Contemporary condemnation of memory

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Abstract

Mnemosyne in Greek mythology was the daughter of Gaea and Uranus, and the mother of the nine Muses, whose father was Zeus. She was the personification of memory and was connected in this way to the arts, as artists recalled primordial memories to draw inspiration for their creations. 'damnatio memoriae', the Roman punishment meaning condemnation of memory, was an official sanction, successful in wiping out the memory of any individual who was convicted of being a tyrant, a traitor, or another sort of enemy of the state. The images of such condemned persons had to be destroyed, their names erased from inscriptions, and every element concerning their public presence was purged. In some cases, the residence of the condemned could be destroyed, and if the person was already dead, his grave was demolished and his last will nullified. Nowadays, the condemnation of memory could be connected to a series of incidents selected to be erased from the public conscience as if they have never happened, although they represent historical or even ordinary events – genocides, wars, migration flows, gender-based violence and others. This paper focuses on the contemporary condemnation of memory using Art as a methodological tool. We argue that art represents a way to investigate current circumstances that aim to wipe out collective memory. We probe these expressive forms that derive from historically transformed roles and compile these facts that are consigned to oblivion.

Keywords: Memory, oblivion condemnation of memory, art and memory, Florou, Ilia-Georgiadou.

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1. Introduction

Memory and oblivion (lethe) are significant aspects of human societies, acquire meaning and are mediated through social behaviours, events and actions. It is through memory that narratives are constructed, relationships and activities are invented, the past is recalled, and endurance and social continuity in the present are assured and potentially expressed in the future (Boubker & Belamhitou, 2018). The projected correlations of memory allow the comparison of past and present conditions. Stavrides (2006, p. 34) said in this respect: '*This comparison is what gives new meaning to what remains of the past, the comparison that renders the past unique in the present of its interpretation. In this sense, the past is not reproduced but activated in the present, thus highlighting the potential it encompassed.*' In contrast, oblivion disrupts dialectical continuity, erases or alters the past and reconfigures any possible social correlations, often with the dimension of operational control (Khan et al., 2018; Masat et al., 2018).

In ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the Titan and daughter of Gaea and Uranus, and the mother of the Muses by Zeus, as told in Hesiod's (1914) *Theogony* (700 BC: 60).[a] She was the personification of memory and connected in this way to the Arts, as artists recalled primordial memories to draw inspiration for their work. Lethe (oblivion) is the daughter of Eris and is genealogically related to Hardship, Starvation, Pains, Quarrels, Wars, Murders, Slaughter and Strife.[b] The parallel narration of oblivion and memory is described in their connection to death and the existence of two similarly named springs. Oblivion is reflected in the waters of the river of the Underworld that erase all worldly memory in those who die, so they may not recall their previous lives once reincarnated. However, those who die for the first time, drink from both springs. Thus, memory and oblivion are repositioned to mean life and death. (Simondon, 1982, pp. 55–59 and 131–140). Auge (1998, p. 20) analysed memory and forgetfulness as manifestations of presence and absence and posits that they maintain the same relationship as life and death.

In the Homeric epics, oblivion is used in the *Odyssey* with a reference to the lotus fruit, which intoxicates humans and at the same makes them forget their birthplace, just like the Circe's drink, which leads to loss of identity (Simondon, 1982, p. 139). In the same epos, the plant nepenthe led to the beneficial forgetfulness of unpleasant memories. The fact that the daughters of Mnemosyne, the Muses, are the goddesses of literature, science and the arts render them sources of knowledge and inspiration, initially for the Greeks and then the Romans.

In ancient Greece, Mnemon Vernant (1989) was a figure charged with safeguarding the memory of the past, mainly of legal and religious matters, and marks one aspect of the social function of memory. Jacques Le Goff (1998a, p. 51) notes '*At various times and within various civilisations, there was a solidarity between the applied techniques of stimulating memory, the internal organization of function, in its position in the system of the ego and the image that people have about memory.*' Le Goff (1998b)

In acknowledging the importance of memory, the Romans imposed oblivion with '*Damnatio Memoriae*', the condemnation of memory. Condemnation of memory was used in ancient Greece as a punishment for impious acts. Herostratus was thus punished for trying to burn the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus to make his name known and was later executed and condemned to obscurity by forbidding any reference to his name. Nevertheless, the Roman *damnatio memoriae* is a politically motivated act. As part of this punishment, all efforts were made to eradicate any evidence that would testify to the existence of the so punished. This process included various methods used to erase every trace of history pertaining to the individual, such as removing their name from all official records, seizing assets and destroying or altering any object (such as statues, wall paintings, objects and others) which may have been connected to that person (Baykaoglu & Akpinarli, 2020). If the person was already dead, his grave was demolished and his last will nullified. The punishment was mainly intended for senators and emperors who had been convicted of treason or other serious crimes – real or staged.

