Spaces of Memory – Reflections on Social Transformation at the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe

Interview with Irit Dekel

Claudia Simone Dorchain: What is the concept of space you use in your studies on memorial arts? Is there a general theory of space underlying your research?

Irit Dekel: There is no one theory of space I use. First, since as an ethnographer I discovered and indeed was part of the construction of what the specific site meant. I did so only during my research. By participating in memory work, or by observing how visitors acted, i.e. what they say about their experience in the site, how they walk in it, take pictures, "play tag" and observe others in the Holocaust memorial. Second, as I learned that this space is made of many spaces and historical times, I developed a tool kit to understand it through the focus on speech and motion, which was influenced by De Certeau, Lefebvre, Foucault, and Goffman.

I looked at the ways visitors, especially Germans (since most participants in guided tours are Germans), created a space for inner observation in which they were expected to undergo emotional transformation while also observing other visitors' [re]action in the memorial. To me the space of the memorial creates possibilities for – or "spheres" of – *speakability* in the present, triggered by speaking about the past, which were not possible earlier.

CSD: Space and time are, in Immanuel Kant's point of view, the conditions of recognition. Of course he is right, but not totally. I mean, isn't there recognition independent of time, as we all know by everyday life, for example in immediate recognition, spontaneous ideas, a sudden flash of insight, a ray of inspiration, *Einfall* in German? There is, for sure, recognition without time. Is there recognition without space?

ID: Thanks for this intriguing question. The memorial is a good case for theorizing the interrelation of space and time. To follow your line of thought, it seems to me that there is no recognition that is not inherently embedded in its own time and places. You might be asking about the duration of recognition in your reference to incidence or the *Einfall*. But an incident is also embedded in historical time. In the case of the Holocaust memorial, the creation of spheres of speakability makes the site have many incidental spaces for communication; not all are "commu-

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nicative" in the sense that not all lead to dialogical conversation, certainly not to agreement. I thus think about space as the social condition for encounter and communication, and of this particular one as predominantly enabling accidental encounters and a framework for conversation: first about itself, then about memory, and only then about the past, the Holocaust.

However, this memorial, despite being built by and for Germans (as its initiators insisted), does not imply that the past is owned by a certain group and located in a certain space, authentic or not. With the case of the Holocaust memorial, and with other invented sites of memory, we can see how different interest groups claim a relationship to the past and to the present state of memory politics. I therefore do not think that there could be recognition that is not inherently connected to an imagined or real place where recognition occurs.

CSD: Space seems to me a notion that gives way to philosophical interpretation without being of philosophical interest in itself. Space as such, space as space has no meaning. Space as a place to start from, as a standpoint, as common ground, allows meaning. Is that right?

ID: I am intrigued by what seems to me a very time-oriented understanding of space in what you suggest here. My understanding of space is not heuristic. I'd rather talk about what happens in it, and what are the preconditions for this happening bound with a specific place, city, agents acting in them, their history cultures, and politics. Space cannot only be conceived as a background for the revelation of meaning. Thus, I look at the space of encounter between individual strangers as the most potent starting point when one studies urban sites, precisely because meaning is also produced in a dialogue between people about places, objects, and their mediations. As the framework for the creation and performance of knowledge practices, the urban site I studied, the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, starts off by stating that indeed it has no meaning, because it stands for the memory of the Holocaust, which cannot be mastered or understood. This statement attempts to neutralize some loaded content that the site tries to make less threatening, a phenomenon that we also see in nonabstract sites or museums that try to attract publics that would otherwise not come to visit. It is thus constructed as an abstract work of art and the visitors have to make sense of it in a way that will enable reflection on how they deal with the past.

Thus, meaning does not arise from space, also not from architecture, but from the encounter between a site, what people know and want to know about it, its depiction in the media, and the actual personal experience of it. And we said nothing about the information presented in the underground Information Center and the ways people experience it. So, I would say (following Bourdieu)

that space is not just the background for some social theater but a multidimensional topos constructed on principles of differentiation, which are constituted by the rules that are active within that social universe. One's role is then defined by one's relative position within that space.

CSD: The interpretation of space – as I have said as "place to start from, standpoint, common ground" – is threefold (if not manifold). It means a place to develop things from, to define oneself, and to define the "other." So, space as a place for development permits all kinds of cultural attempts aiming at the future, thus technical and ethical; space as a standpoint remains for those who intend to find their identity, thus psychological; and space as a place to define the "other" is what ancient Greeks called *politeia*, the room of politics, government, rule-giving, and justice.

ID: The dialogue occurring in space does not have to lead to a unified worldview. Here I find Habermas very helpful, especially his critical understanding of communicative space, which can and indeed should also reflect diversity. Eder is helpful in understanding the structure for analyzing the creation of others by "we" groups in Europe: "collective" or common memories are one central precondition for "collective" and common identity. This, I believe, is how one can find something like the Greek *politeia* in our own, much more multifarious and simply much larger, political structures. In the Holocaust memorial I studied visitors' actions as well as educational programs and the work of the Foundation Memorial and found that the site enables speech about memory work and one's relations to it as a prism to their "moral career" as citizens.

