

RESHAPING THE MEMORY OF THE PAST

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This presentation deals with an input that nourishes the memory. By the term memory we understand a set of cognitive abilities by which we keep information and reconstruct our past experiences for today's purposes. Memory is one of the most important paths through which our narratives give life to our current actions and experiences. The research calls into question the idea of a lost past or a past at least definitively frozen. The human being is distinguished because they keep and mold their memory as a reaction against the second law of thermodynamics, which undoes everything. The incentive is generated by the need of having the ancestors' and our previous experiences because they constitute the basis of our topical decisions.

Memory is active, it is modified, it is impoverished or enriched, though meanwhile sedimented. It is shaped by the information we get through different paths and fields.

Memory and History

In order to be remembered and understood, the past must be shown by the means of history.¹ At this point, the idea of referring to the historical past is more than right, but we must examine how it was constructed or formulated, from what sources it was nourished, by whom it was written, by the winners or by the losers? How valuable is this positive view of Cicero's on History?

Memories relate to events that occurred, while stories are sometimes subjective representations of what historians think is essential to be remembered. This is one of the difficulties that people face while trying to understand the new society in which they find themselves living and experiencing, because the changes, the breaks and the disconnections from the past, are always happening within shorter lapses of time at a dizzying pace.

Previously, in my youth, I had been intrigued by the Freudian view of memory and oblivion. Later on, I read about the views of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur regarding memory, forgetfulness and forgiveness. This was related to our aspiration for an honest and accurate recollection of our past history in relation to the proper continuation into the present.

Following his demanding logic, it was requested to put the individual and the collective memory in a fair ratio, as well as seeing them in close connection and exchange with each other (especially under the influence of the second).

¹ The importance of the references of an individual or society towards a historical past is witnessed in sayings and proverbial sentences of ancient authors. In the notes of Cicero concerning this argument there's a well-known saying that aims to accentuate the significance and undeniable value of History: (*Historia, magistra vitae, testis temporum, nuntia vetustatis, lux veritatis*, Cicero Marcus Tullius, *De Oratore*, 1862 p. 110 / *History, teacher of life, witness of times, messenger of ancientness, light of truth.*)

An opportunity for a "righteous memory" can stem from establishing a new relationship between past, present and future, a relationship in which the gesture of forgiveness finds its place, says Ricoeur.² Only in welding these dimensions together (past, present and future), contemporary man can truly face the past laden with suffering and violence, facilitating and illuminating goals for the future.

The reformulation of memories is related to the need to make them coherent with the horizon of the present and with the traditions accepted by the community or group to which they belong, first of all in moments of the most radical turns. Individual memory is supported not only by subjective memories but also by social frameworks and external constituents (language, signs, signals, monuments). When that was accepted by prominent philosophers such as Ricoeur and Halbwachs, their aim is to understand the relationship that exists between individual and collective memory. The aforementioned idea, supported by the modern philosophers Locke and Husserl, is that you cannot remember alone but only with the help of others. Moreover, each individual memory constitutes a viewpoint on collective memory. In this view, as well as in the ecological one, the psychic act of remembering cannot be understood by detaching it from the context of the living world and communicative practices, which is defined as the social and cultural context. The concepts they deal with refer to a structural element that exists before individual thoughts and that takes form and content from the dimension of culture. Halbwachs elaborates on this point, in an attempt to take this sociological program inward into the realm of psychology, precisely on the terrain seeming to be closer to the pure individual dimension. The individual act of remembering exists, in his view, only on the basis of "social frames" (*cadres sociaux*). Memory expresses solidarity between the individual and the social group or groups to which he/she belongs.

Ricoeur's approach interested me in relation to the socio-historical context of our country, where currently many things have happened, yet the sources coming from the past have not been asked to recall and rewrite the facts about people and events of important aspects of our historical past and thus to re-dimension the views, considerations and stances towards them. What is noticed, is the lack of a determined will for transparency concerning the sources that come from the past, as well as concerning in a deep and alternative way the use of the written and visual sources, etc. Something like that I think could be laid out and demanded perhaps in a more radical way.

