COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE WRITING ON THE WALL
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Photography plays a very important part in building collective memory. No matter what, where or which catastrophe in the world, be it the Holocaust, atrocities committed in the Bosnian war, Rwanda, forced removal of children from aboriginal parents in Canada, apartheid in South Africa, the Gulf Wars, both World Wars, the aftermath of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, photography has always been present, since its invention, documenting the events that contribute to our collective memories of such events. This essay will examine how photography contributes towards collective memory by examining the work of Shimon Attie, with particular reference to his oeuvre ‘The Writing on the Wall’.

What is memory?

There are numerous terminologies used today to describe memory: mémoire collective, Mnemosyne, storia e memoria, lieux de mémoire/sites, or realms, of memory. Then to complicate matters further there is also cultural memory, communicative memory, social memory, social forgetting, transcultural memory to name but a few (Erll, 2005, p. 6)

Memory as defined in the Oxford dictionary is the ‘power of the mind by which facts can be remembered; an individual person’s power to remember; the period over which people’s memory extends; the thing, event that is remembered’. Memory is evident and practised in all walks of life, be it academic, biological, social or work life. Memory, remembering and forgetting are all so closely intertwined on both the individual and collective level, but we need to keep in mind that remembering is a process and memory is the result of that process. Memory is not an observable activity, but an ability. Memories are subjective and depend on the circumstances in which they are recalled. ‘Re-membering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present’ (Erll, 2005, p. 8).

Furthermore, memory is the result of the acts of remembering and forgetting. Without forgetting, we will not be able to remember. Memories, be they individual or collective, are never a mirror image of the past, but an expression of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present.
Maurice Halbwach (1877 – 1945) was the first person to espouse the concept of mémoire collective (collective memory). According to Erll (2005: 15) Halbwach’s theories on collective memory revolved around the concept that collective memory operates within a social and cultural environment. Humans experience things through human interaction. We tend to remember things based on the shared experiences with other people – those who can help us remember. This is known as cadres sociaux (social frameworks). It is these social frameworks that enable us to recall, convey and interpret collective memory. Halbwach (1980) stated that ‘It is only through individual acts of memory that collective memory can be built and observed since each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory’ (Erll, 2005, p. 16). Collective memory is a result of shared pasts within small or large groups resulting through communication, interaction, media and other institutions such as galleries or museums. This would include the passing down of stories from one generation to another in some or other form e.g. oral histories, and the establishment of tradition within the specific groups.

There are various forms of collective memory: family memory – an intergenerational memory which comes about via communication and social interaction such as family get-togethers and passed down history. An important function of collective memory involves the formation of identity. It is within these social frameworks that we discover things that are of interest and importance to us. The memory of historical events that we have not personally experienced is called collective-semantic memory. This collective-semantic memory and mourning which is passed down through generations, as in the case of the Holocaust, is called postmemory. It is these postmemories that allow subsequent generations to form an identity association with the world of their parents or grandparents as these second or third generations are frequently living in exile of their original countries.

**Background to The Writing on the Wall**

Shimon Attie visited Berlin in 1991 and noticed there was a visible absence of Jewish culture and community. Upon performing some research, he came across archival images of the daily Jewish life in the Scheunenviertel district which was located in East Berlin. The majority of the people living in this area were refugees from Poland and Russia and were known as Ostjuden (Eastern European Jews) and were mainly working class. Attie managed to pinpoint some of the actual addresses of where the archival photographs had been taken and photographed his light projections at these locations using three to four exposures. His projections were temporary, and no explanatory
information was offered. ‘Once projected ... these archival images seem less the reflections of light than illuminations of figures emerging from the shadows’ (Young, 2002, p. 82). Those viewers who were fortunate enough to pass by the installations would forever have the after-image of these photographs burned in their memories. No specific mention to the Holocaust is made in Attie’s work. Instead he uses traumatic realism (‘an aesthetic strategy that simultaneously draws on and undermines the conventions of realism, producing a subversive performance of realism’ (Friedman, 2011, p. 218)) to narrate his story.

“"The Writing on the wall’ grew out of my response to the discrepancy between what I felt and what I did not see ... give this invisible past a voice, to bring it to light” (Young, 2002, p. 82).

**Collective memory and memorial sites**

![Figure 1. Attie, Shimon (1992) Almstadtstrasse 43 (formerly Grenadierstrasse 7): Slide projection of former Hebrew bookstore, 1930, Berlin, color photograph and on-location installation reproduced with kind permission of the artist](image)
The layering of Shimon Attie’s projections on the crumbling, dilapidated façades of the buildings in the Scheunenviertel District forms the gateway to linking the past with the present creating palimpsestic associations according to Muir (2007: 305). The framing of the image turns the viewer’s gaze into that of the bystander, while at the same time being a spectator “forcing” the viewer to have a foot in both worlds so to speak. The modern elements in the image, in this case the car and the sign posted on the door (do not block entry) serve as reminders that we are in the present “watching” the gentleman from the past gazing into the bookstore’s windows. Because the projections are life size we are easily drawn into this illusion. The juxtaposition of the orderly Jewish script of yesteryear in the window with its square characters contrasts sharply with the childish graffiti of today painted irreverently on the door, the meaning of which only modern-day punks might be able to discern and further creates a binary between learned and uneducated. Gradually the viewer comes to realise that the books that the man is looking at through the window are no longer there. Is it pure happenstance that a blue car was parked in front of the old Hebraische Buchhandlung? To me the blue colour of the car serves as a visual reminder, a sign, that this was once a Jewish neighbourhood. The reflected white window frame on the car’s bonnet in the form of an upside-down cross remind me that the apostle Peter requested to be crucified upside down as he did not regard himself worthy to be crucified in the same position as Christ (Bible Study Tools, online), providing a macabre link that Hitler did not consider the Jewish race to be worthy of existence. The white crosses of the window frame also serve as symbols of remembrance.