An interesting link between knowledge and memory appears in the work of Guilio Camillo (1510), *Il teatro della Memoria*, where memory is depicted as a Roman amphitheatre with tiered seating where the wealth of memory is ranked and the spectator, ideally from the stage, looks up at the accumulated organised knowledge of his era. The process of recalling knowledge involved the reversed positioning of the stage-action-spectator and while the spectator was at the centre of the stage as the action shifted to the theatre stands.

2. The modern era

Memory is separated into three key processes: retaining and encoding information, recognising and storing it and retrieving it. Terzoglou (2006, p. 267) says:

…*The mnemonic function presupposed an internal, composite process of accounting: by recalling mental records, memory compiles a new 'construction full of imagination* (UNESCO, 1972)*, as Barlett writes, which interprets all mnemonic traces in conjunction with the immediately and perpetually new influences from the environment.*

In addition, the ways in which memory is recognised and shapes experiences do not remain fixed over time, but traces of experiences are stored differently depending on the status of the subject, while their interpretation is linked to the outcome of experiences (Ansermet & Magistretti, 2015). '*Collective memory*' is often defined as the way in which individuals, groups or communities recall events of the past and is used along with the terms '*historical memory*', '*social memory*' or '*cultural memory.*' Assmann (2017) studies the ways in which this '*cultural memory*' is created and transmitted, as it connects to an external dimension of human memory dependent on social and cultural factors (Oyarzo, 2020). Halbwachs (1992) argues that human memory can only function within a collective context, given that diverse groups of people have different collective memories, which in turn result in different modes of behaviour.

Chaniotis (2017, p. xx) refers to the term '*communicative memory*', since

…*the more or less common memories of a group constitute a factor in broader communication. Within just a few decades, the memory of specific events, even when there is a wealth of audio-visual material, as in our times, becomes an object of selection, processing, interpretation and use for a variety of purposes. It becomes the object of ideological and political exploitation; it is used to transmit values; it is the source of free inspiration for artistic creation. 'Collective' or 'communicative memory' is the product of processing and subject to changes*.

At the end of the previous century, a worldwide trend emerged to recognise and publicly showcase cultural heritage described as '*difficult*'. The highlighting of traumatic aspects of the past, and particularly the recent past, is a complicated process determined by the politics of memory and oblivion (Burstrom, 2009, p. 170). In talking about the physiology of memory, it is noted that '*memory of traumatic events appears to be sensitive to oblivion*' (Masoura & Kargopoulos, 2008, p. 56).

But these conditions appear to have been rapidly changed. By introducing the metaphorical term '*liquid modernity*', Bauman (2000) establishes a conception in relation to the modern world that connects it to humanity and the changes that are made to the conditions of life and existence, and says '*liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty.*' These changes influence everyday life and existence, individuality and sociability and even the flow of knowledge and collective memory in the status of globalisation. In this era of globalisation, in conditions of constant liquidity of information, the concepts of identity and individuality in social development seem to occur without content. Modern electronic media help to create an 'artificial memory' which stores any amount of information easily, but which is vulnerable to distortion as objects of memory that seem to apply to all expressions of human life – daily routines, social relationships, politics, justice and culture – and to lead to new connections and interpretations. On a personal and existential level, human life extends beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries and is reassessed in a manner adapted to

conditions of a communicative dialogue. If the material evidence can establish a stable framework of collective memory, virtual evidence can similarly shape a framework of '*constant disruptions and lack of reliability of the past which are encoded in this liquidity, where history does not completely work for humanity as a reference point but conjoins to a trajectory of instability*'. (Ibrahim, 2018). Therefore, under conditions of incessant liquidity in relation to the traces imprinted upon us by the past, the conception of each instant is reshaped. Cultural diversity is a leading characteristic of modern societies, enhanced by the use of technology and the forced or voluntary movement of large social groups.