As we know, in our country, within a relatively short time, there were changes in the terms of dependence and national governance. In less than a century and a half several governments of various kinds were overthrown and replaced one after the other (in some cases perhaps by being unjustly overthrown and in others without being overthrown as it should have been done). Consequently, after these dizzying upheavals, in the time we are living in, no radical change was seen in what is offered today to the writing of history by the testimonies coming from the past. Given Ricoeur's ethical claim, I have also never heard of anyone apologizing to someone for what they had caused, intentionally or unintentionally, instead they stay in that initial track or camouflage themselves. And then, I did not hear anything concrete about the forgiveness by the victims.

² Ricoeur Paul, "*Ricordare, Dimenticare, Perdonare*" (*l'enigma del passato*), Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004.

Our country never significantly passed even the "age of witnesses" who could appear here and there to testify about their dramatic past and to offer a different vision of our history to the next generation. A witness version was more present during the communist regime, that of war veterans' witness activity. The tendencies of some movements that questioned history never received a full answer but only a few partial answers.

For this reason, the question arises whether the future can be built by leaving our past concealed behind, and consequently also its righteous memory? Besides, how can the journey continue if we have left behind hidden or diverted facts and evidences with the desire to forget the dark spots that have marked our conscience? What can follow from all this? However, the idea of a reciprocal defining relationship between past and present was not something new to humanist reflection. A significant example is that of the writer Italo Svevo, when he at the beginning of the last century wrote about the manipulation in the elaboration of the past from the present according to the interests that arose, extending certain periods and shortening some others, highlighting some voices coming from the past and blocking some others: "The present directs the past as an orchestra conductor directs his musicians. These and those sounds come into play, not others. That's why the past seems sometimes very long and sometimes very short. It sounds again or becomes mute. In the present, only the part that has been called to be lightened or to be darkened will sound....", Svevo writes.

"Tiger's jumping in the past", as Benjamin describes in his thesis "On the Concept of History", forms a constellation with the present that radiates sympathy and continuity, which would otherwise have remained deeply immersed under the 'triumphant process' of history winners.

Besides history, the sources that bring information can come from different fields: literature, arts, etc. (e.g.: *the big painting of Guri Madhi "Enver Hoxha in the Moscow meeting of Communist Parties"*; *here Hoxha's enemies disappear one by one.*)

If people were aware that sometimes history could be a special version of the past, they could get involved more and more in their own cultural heritage to be able to shape their collective and national identity.

What appears to be an obsession with memory, coincides with the fear of being forgotten and with the pursuit of authenticity. This also explains the interest in embodied memory.

In the wake of the sources containing memory, the stream that we will deal with here, which belongs to the 20th century, neither contains painting, nor literature, but the technical image of photography.

History is a science of traces (Marc Bloch). Documents and photographs are traces and archives are resources of traces of inventory / a prior knowledge of the habits of the person who left the trace is required.

Now, the cases I will present are examples from two photographic archives, that of the National Museum of Photography "Marubi" and the Albanian Telegraphic Agency "ATSH".

Archives are memory spaces where the documents of a society are stored and preserved. Archives not only provide information; they also preserve the context, intentions and conditions of the production of these images.

Photographs not only can stimulate or aid the memory, but can also obscure the actual one. When we remember in relation with photography, it can serve as a reminder against our tendency to forget. How do the visual and gesture codes of the subjects of those times come to us nowadays? I was always wondering how true the image of my country, of my people was that came from this source, what way the process for its realization followed. Was this process free and interpreting or scrupulous and impartial, what qualities did its production have?

The act of photographing emphasizes the importance of remembering, individually and collectively.

The archive of the *Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATSH)* is this place of memory where documents of our society are stored. In order to know and understand the qualities of this memory left by this trace, it is worthwhile to adventure in this great archive, following the chronological course, to understand and feel the changes that have taken place, the context, the technology.