However, dialogue or conversations are not necessarily produced there; rather it is a mutual performance and observation of emotional transformation. In this sense, the memorial is certainly not the "space to start from."

This work of memory is directed by the expectations visitors have from other "authentic" and nonauthentic memorial sites, which migrate to this new one. It is also not a common ground in terms of social activities, which are not common at all and certainly do not produce a unity of meaning or interpretation. As a stranger studying the memorial and writing its first ethnography, I found that people's actions in it are aimed at mutual observation in the present and directed at "self-knowledge." Clearly, this self-knowledge is not exclusive to group or community knowledge, but it is, however, directed by and toward the individual who is supposed to undergo transformation in the site. One might ask whether this transformation happens through the acquisition of historical knowledge and I would argue that is not necessarily the case. The transformation is on the emotional level and can be triggered by images or certain recognizable activities.

CSD: In your recent work on space in memorial arts in Germany and its numerous examples, where do you find space as 1. technical/ethical; 2. psychological; and 3. political dimension? Can these layers of interpretation or "ways of world-making," as Nelson Goodman would have said, be defined more precisely? Do we still deal with semiotics, places as a continuity or discontinuity of symbols with a certain meaning, or do you think a different approach would be better?

ID: In my forthcoming book, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial*, to be published by Palgrave, I offer a typology of four forms of speakability that develop and are performed in the Holocaust Memorial: *witnessing, guilt and shame, performing silence, and provoking knowledge*.

In the first, witnessing, the visitor becomes a witness of Holocaust victims and the state of victimhood and then reflects on what being a witness means to her or him. The second form, guilt and shame, is the reflection of one's moral standing as a visitor to the memorial, which is often expressed in guestbook entries by German visitors and in conversation with and among the guides at the memorial. Performing silence and talking about the need to be in silence happens through individuals talking about their most desirable memorial experience as well as by groups asking to sit or walk quietly at the end of a guided tour. In a visitors' survey at the Information Center, it was also made clear that the site is meditational for many, just like a church, as Uhl already suggested. The last form of speakability is provoking knowledge, which is usually done in discussion about the underground installation where visitors reflect on new information they learned about the Holocaust, as well as exchange their reflections on particular individuals and families.

CSD: Space is not only static, as Pierre Nora states in his theory of *lieux de mémoire*, but utterly *dynamic*, changing. In my view, it is the dynamic of space that allows interpretations which differ that much. Because the static in itself can't be interpreted. Space, in the most general view, is the condition of motion, of movement, thus the approaching of the future, or the approaching of death. And it is motion, in my eyes, which, with all its connotations, adds the manifold interpretations to the concepts of space.

ID: Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire, as presented in his monumental project of analyzing French spaces of memory, understood not only classical "places" but also seminal texts as sites of remembrance when the milieu of memory is gone.

The Hebrew concept of space (*merchav* and also *makom* – for place) is never "in place," is always open for change and interpretation, and is often sacred, interior, ritualized. Gurevitch wrote about the concept and idea of "place" in the

Hebrew culture as stemming from this ambivalent Jewish understanding of place, which is, as you said, a place to start from. Indeed, he reminds us, Genesis starts when God created earth but at the same time the Jewish and later Israeli place is never fixed, never final. Having grown up in Israel and being Gurevitch's student, I am very much influenced by the potency of this liminal condition of place.

CSD: Space as a condition of motion, and motion being a multilayered issue, reminds me of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Their paramount questions in philosophic research have been the following: first, what is the substance of the Primal Being (water, fire, the intelligible mind, the atom?) and second, is the Primal Being static or dynamic?

ID: In clearly very different discourses, with different bases and different aims, I see the tension you identify in the early moment of Western thought – between static being and dynamic becoming, between, say, Parmenides and Herakleitos – as largely overlapping with the tension between emptiness and content, between above and below, in the experience of space in the memorial. The formal and material vacuousness of the "Stelenfeld" (field of stelae, or stones) in this sense, stands in opposition to the highly structured space and carefully constructed order of information-presentation in a manner that parallels the opposition between the totally undifferentiated space of being and the absolutely determined, ever-in-motion space of becoming.

CSD: Herakleitos was of the opinion that everything conceivable to our eyes could not be but dynamic, the matter of perception of something as "static" would be unreal, an illusion. In sharp contrast, Parmenides wrote about the immobile Primal Being as ever motionless. But Parmenides already conceded that there actually could be a twofold meaning of human recognition: the false recognition given by the senses, which displays the illusion of the motion and variability of phenomena, and the "truth," the hidden knowledge of invariability and immobility of "that which is," a knowledge that is, according to Parmenides, not conceivable. So, the Parmenidean standpoint was not an empirical one, but somewhat mystic.