The blue and white combination on the car’s bonnet point to the Israeli flag, the blue of which symbolizes “the spenders of the firmament” and the white representing “the radiance of the priesthood” according to the 1860 poem by Ludwig August Frankl entitled “Judah’s Colors” (Mishory, 2003). The colours are also similar to those found on a tallit (prayer shawl). While the white crosses in this image are Christian symbols of mourning.
Figure 2 Attie, Shimon (1992). Linienstrasse 137: Slide projection of police raid on former Jewish residents, 1920, Berlin, color photograph and on-location installation reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

But for the caption under this photograph, one could be forgiven if one was under the impression that this was simply a photograph of a family outside their home alongside some officials and not the beginning of a forced removal. The homely, almost affable atmosphere of some Jewish residents posing for a photographer with relative composure alongside the German police officials who stand casually with their hands locked behind their backs, are at odds with what we know happened later. The uncanny sense of homeliness is further emphasised by the presence of the pot plants in the window above the residents. Once again, the white cross features in the window, providing a foreshadowing of what is to happen to these people.

The projections are indexical traces of the past recording life and death.

“The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here” (Barthes, 1981, p. 80)
Attie’s installations create a movable memorial space in the streets of the old Scheuenviertel district in a way that allows the past to interact with the present, where we the viewers can be witnesses to these disrupted lives instead of just registering historical and factual memory. According to Jeanne Wolff Bernstein a bricks-and-mortar monument ‘can easily supply and replace the person or deed to be remembered’ (Wolf Bernstein, 2000, p. 355). By placing his insertions on the façades of the old buildings of the Scheunenviertel district, Attie is avoiding any possible forms of idolatry which is also in accordance with the Torah’s teachings, thereby strengthening the link back to the former Jewish community. How often do we not visit memorial sites such as the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, or the Cassino War Cemetery and marvel at the fine architecture, paying attention to design and form, instead of remembering the people the buildings represent?

“The site of destruction has been reconnected to the site of commemoration, icon merged with index, context and content restored” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 683).

By projecting his images onto the dilapidated buildings, Attie has removed that temptation. All we now see is the dead past recreated into memories in the present time. Our sole focus is on the people and so our internal questioning begins. This aura around these people, returned from the past, draws the viewer into a field where he/she can straddle both past and present and interrogate this space with his/her own imagination. Memory too is fluid. Once memory has been attached to a particular place or object, it is inclined to lose it signification and the process of forgetting begins.

There is an element of memento mori present in Attie’s installations. The representations of the images suggest the historical mass forced removals and subsequent death that we know took place and yet at the same time they try and recover something of the community that was lost.

Attie’s images in The Writing on the Wall serve as reminders of what was lost (the culture and way of life of these ordinary Jewish families) and not what happened subsequent to their forced removal, but at the same time they create a historical connectivity between image and viewer which allows the viewer to look for the history that will take place – a punctum of time.

“I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist) the
photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence”

It is this connection that is characteristic of postmemory. “It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired … the act of mourning is secondary, the lost object can never be incorporated, and mourning can never be overcome” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 664).

The name of Shimon Attie’s oeuvre The Writing on the Wall references the book of Daniel Chapter 5 verse 25 where a spectral man’s hand appears and writes across the wall the words “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN). Upon seeing this, King Belshazzar became very afraid and demanded that his holy men translate the message. None of them could do so. Daniel was summoned, and he explained the message to the decadent king. In essence the words were a warning that the king’s days were numbered. He had been found wanting and his kingdom was to be divided. In a similar vein, Attie’s images could be echoing the same message to the viewers. Has mankind truly mended his ways in the treatment of people? Would we pass the test if we were weighed, or would we be found wanting? I believe his images serve both as reminder and warning, but that is up to the individual viewer to decide for him/herself.

Conclusion
Photography exists as a powerful medium of memory because photographs are read as traces. Photography is always about loss. The loss in Shimon Attie’s photographs is an essential part of the landscape of the Scheunenviertel District. It is part of the invisible fabric of that community. Photographs are physical connections to the past and very often the photograph outlives its subject(s) as we have seen here. As Susan Sontag (1977: 70) states such photographs are imbued with ‘posthumous irony’. Seeing the people displayed large as life, activates Barthes’ punctum of time, for we all know what the destiny of these innocent people will be. Photographs help to anchor the fluid nature of collective memory. Memory is the binary of forgetting. We must have a community or national collective memory lest we forget.
References


Images


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