

Performing urban memory

The façade of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*:
theater, site of terror, site of memory

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The city is a place of memory, but how does this memory work? In this paper, I will explore the case-study of the façade of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*, an exemplary urban palimpsest that was a theater in Amsterdam before the war, a deportation center for Jews during the war, and became a memorial-museum after the war (figure 1).



Figure 1

Introduction

A city does not embody a material memory in the way a USB-stick, a written account or an archive does. It is not a medium of cultural memory (Assman, 1992). There are of course structures that are built with the intention to retain a specific memory of the past, such as memorials, museums, monuments and archives (Assmann, 1999: 15). The city as a whole, however, does not remember. Only in exchange with an individual or a group of people, can an urban artifact *support* a performance of memory. This is always a process in the present and never a perfect rendering of the past. These urban elements are not media that transmit a fixed meaning, but rather auratic contact zones that enable a production of meaning (Assmann, 1999: 337).

I will look at two conceptualizations of urban memory. The first understands the city as a (collective) image or cityscape that can be read or interpreted by the individual (Halbwachs, 1980; Lynch, 1996; Urry, 2002). The second describes the relationship between the city and an individual as dialectical (Benjamin, 1999: 262-267; Benjamin, 2002: 416-455). The former position is problematic because it fixes the image and memory of the city. The latter provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the city and the individual, but reduces the role of the city to the playground of a semi-conscious flâneur. When we examine the case study, we are confronted with a site of terror. It is therefore difficult to understand the relationship between the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* and the passerby as one of intoxicated flânerie. This paper will look at a third model in which urban memory is interpreted as a performance between this former theater and the attentive passerby (Rigney, 2005: 11-28; Winter, 2010: 11-23). The façade is an affordance that must be read as a script and in so doing saddles the spectator with agency (Hutchby, 2001: 441-456; Lozano-Hemmer and Massumi, 2003; Bal, 2002). The *Hollandsche Schouwburg* seduces this viewer to interact but the subject must choose to do so himself: he is the agent of performance. In this sense, performing the urban memory of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* is a conscious and meaningful act, rather than reading the city as an image or playful flânerie.

The image of the city

Maurice Halbwachs argues in his seminal *The Collective Memory* that individual memory is always produced within social, collective frameworks.

Our memories remain collective [...] and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned. In reality, we are never alone. Other men need not be physically present, since we always carry with us and in us a number of distinct persons (Halbwachs, 1980: 23).

In the first example of this book, Halbwachs is walking through London for the first time in his life. Even though he is alone, he is still accompanied by historians, architects and painters that point him to specific elements. They do so through books, signs, maps, and tour guides. Some landmarks remind him of literary renderings.

Many impressions during my first visit to London – St. Paul's, Mansion House, the Strand, or the Inns of Court – reminded me of Dickens' novels read in childhood, so I took my walk with Dickens. [...] I can [...] recognize in myself many ideas and ways of thinking that could not have originated with me (Halbwachs, 1980: 23-24).

Halbwachs' description of his walk through London is quite reductive and his conclusion premature. Whether a walk in a city we know nothing about would have the same effect remains unanswered. He knows the outcome of this little experiment before he has actually started it: all individual memory is collectively formed. If we analyze what actually happens in this example, we are confronted with multiple processes of interpreting media (the maps and tour guides), recollecting things we have read and heard before (in books and conversations) and reproducing a fictional image of the city (through Dickens' novels). Reducing these complicated processes to the thesis that we are never alone and therefore memory is always collective can hardly provide us with a deeper understanding of urban memory. What is striking is the passive role of the city. For Halbwachs, the practice of walking through London is nothing more than connecting preconceived and collective memories to readable landmarks. Many idea or way of thinking did not 'originate with me', but rather in the walker's virtual group of friends. The visitor has a prefixed image of the city that is made up of well-known sights and other stereotypes. His walk can only confirm this image and is therefore not a new experience but rather a confirmation of what he already knows.

Kevin Lynch explains how this process works. In his *The Image of the City*, Lynch analyzes the mental image of cities that is held by its citizens. His work concentrates "[...] on one particular visual quality: the apparent clarity or 'legibility' of the cityscape. By this we mean the ease with which its parts can be recognized and

can be organized into a coherent pattern” (Lynch, 1996: 2). This legibility is based on recognizable symbols such as landmarks. The reason people reduce a city to such a legible pattern is to feel safer. Because people understand that this image is a reductive representation, it is (ideally) an open structure, adaptable to change and communicable to others.