The term "collective memory" refers to collective representations that operate in accordance with principles and rules distinct from those of individuals. Here, collective memory refers to the ways in which images, practices, political rhetoric, and objects, such as monuments and memorials, actively shape what is to be remembered. If we are determined to define the meaning of a documentary photography, we must begin by setting the historical context for the image and its creator. A documentary photographer is a historical actor inclined towards communicating a message to an audience. Documentary photographs are more than an expression of artistic mastery; they are consciously persuasive acts.

The idea of this topic derives from pondering about what we perceive or rather what we read today from the photographs of the ATSH archive, based on the abovementioned considerations. Of course, in this case, the story sought to be told was shaped by politics. It is therefore necessary to have a prior knowledge of the habits, the tendencies of the one who left it, the one who fixed it as well as the one who ordered the trace. Examining all these factors in this regard, we understand the mentality, theoretical and socio-political interests, aesthetic tendencies of the authors and the commissioners, but also of the subjects, their demands and aspirations at that time. In the photographing process of the early years of this archive, the photographers are like those early monk painters, or writers, who called themselves instruments of the divine will (or power) and fulfilled their job with joy without claiming authorship. I guess it didn't happen because of their neutral position, but more because of the obligatory obedience and veneration toward the government.

On the occasion of the opening of the historic building (Prime Ministry) to the public, I screened two image projections from the ATA photographic fund, which showed the relation between power and people. One projection showed a selection of photographic images from the political life of Albania, whereas the other presented a selection of images from an official archive of "daily" life. In this way, the history of exercising the power was confronted with the experiences of those who were its subjects.

I thought of separately presenting these images from the archive of ATSH, which exactly show the lack and impossibility of the dialogue while they were conceived and created in a one-sided way. As once, in the XIV century, in the government palace of Siena it was required to learn and remember the effects of good or bad governance through painting (by Ambrogio Lorenzetti), today we see the already proven effects of a certain kind of governance already in the documented memory of a medium like the photograph.

It was not my aim to deny the existence and value of great historical processes that occur in the country and everywhere (industrialization, electrification, railways, urbanization, etc.), but to understand and present a different point of view. All the while I was wondering if it was true that everything that went through the minds of these simple people were just these major projects that would change the face of the country, socio-political ideals and nothing personal, close to love and belief. (Cp. *the discussion about the short story of the newlyweds in the Writers' and Artists' League of Tirana*).

The stories that photography has to tell in its fleeting moments we see in the movement that we can discern inside or because of seemingly stunned moments. Each photograph is an important moment that, even in its isolation, has a connection to other moments. Every photographic moment is a choice made in relation to that incident and what will follow, which renews the expectation of how history will be perceived. This went with the exposing conditions through projections, so that one image would be followed by another while avoiding somehow the static stunning of the photograph. The selected photos form two streams of images that do not undertake to be comprehensive nor precisely historical. The selection is also based on faint traces, discrepancies, voids, slips and misunderstandings of photographic images found in this archive. Thus, the history of the exercise of power is juxtaposed with the experiences of those who were its subjects. There are photographs that surpass the sharp control of censure: (*Slides show the way how Enver Hoxha is preaching; how a cloud seems to come out of the megaphone in the square etc..*)

The birth and formation of the *Marubi Archive* is a story that started individually and concluded collectively. In the course of time it was realized that in addition to fulfilling the subjects' desire to have a 'real' image, which they took and kept as immutable, and besides the material and spiritual reward that the photographer took, the studio could serve as a collector and keeper of images, a place that made it possible to remember things that were no more. It was the status of the photographer that put them in positions of confrontation with the socio-political context.

SUBJECTIVITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

In this regard we can mention Wittgenstein, who notes that: "whatever the event leaves behind, it is not a memory" (1980, paragraph 220).

Trace theorists, however, accept this point: “the *engram* (preserved fragment of an episode) and the memory. . . are not the same thing”³. Traces (whatever they are) are “merely auxiliary”, potential to call to memory, providing some kind of connection or continuity between experience and memory; so the traces are important but are not sufficient explanatory factors of the issue.