What happens, then, under modern social conditions, where liquidity and the flow of information predominate? Do they constitute elements that compose a mnemonic dynamic, or do they transform or even condemn with the diffusion of virtual information to oblivion? Is digital diffusion in a position to function as memorisation and as a recall of mental records, or in other words to undertake this internal complex process of accounting and creation of experiences? And can this memory which was defined as '*difficult*', aside from past collective traumatic experiences, be situated in the modern, liquid condition? Movement of refugees, genocide, information about gender-based violence in all parts of the world compile virtual realities, linking places and times and activating incidents of mnemonic discontinuity. The ephemeral condition and the virtual connection which is communicated is not tied to the existing and endured experience but is reflected in the immaterial relation where the boundaries between public and private become confused and memory is potentially manipulated.

In his book *Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard (1990, p. 10) wrote that

…*it is about the status of the realized utopia, all realised utopias, where you are paradoxically forced to continue to live as if these were not realized. However, as they are realized and as we can no longer maintain the hope that we will realize them, nothing remains but to hyper-realize them through an indeterminate simulation. We live in an indeterminate reproduction of ideals, ghosts, images, dreams which from here on after are behind us and which we should nevertheless reproduce with a sort of fateful indifference.*

So, while ancient condemnation of memory was linked to materiality, with erasing any evidence of existence, modern condemnation of memory is associated with the 'noise'[c] caused by the vast volume of information being channelled, and with the manipulation of the public sphere. Habermas (1995) argued in this regard that

…*Society may be seen as a web of communicative exchanges, which, if done under conditions of equality and mutual recognition, result in satisfying the vital aspirations of the participants. In today's reality, however, communication is systematically distorted. The predominant interests actively intervene in the communication flow and subjugate it to their authoritarian purposes, thus doing away with the autonomy of civil society* (Vallianos, 2002).

The ocean of information and the non-existence of the experienced dimension create a mnemonic discontinuity and contribute to the fact that an over-abundance of information cannot be converted to knowledge. In this way, it makes it more difficult or eliminates the retention and codification of information so that it is not memorised and it either cannot be recalled or its recall is fragmented, like pieces of an ephemeral condition that is part of exposing the subjects to distorted perspectives.

2.1. Art

In observing the physiology of memory performed in the physical body, we should link its function to the social and cultural experiences which take part in forming it. Read (Vallianos, 2002, p. xiii) and Pourkos (2017) note that art is the function of culture and that the term '*art*' should be applied to those processes which are fundamental and associated with the physiology of the human body itself. As such, we could say that if the body is of the utmost value for human art, art is the reflection of real life, either through symbols or in terms of realistic representations. As we examine this argument and

the incorporation of the mnemonic biological process in the globalised modern environment, we refer to two artists – Vaso Florou and Ifigeneia Ilia Georgiadou and their respective works.

Florou's work (2019) springs from the murder of Greek student Eleni Topaloudi in November 2018 in Rhodes island in Greece. Eleni was 21 years old; two young men raped and savagely murdered her. The media and social networks followed the case closely due to the brutal nature of the murder that shocked public opinion. The defendants appeared to perpetuate sexist stereotypes and to attempt to alter documented facts, a practice which was repeated in the broader framework of the public sphere.

Figure 1. Triptych by Vaso Florou (2019). 27 November 2018 (24 hours). 24 'Curtains' in public view, one for each hour of 28 November 2018. Photographs by Panagiotis Ilias

Gender identity has not always been the same – women are not one unified social group but characterised by fluid heterogeneity which varies with different levels of characteristics. Vaiou (2009, p. 144) says that a '*dimension of fluidity [is introduced] into the conversation and the identity which refers to a concept of identity during development that is cohesive and stable for just an instant and in a specific place. In this context, gender is jointly formed along with social class, race, nationality, sexuality, etc., creating a plethora of changing femininities and masculinities*'. The representational character of the female and femininity in cultural approaches is ideologically associated with the dominance of the male element, where, in a contemporary patriarchal society, the archetype man-subject-gaze and woman-object-image to be consumed is the predominant condition. The preservation of relationships of power and dominance is recognised as the essential goal of the '*hegemonic*' (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1999) group in forming social relations and this constitutes the main model developed as a narrative in all aspects of public dialogue. We could say it is a narrative palimpsest developed in differing historical, political and social conditions, founded on relations of gendered characteristics. Reference is called here for the views of Foucault (1982, 1989) with regard to the biological normality and transformation of the sexual subject of western societies, where he describes the history of subjugation of female sexuality as beginning with capitalism and bourgeois regimes.