A highly [legible] city in this peculiar sense would seem well formed, distinct, remarkable; it would invite the eye and the ear to greater attention and participation. [...] Such a city would be one that could be apprehended over time as a pattern of high continuity with many distinctive parts clearly interconnected (Lynch, 1996: 10).

This perspective can shed light on the example of Halbwachs. There is a certain stereotypical and communicable image of the city that comes to us in many different shapes and forms. For Halbwachs, this ‘image’ replaces an actual experience; for Lynch, it is a starting point for new experiences. Thus, when we read in a guide that London is famous for its pubs and we visit these locales, we do not explore a memory that is given to us by the guide, but rather experience these pubs in order to get to know the city.

The legibility and communicability of such an image of the city makes it an attractive object for the tourist gaze and therefore an appealing tool for marketing. John Urry argues that tourists are focused on visualization: they consume places through their gazes. The image they have of a city is captured through “[...] photographs, postcards, films, models and so on. These enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured” (Urry, 2002: 3). Tourists often visit places and take pictures of landmarks they already know, which according to Urry leads to a hermeneutic circle. “What is sought for in a holiday is a set of photographic images, which have already been seen in tour company brochures or on TV programmes” (Urry, 2002: 129). This hermeneutic circle is precisely why the city as an image cannot provide us with new insights on the process of urban memory. The image is a stereotype that can easily be communicated, but has no other content than itself. It does not do justice to the actual history or memory of a city, nor does it intend to do so. A city is not just a collection of readable signs that can be communicated through other means. To get to know a city, you must spend time there: visiting London is not the same as reading Dickens and a handful of history books, even if these practices

enhance each other. The experience of being in the city is an essential characteristic of the flâneur that provides us with an alternative perspective on urban memory.

The city and the flâneur

Walter Benjamin's famous figure of the flâneur is not a first-time tourist, but intimately familiar with a city. In a book review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*, Benjamin describes the author as the reincarnation of the 19th century flâneur:

Hessel does not describe; he narrates. Even more, he repeats what he has heard. *Spazieren in Berlin* is an echo of the stories the city has told him ever since he was a child – an epic book through and through, a process of memorizing while strolling around, a book for which memory has acted not as the source but as the Muse. It goes along the streets in front of him, and each street is a vertiginous experience. Each leads downward, if not to the Mothers, than at least to a past that is all the more spellbinding as it is not just the author's own private past. [...] The city as a mnemonic for the lonely walker: it conjures up more than his childhood and youth, more than its own history (Benjamin, 1999: 262).

The flâneur is idle and intoxicated, he strolls aimlessly and half dreaming, making studies of his environment and remembering the city through his soles. Howard Eiland describes how the flâneur “[...] experiences an uncanny thickening and layering of phenomena, an effect of superimposition, in which remembered events or habitations show through the present time and place (Eiland, 2007: 122).” This is what Benjamin calls the ‘colportage phenomenon of space’ that turns buildings and streets into palimpsests and the flâneur into an archeologist. When he walks through the city, “[...] far-off times and place interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment” ((Benjamin, 2002: 419). The flâneur remembers the city through his feet and does so intoxicated, half-dreaming, because “[...] remembering and awaking are most intimately related” (Benjamin, 2002: 389).

An important characteristic of the flâneur is mobility; he wanders around in a hectic city filled with a plenitude of sensory impulses (Simmel, 2002: 11-19). His flânerie is a creative reconstruction of past and present and during his walks his mind can wander off, enclose itself and distance itself from the immediate here-and-now. This artful play and constant mobility makes the flâneur a slippery figure hard to pin down, who is never fully conscious and always in a state of awakening (or falling asleep, one could argue). The city is not a predetermined image or cityscape of fixed signs, but rather a playground for the flâneur's imagination. This figure is the product

of 19th century Paris and spaces such as arcades and boulevards, and is a highly privileged and male subject (Wolff, 1985: 37-46). Benjamin recognizes some incarnations, such as the sandwich man and the writer Hessel, but the real *flânerie* has ceased to exist. The issue at hand, however, is not about the historical correctness of this figure, but rather if we can use the insights of Benjamin to come to a better understanding how urban memory functions in the case of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*. Both the constant mobility and the playfulness are problematic here, since I am interested in how a specific site or terror interacts with the urban subject.