ID: It was something of this tension in the "epistemologies" of the two that I meant to capture in my last comparison. If we think about the "Stelenfeld" and *Ort der Information* [OdI] as models of knowledge performance and dissemination, one might suggest that the empty, formal and fundamentally anarchic space of the "Stelenfeld" represents the eternal, atemporal, and immobile truth of what is, and cannot not be – in the sense of Parmenides; while the ordered progression

through carefully presented materials in the OdI can be thought of as a manifestation of the Herakleitean insight into all knowledge as the knowledge of motion, in this case the knowledge of the motion that occurs within the visitor – the emotional response – in conversation with the motion within the installation of the OdI.

But I am a little uncomfortable with this metaphorical talk we have engaged in. For my interest in the site at the time of its opening and five, six years later was on the one hand precisely the playfulness it will enable, which I thought could be interesting to observe and take part of. On the other hand, however, through this playful exchange of metaphorical thinking about space in its abstractness, and the eros of revelation of what cannot or shall not be grasped, with the agreement to talk very little, if at all, about the Holocaust was for me a reason to approach it as a sociologist analyzing memory work. I can thus talk about memory work of the Holocaust at a certain point in time and how it is a knowledge producing activity, at times the knowledge of what *not* to talk about. This is what I learn from that particular place, as a culmination and a reflection of wider phenomena of speakability.

CSD: Christian philosophers adopted the Parmenidean-Heraklitean dichotomy, made more sophisticated through the Neoplatonic approach that Plotinus, Proklos, and Dionysos Areopagita defined in the first centuries after the fall of Rome. For these Neoplatonic thinkers, space is the emanation of the Divine Mind, which is supposed to be the Primal Origin. Of course, many Christian philosophers shared this view of space. They identified God-the-Father with the immobile Primal Being, and the devil, the world of illusion, of falsity, with the ever-changing vain phenomena of perception, as Plato's *Cave Allegory* shows. In this regard, the matter of space becomes, once again, of enormous interest since the scholastic scholars first adopted it.

ID: It is very tempting to think of the *Cave Allegory* in relation to the "above and under" of the Holocaust Memorial. Here, though, the apparent interpretation of Plato's intention would have to be reversed. That is, it is only in going down below (into the OdI) and exposing oneself to a series of images that are presented on the wall that one can hope to escape "the condition of the soul in its lack of education" that is radically encountered in the "Stelenfeld". Namely the visitor above is entirely ignorant with respect to their current spatial surroundings: What are these stones? Why are they here? Who built this? When? Why? For whom? What am I doing here? And so on. It is only when they "go down" – and not "rise up" – that there is the possibility of education.

This going down is literal – you must (on this reading) enter the OdI – but it is also figurative: you must go down into your own soul, or heart, or experience and encounter the loss symbolized in the Memorial. This might also suggest, however, that the apparent interpretation itself – and surely its cooptation by Christian metaphysics (and later by *The Matrix*) – ought to be called into serious question.

CSD: *The Matrix*, yes, a dystopia ruled by Christian metaphysics, ascetics replacing lust for life with tabloids, and a filmic model of special effects concerning speed. Space literally gives way to motion so, from a scholastic point of view, space is the condition of illusion, of vanity, evil. That is the reason why the Gothic architects did not allow their cathedrals to become too "fleshy," for stones are the "flesh" of a house if you will; what they aimed at was the "de-manifestation," the diminishing of the material world, a kind of utter deconstruction in fine arts.

They (Christian architects in the Middle Ages) created memorials of the non-space. Is the matter of "non-space," an idealist concept deeply rooted in Christian-Platonic philosophy, at all influential in what German memorial arts and films consider to be "Jewish"?

ID: In hearing "non-places," I think of the work of Auge on such "non-places" as airports and malls. These are places of transience that are not defined as a negation of more essential places but instead a condition in which the subject tends to be a spectator and the gazes may shift frequently between various spectators and spectacles.

For Auge, non-places proliferate in "supermodernity." In such venues, one's identity is transient and exchangeable. These are of interest for two reasons: the abstractness and the accidental tourism that occurs in the Memorial, where one stumbles upon the site, then happens to reflect on it or not. As for the "Jewish question," I am uncomfortable talking about Jewish architecture (or Jewish anything). If the Judeo-Christian tradition leaned toward abstractness in the case of this memorial and many others in the past three decades, which could reflect this ambivalence, then we have to link it more to individualization, postfigurative memorials in the postnational age and the specific, very liberating possibility opened for the first time for visitors to a Holocaust memorial (the first German national memorial) to say "I like it" or "I don't like it."

Eisenman is Jewish. He and Serra understood the power of the monumental abstract in this regard. The fact that Eisenman and later others compare it to a graveyard does not make the site or its architecture Jewish, just the particular culture look for things Jewish and their detectable, ever obscured, symbols.