Florou's work (which is previewed below)[d] refers to the female gender and violence it is subjected to in various manifestations of common life. The artist herself says '27 November 2018 (24 hours). 24 "Curtains", one for each hour of 28 November 2018. "Curtains", some blank and others with imprints created by the removal of fibres. Removal, imprint, loss. Curtain – a household item that separates the Private from the Public. It hides the interior from public view and moves with the wind as long as the window is open. For as long as the crime and its details become food for public consumption. Figure 1 shows 24 curtains, one for each hour of the pre-mentioned date (28 November 2018). Figure 2 shows four curtains with women figures imprints on them. Then the curtains are folded up and put away in oblivion in a box marked 27 November 2018 (24 hours) as shown in Figure 3. The box is stored next to 26 November 2018, waiting for 28 November, and so on. 365 boxes for 1 year. Each box, one date, 24 hours. According to the United Nations, 137 women are murdered each day in the world due to gender-related violence. On 27 November 2018, 136 women and Eleni Topaloudi were martyred on the altar of femicide'.

Figure 2. Tetraptych by Vasso Florou (2019). Selected 'Curtains'. Photographs by Panagiotis Ilias

Figure 3. Vasso Florou (2019). The box marked 27 November 2018 (24 hours). Photographs by Panagiotis Ilias
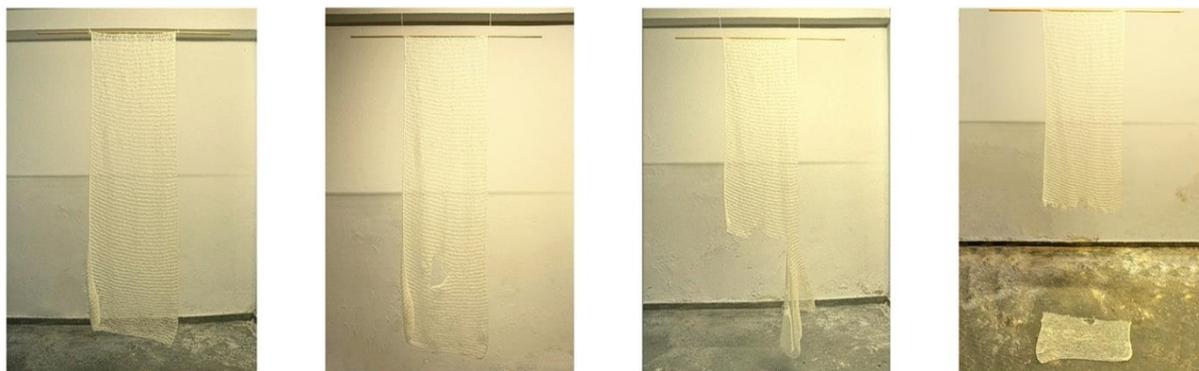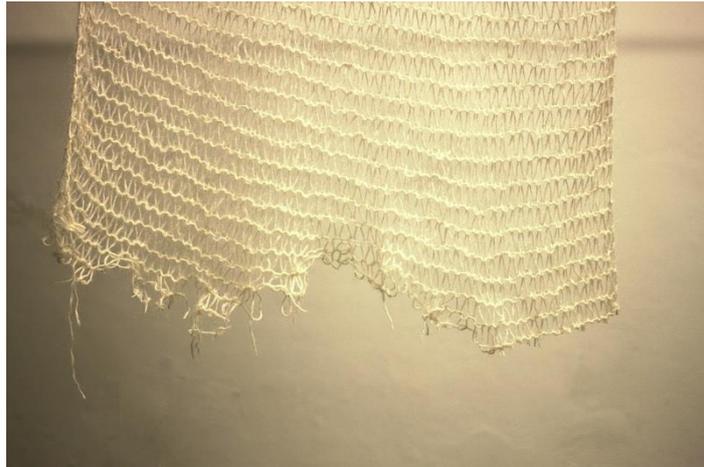

Figure 4. Ifigeneia Ilia-Georgiadou (2020). Installation 'Damnatio memoriae.' Photographs by Myrto Christou and Christos Vagiatas