What is memory if it is not a photograph? And what is a photograph if it is not a memory? A tool to win or lose it?

This is the moment to bring to mind the fact that the feature, seemingly non-symbolic and objective in technical images, orients us towards seeing them not as images but as windows. For this reason, observers do not trust those mechanical images as much as they trust their eyes. Consequently, observers do not criticize them as images but as a way of seeing the world. Their critique is not directed against their product but against an analysis of the world. And the lack of criticism against technical images can be dangerous at a time when technical images are in the process of replacing textbooks. Flusser says that it is dangerous because the objectivity of technical images is an illusion.

Going back in time, in front of most Marubi photographs, we feel the truth of the saying that when we look at a photograph, we see a reality sometimes fabricated and sometimes sorted out or even both. We have often heard from researchers in this field that a photographer is accustomed to seeing optically, as through the lens of his camera more than with the soul, just as the human eye which sees a wide field of view and at the same time absorbs many human experiences from different directions. A photographer works within the parameters given by technology.

So, to photograph means to frame (include) and therefore to exclude. Those traces, memory sustenance, appear to us sometimes as an attitude that reveals an ethical and aesthetic mentality and sometimes as a ‘document’ or evidence of people, places and decisions, events and remote times. Thus, in our case, memory as a vital phenomenon for humankind, appears to us as a recording of something like affectation, fiction, but also as a neutral trace. But still a truth can be found even within this fiction, the narration of this fiction as a keeper of a certain mentality.

The magic of photography

Born before the mid-nineteenth century, photography had given to Pietro Marubi, as to his predecessors, an intense emotional, psychological, and physical sensation of its strange potentialities. The same seems to have been transmitted to his descendants, Kel and Geg Kodheli (Marubi). This extraordinary invention continued to exercise this fascination on them. Like Nadar and other photographers, they tended to attribute extraordinary quality to this medium, despite the fact that they knew how photography functioned as a medium operating through sign, trace, trail (the last word seems to me the more appropriate to the case). The photographic sign is the indicator as a significant trace, its connection with the thing is that of being physically produced by its referent. Even in the Marubis, as we find in Nadar's book where he talks about Balzac's idea of photography, the idea of the photographic image transpires

³ Schacter Daniel, *Searching for Memory the brain, the mind and the past*, Basic Books New York, 1996, p. 70.

strangely impregnated by a union between science and spiritism.⁴ We find this tendency in some photographs where strange presences (with fewer layers) show up near normal presences, making us experience situations of ephemeral, celestial creatures, next to/along with terrestrial creatures with a great material consistency. Firstly, these images highlight the ability of the camera to capture what would otherwise be very elusive to the naked eye. Secondly, it adds a documentary force to its claim to authenticity, the physical connection it shares with the world it represents, but which also seems to indicate a paranormal ability of this medium. (*Slides showing a ghost with a violin; a friar who dreams, etc..*)

That's the moment to talk about the arbitrariness of the photographic gesture that stops life in a continuous flow of elaboration and change, selecting and realizing a stop at a certain moment, made according to a subjective selection, which does not allow explaining or deviates from the meaning of the truth. Undoubtedly, there have been many cases of that kind.

Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of a photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory. *One day, some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had any number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left. Surrounded by these photographs, I could no longer console myself with Rilke's line: "Sweet as memory, the mimosas steep the bedroom": the Photograph does not "steep" the bedroom: no odor, no music, nothing but the exorbitant thing. The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed.* Roland Barthes "Camera Lucida"

The case of not recognizing a person in a pose, captured in a different time and age than the one in which we knew him/her. (*Sigfrid Kracauer / E. Tabaku: poem "Last Night"*)

On retouch and collages

Although a photograph was often seen as a precise record of reality, all that we said above defines it as a trace of this reality, taken in front of it and simultaneously with it; the truth is that this acclaimed and long-awaited medium, precisely for this virtue, appears to us as a manipulated one. This happens not only nowadays, in the age of digital photography and photoshop, but also in earlier times and techniques.