The flâneur protested against the increasing velocity of modernity with his turtle, and against the division of labor with his idleness (Benjamin, 2002: 422, 427). But how can we understand such a protest in the postwar, post-Holocaust Amsterdam? Parts of this city are haunted by their past and need interpreters that remember the city through their soles; but this remembering is not a playful, mobile and privileged remembering of the idle flâneur. It rather is a commitment to the past and the memory of those that have perished. The memory of the war is not aimless but meaningful and affective. This does not mean that the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* is a fixed sign that needs to be read, but rather an open invitation that the *attentive* passerby can reject or accept. Its memory is to be performed by a conscious and willful individual. Because this is a performance, it has the ability to be affective and productive, rather than retroactive and passive. In this sense, the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* is a mnemonic tool that leads to a memory that is not only his or her own, but is produced in interaction with this memorial museum.

The memory of the Holocaust

Both Halbwachs and Benjamin wrote their theses before World War II; and both have died as a result of this conflict.¹ Where Halbwachs interpreted the city as a readable collection of landmarks that are known prior to our visit, Benjamin was interested in the playful memory of the flâneur. When it comes to the memory of the Holocaust in the case of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*, neither model suffices.

The Holocaust has had a great influence on memory studies. It confronted Europe with an event that could not be easily remembered or forgotten (Assmann, 2006: 74-81). In the Netherlands, this memory was actively repressed by the Dutch

¹ Benjamin committed suicide during his flight from the Nazi's, while Halbwachs died in the concentration camp Buchenwald.

government during the first few decades after the war. In the 1980s, the Holocaust became an ethical imperative and central to the memory of the war (van Vree, 1995: 89-115). In contemporary Holland most people are aware of the atrocities that took place during World War II. The memory of the war is not direct but mediated by a culture infused with this traumatizing episode. This postmemory (Hirsch, 1997; Hirsch, 2008: 103-128), prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2004) or cultural memory (Assman, 1992) is the result of a web of iconic photographs, Hollywood movies, museum, memorials, and other cultural practices that western subjects are exposed to.² Each new 'practice' elaborates on this network of shared memories: it both refers to this web and has the power to add something or even revise it. A visit to Birkenau might not provide you with new facts, but it can be a meaningful and emotional experience that charges the knowledge of the Holocaust you acquired through education and reading books. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's notion of aura,³ Aleida Assmann calls these sites of terror auratic contact zones (Assmann, 1999: 337-339). It is aura's paradoxical nature of being close and yet separated from the authentic place that makes these sites of terror so expressive and irreducible. They therefore have a special place in the network of mediated memories. Halbwachs referred to this network as a collection of 'collective memories' without observing that the act of remembering is a process in the present. Ann Rigney writes:

Whether a private or a collective matter, recollection is not a matter of stable 'memories' that can be retrieved like wine bottles from a cellar or, alternatively, that can be lost in transit. Instead, it is an active and constantly shifting relationship to the past, in which the past is changed retrospectively in the sense that its meaning is changed (Rigney, 2005: 17).

The memory of the Holocaust is not suitable for inconsequential and playful flânerie, but appeals to a meaningful, emotional and even ethical relationship to the past.⁴ This

² The overwhelming influence of the memory of the Holocaust is more common in some regions than in others. I use the term 'western subject' to refer to individuals that have been raised in a culture where the memory of the Holocaust plays an essential role. As I have pointed out before, the recognition of this memory was not always a given in the Netherlands, nor in other countries. For a comparison with France and Poland, see Frank van Vree, "Auschwitz and the Origins of Contemporary Historical Culture", Atilla Pók, Jörn Rüsen and Jutta Scherrer (eds.), *European History: Challenge for a Common Future*, Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2002, pp. 202-220. I do not argue that outside the western world, the Holocaust is not remembered, or that every individual in the western world acknowledges the memory of this historical event in equal measure.