The work of Ifigeneia Ilia-Georgiadou (2020) depicts the content of condemnation of memory itself in the form of the trace, which is not unaltered, but which can be rearranged, modified and lost. An event takes its place within a series of events organised in sequences and forming a condition; they are retold at the level of recording histories and a new condition creates a critical section and interrupts the continuation of the narrative, modifying the process of construction of a mnemonic discontinuity, just like the imposition of oblivion in the Roman damnatio memoriae. If the stitch (event) is lost, the resulting oblivion is not only uncontained, but by distorting the mnemonic continuity, it extends to other areas of the knitted construction and destroys it. Figure 4 shows the mnemonic sequence cut up and deconstructed.

Figure 5. Ifigeneia Ilia-Georgiadou (2020). Installation 'Damnatio memoriae'. Detail.
Photographs by Myrto Christou and Christos Vagiatas

The artist herself says: 'This work is a knitted wall hanging installation measuring 80 by 39 cm. The work was inspired by the Latin phrase "Damnatio memoriae" used as a punishment in Roman society. The texture of the knitted piece exhibits certain repetitiveness and an automated quality, as its creation is the result of a continuous motion that renders the knitted piece a unified material. Figure 5. In this particular work, I have chosen to cut a stitch from it, knowing that over time it will self-destruct completely since the stitches are all interconnected. In my view, the condemnation of memory translates into the gradual deconstruction of a whole.'

3. Conclusion

Our initial reference to mythology and the role that Mnemosyne played as a deity should be resituated within the context of our summary. The muses of antiquity as transcendental powers and protectors of speech represent the '*threatening and bewitching face of the myth*'. However, according to Benjamin (1982), '*The mythical forces are present in modernity and the gods show particular favor towards the transitional intervals of awakening that we are experiencing.*' Buck-Morss (2011, p. 396) alludes to Benjamin's work and points out the reference to new muses by Surrealists '*Ballhorn, Lenin, Luna, Freud, Mors, Marlit, Citroen*', noting that what distinguishes the gods of this modern mythology is their vulnerability to time, because they belong to the earthly irreversible world of human history in which their powers are ephemeral.[e] She continues, adding '*the worlds of memory are replaced faster, the mythical element is revealed more quickly and more violently, a completely different mnemonic world must swiftly be placed opposite them. This is how the accelerating rate of technology is presented in light of this proto-history.*'[f]

The passage from one allegorical past to the ephemeral state of mass culture marks a displacement process in the biological mnemonic processing by Language and Imagery. We argued that the fragments of the ephemeral condition we described can be connected in a creative work and that by acquiring a new status can refer to expressive behaviours and to mediate rudimentary performances that generate a collective memory. The contemporary condemnation of memory is essentially suspended and thus the conversion of some event into a work of art does not follow the primordial route of event-knowledge-language-art, but the reverse with the insight of the artist. In this way, the work is composed as an autonomous, ephemeral event and from it, spring language and knowledge and redefine the initial event.

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[a]'Them in Pieria did Mnemosyne (Memory), who reigns over the hills of Eleuther, bear of union with the father, the son of Cronos, a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals. And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the months waned, and many days were accomplished, she bore nine daughters, all of one mind, whose hearts are set upon song, and whose spirit is free from care, a little way from the top-most peak of snowy Olympus. (60) And further These things, then, the Muses sang who dwell on Olympus, nine daughters begotten by great Zeus, Cleio and Euterpe, Thaleia, Melpomene and Terpsichore, and Erato and Polyhymnia and Urania and Calliope: who is the chiefest of them all (80)'. http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0020.tlg001.perseus-eng1:63–103 Mnemosyne, Hesiod. *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* with an English Translation by Hugh, G., E., W. (1914). *Theogony.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. Trans. Hugh G., E., W.

[b]'But abhorred Strife bore painful Toil and Forgetfulness and Famine and tearful Sorrows, Fightings also, Battles, Murders, Manslaughters, Quarrels, Lying Words, Disputes, Lawlessness and Ruin, all of one nature. (230).'

[c]'Noise' is the signal (with whatever it identifies) without information.

[d]The final presentation will be in video means. The present preview is based on a stop motion series of photographs, by Panagiotis Ilias. The artist has on purpose chosen men for the photographic and video presentation of her work, in order to reflect a man's point of view.

[e]Ibid. 400.

[f]Ibid. 432.