lehrer 2016) the tradition of critical museology devote themselves to a mission that is inherently critical and directed at practicing democracy in response to humanitarian breakdowns.

For many of us Vera Zolberg was a mentor, a source of inspiration, an extremely generous and brilliant colleague, a wonderful person and rare friend. From her work, we know that the past is a complicated matter. Indeed, as we stress in beginning this editorial, sometimes it is not possible to arrive at a common and shared understanding of what happened and its consequences. This holds as well even in cases where the past does not seem difficult to those who aim to revise it, as in the piece by Forchtner and Kolvraa in which extreme right groups which celebrate a horrendous past as justified (or altogether deny its horrendous elements and celebrate their outcomes). Doldoy, Dekel

and Vinitzky-Seroussi relate to an acknowledged difficult past which is represented through many, often not compatible and competing forms of mediations. Goldfarb shows that those actual mediations in film bring the public closer to the truth of the matter when dealing with loss and injustice in their complexity. In writing about the Palestinian Israeli conflict Nadim Rouhana (2008) suggests a model for achieving truth in processes of reconciliation one is “forensic truth” referring to the hard facts about human rights violations; a truth that journalism strive today, more than perhaps ever before, to keep fair and just; emotional truth refers to the impact of violations on victims; and general truth: refers to plausible interpretations- or how claims to truth reflects the relations between truth, authenticity and justice.

References

Maccannell Dean 2008 Why it Never Really was About Authenticity Symposium: Touring the World 45:334–337.

Gable Eric and Richard Handler 2007 “Public history, private memory: notes from the ethnography in Colonial Williamsburg” in Amy K. Levin ed. *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's changing communities* Rowman and Littlefield.

Lehrer, Erica 2016 “Public pedagogy and transnational, transcultural museums.” *Poland and Polin: New Interpretations in Polish-Jewish Studies*. (Eds.) Irena Grudzinska-Gross and Iwa Nawrocki. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016. Pgs. 197-218.

Passerini Luisa, 1986 Oral Memory of Fascism, in D. Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1986, pp. 185-196.

Tota, Anna Lisa and Trever Hagen 2016 (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, London: Routledge.

Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Chana Teeger 2010 Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting *Social Forces* 88 (3): 1103-1122.

Jay Winter 2010 "Thinking about Silence" Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, Jay Winter (Eds.) *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* in Eviatar Zerubavel 2007 *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zolberg, L. Vera 1998, Contested Remembrance: The Hiroshima Exhibit Controversy *Theory and Society* Vol. 27, No. 4, Special Issue on Interpreting Historical Change at the End of the Twentieth Century (Aug., 1998). Pps. 565-590