³ She quotes Benjamin: "We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." (apud Assmann, 1999: 338; translation by Harry Zorn)

⁴ Aleida Assmann warned for the potential politicization of this ethical interpretation (Assmann, 2006: 79-81).

is a memory that is performed rather than transmitted and can therefore maintain an affective bond with the past. Jay Winter argues:

The performative act rehearses and recharges the emotion which gave the initial memory or story imbedded in it its sticking power, its resistance to erasure or oblivion. Hence affect is always inscribed in performative acts in general and in the performance of memory in particular. (Winter, 2010: 12)

With this in mind, we can start to explore how the urban subject can interact with the façade of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* and how this can result in an affective and meaningful performance of memory in the present.

Performing urban memory

According to the architect Aldo Rossi, monuments are important permanent urban artifacts: they constitute the memory and therefore the soul of a city. These monuments have somehow absorbed the historical events that have taken place at these sites. Peter Eisenman explains:

For Rossi, the city is a theater of human events. This theater is no longer just a representation; it is a reality. It absorbs events and feelings, and every new event contains within it a memory of the past and a potential memory of the future (Eisenman, 1982: 7).

A city cannot be designed as a whole and grows over time; monuments have an important role in this process. “They serve to bring the past into the present, providing a past that can still be experienced” (Eisenman, 1982: 6).

Unfortunately, Rossi does not explain *how* these monuments relate to people and vice versa. My case study might help us to examine this dialectical relationship: the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* is a good example of a monument that has absorbed an historical event. It was built as a theater and not as a memorial. It still has both the appearance and the name of the former theater that was housed here, besides some minor changes. As such it is not a sign that can be interpreted, but an urban artifact that was a stage of the Holocaust in the very fabric of the city, unlike the camps outside of Amsterdam. The period that the theater functioned as a deportations center overshadow both its pre- and postwar periods. If we want to test Rossi’s ideas, we have to scrutinize how the urban memory of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* can be performed by the alert passerby. In order to do so, I will look at Mieke Bal’s conceptualization of performance and performativity. In her chapter *Performance and Performativity*, she argues that the viewer can be ‘saddled with agency’. This notion is

more suitable to the memory of this former deportation center than the semi-conscious state of the intoxicated flâneur.

Bal starts out with the difference between performance and performativity: the former is an execution of an artwork, the latter is a theoretical concept connected to language in the sense Austin introduced it (Austin, 1962). As such, they seem to be wholly different. When we consider the role of memorizing and reiteration that a rehearsal entails before we come to an actual performance, performativity is inserted in the process. The two concepts are not the same, but they are connected. Austin introduced performativity as “[...] the unique occurrence of an act in the here-and-now. [...] But as we have learned since then, performativity misses its effectivity if the act is not cushioned in a culture that remembers what that act can do” (Bal, 2002: 176). This culture resembles the network of mediated memories of the Holocaust that a western subject has been exposed to as described above. Any new encounter with the Holocaust is framed by a culture that has nurtured its remembrance. Jay Winter argues that “[...] the performative act both describes a condition and recreates it. Memories return to past experience but add their traces to the initial stories” (Winter, 2010: 11).

Can we understand the interaction between the visitor and the façade of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* in terms of agency? Bal analyzes how an installation artwork by Coleman turns the viewer into the performer. In this encounter, the viewer is offered a script that he can decide to follow or not. “The viewer is the agent of performance. But, at the same time, the play performed by the viewer is not pre-scripted, prescribed” (Bal, 2002: 186). The viewer has an actual choice: he can decline to interact with the work and therefore “[...] is given – and saddled with – agency. [...] The viewer who allows herself to be seduced into this play accepts to perform the work” (Bal, 2002: 207).

The façade of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* as an affordance

Is there a ‘script’ in the case of the façade of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* that can be followed or not? And in what sense is the urban subject required to follow this script, or free to interact with this façade?

We can look at the term of affordance for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between script and subject. This concept is a middle-ground between determinism (the possible applications of an artifact is determined by its design) and

social constructivism (the use an artifact is determined by its user). Ian Hutchby explains:

Affordances are *functional* in the sense that they are enabling, as well as constraining, factors in a given organism's attempt to engage in some activity; for instance, walking, or hiding, photocopying a document, and so on. Certain objects, environments or artefacts have affordances which enable the particular activity while others do not. [...] The *relational* aspect, by contrast, draws our attention to the way that the affordances of an object may be different for one species than for another. Water surfaces do not have the affordance of walk-on-ability for a lion or a crocodile, but they do for an insect waterboatman (Hutchby, 2001: 448).