Among the photos found in the Marubi archive, there are also some that do not seem to take into account the feature of the authenticity of the image, the authenticity of the fact extracted through this medium. What they want is to subject this medium to their wishes and make it show the event or the meeting as they would like it to have happened one day in real life. The cases I am talking about were motivated by different reasons, from political ones, to unrealized wishes and meetings that never became true, at least not in a photo studio or anywhere else in the presence of a photographer. (*Examples of combinations of persons and retouches: Hilda Pistulli's eyebrow; the lady with the slimmed waist*).

⁴ According to Balzac's book, every body in nature is composed by a series of different ghosts, in layers superimposed to infinity, stratified in infinite membranes, in all directions where optical perception is performed. Nadar F., *Quando ero fotografo*, Abscondita, Milano, 2004, p. 6.

The misleading, confusing use of only one pose from a set of photos. (*Geg Marubi "Activities in honor of Bajo Topulli and Mustafa Qulli", the martyrs who fell in the surroundings of Shkodra*)

In conclusion, this entire presentation on the subjectivity of photography in the above cases was an opportunity for a long contemplation and study. Such a platform offered of course a partial view and you could deal with only one of the issues, the subjectivity of photography. From what I saw, I understood that the existing researches could be valid for two ways (subjectivity and objectivity), but highlighting what is essential for all human inventions, the ethics of use. That's why I kept them both and put them in front of each other and saved objectivity of the photographic image for the end.

OBJECTIVITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The meanings of the verb **kujtoj** in the Albanian dictionary: *Kujt/ój kal., óva, -úar* 1. reminds someone or something; / brings something to someone's mind. 2. zë në gojë, / mention⁵

In our case, concerning the medium of photography, the words testimony/evidence and witness take on a powerful meaning. This happens precisely because photographic evidence does not translate into words what it has seen and then does not request you to believe it. This evidence brings us the true trace of reality, a moment stopped by a fact or event. However, the meaning of the word **tempus** made me think that what photography catches is even itself a tempus. The word **tempus, temporis** is connected with the Greek verb **temno** (to cut) and shows properly a session, a portion of time, so an "instant", a "moment", a "pausa". In this introduced sense, it takes the meaning of "the right time", "circumstance".

Taking into consideration the arbitrariness of capturing only a moment, accepting and using this intervention we could find an image full of destiny. [*Portrait of Gjeçovi, Shantoja, Koçi Xoxe: head on the table (Kassandra foreseeing the future)*] The photographer has assisted as a witness together with other witnesses at a fact, an event, but with his action he has somehow made us assist there, even without really being present in that moment that belongs to the past.

Each photograph is a Certificate of Presence (Roland Barthes). (*Slides of documents that claim our national independence, the borderlines of Albania, the document of the letters of the Albanian alphabet: photographed by Kel Marubi and other photographers*)

Witnesses of first grade: *Cases of Kel Marubi's photos on "The Gaining of Shkodra"; "The Case of Jup Kazazi"; "The Confirmations" by Pjetër Rraboshta*

The intention for this historical memory in the form of the photographic trace inside these archives is not to remain simply stored but to be built, dismantled and reconstructed again and again.

⁵ Thomai J., Samara M., Haxhillazi P., Shehu H., Feka Th., Memisha V., Goga A., *Fjalor i gjuhës shqipe*, botim i Akademisë së Shkencave të Shqipërisë, IGJL, Tiranë, 2006, p.503.

So, how can the blocking and falsification of memory be avoided? Does a genuine loyalty to the past exist? If history and memory are doomed to "fluctuate between belief and doubt", the only remedy for memory falsification lies in restating the ethical dimension, in requiring everyone to formulate a promise of loyalty and truth, which must be constantly renewed versus the danger to which we are all exposed, that of rhapsodic fragmentation and the randomness of memories.