Affordances can be learned: an amateur photographer will not be able to use a camera in the technical way of a professional photographer. And affordances can arise after something was established: the television and telephone cables that are now used to access the internet where there before internet even existed.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Brian Massumi apply this concept to buildings. “The façade of a building is [...] an affordance.” (Lozano-Hemmer and Massumi, 2003: 32) They argue that most people know how to interact with generic types of buildings, but at the same time need to learn how to use it. For instance, when a façade tells the passerby he is standing in front of a shop, he knows he can enter without asking for permission; when it is a private home, he will need to ring the doorbell. “It is built into our learned relationship to that generic building type” (Lozano-Hemmer and Massumi, 2003: 32). This affordance acts like a script: it tells the passerby how he can or cannot interact with this building.

However, this does not always work that simple: not all façades function like clear-cut signs. The *Hollandsche Schouwburg*, for instance, still looks like a theater in spite of its current function. The only assistance that is provided comes from the blue posters at the front with the sentence ‘*Geen voorstelling van te maken*’ (‘scenes beyond imagination’).⁵ An attentive passerby can read these posters and begin to understand that he is not standing in front of a theater, but rather a site of memory. There is an actual interaction between the subject and the object, rather than a straightforward interpretation of urban signs. This relationship is both “[...] *fusional* (an integral experience whose overall quality is attributable as much to touch and other senses as to vision) and *durational* (presenting not just as an object but an

⁵ This title plays with the double meaning of the Dutch word *voorstelling*, which means both a theatrical performance and imagination.

unfolding)” (Lozano-Hemmer and Massumi, 2003: 31-32). The content of this relationship is thus not predetermined, but rather unfolds in time. It is not despite the fact that this façade suggests something different than what is offered, but rather *because* of this initial confusion, that the passerby has to invest himself in understanding this urban artifact.

The relation always arrives [...] in advance of its next sequential unfolding. In other words, its arrival is a promised *event* that has yet to occur: an appointment with a known by not yet actually afforded outcome. To afford oneself of the outcome is to eventuate the relationship, to *perform* it, to follow through with its actual step-by-step unfolding (Lozano-Hemmer and Massumi, 2003: 32)

Conclusion

A city is not a collection of readable signs but rather a historically formed environment of urban artifacts. Benjamin’s flâneur recognized the palimpsest nature of the city and tried to reconnect with the past through the present. The urban memory of the Holocaust, however, presents us with a different kind of past: not one that is playful and on the verge of extinction, but rather complicated and omnipresent in the culture of the Netherlands. The memory of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* is framed in a larger network of mediated cultural practices.

Urban artifacts that are not designed as memorials can constitute the ‘soul of the city’. These palimpsest monuments are auratic contact zones that enable the inhabitants of a city to connect to a past that is always already distant. To interact with a site of memory, a subject must be embedded in a culture that recognizes and remembers the (historical) significance of such a site.

A visit to a concentration camp, such as Birkenau or Westerbork, is framed by the conscious activity of going to such a site. You can prepare for what you are going to see. Walking around in the city, however, does not necessarily provide such a frame; because Amsterdam, like any city, is historically shaped, going to the bakery around the corner is potentially a ‘vertiginous experience’. When an attentive passerby crosses the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* without exactly knowing what it is, but being fully aware of the horrors of the Holocaust, he might be seduced to look a second and even third time. What is this theater doing here? And when he notices that the façade is deceiving him, that he is actually standing in front of a site of terror, he is saddled with agency. The affordance of this façade is an unfolding, rather than a

given. He is offered a choice: to acknowledge this interaction as part of the network of mediated memories or to walk on unaffected. The fact that the façade 'covers up' the building's history and inserts it as a normalized part of the everyday urban texture is a reminder of the Nazi's candid method: the Jews of Amsterdam were deported right in front of the eyes of the Dutch population. The passerby is saddled with agency to acknowledge and perform the memory of this site. The fact that this memory is not simply represented or given, but must be performed, makes it a meaningful act of memory and a potentially affective experience.

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