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**AT THE THEATRE WITH MEMORY:
UNCERTAINTY AS A RESEARCH CANON**

I would like to begin by mentioning a friend who unfortunately is no longer with us: the philosopher Aldo Gargani. Some forty years ago, Aldo played quite a relevant role, in Italy and beyond, in what would later be defined as the “crisis of reason”, leading up to the so-called “weak thought”. Gargani edited a collection of essays titled precisely *La crisi della ragione* (“the crisis of reason”),¹ which notably included Carlo Ginzburg’s first essay on a subject pertaining to art history. In that essay, titled “*Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario*” (“Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”),² Ginzburg compared the method developed in the late 19th century by art critic Giovanni Morelli to the parallel reflections of Sigmund Freud and Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective invented by Arthur Conan Doyle. Ginzburg’s idea remains interesting to this day.

On the numerous occasions on which we met, Gargani would often talk of artworks as “influential images”. In other words, he considered them as signs with which each generation must come to terms. Gargani’s words come back to me every time I think of Titian’s *Allegory of Prudence* (or *Praise of Memory*) at the National Gallery in London. If each generation looks at the artistic signs of the past, on the one hand this gives us a truly inexhaustible opportunity to interrogate the artwork and reopen old cases, as noted in 1942 by Lucien Febvre.³ On the other hand, it is also evident that

¹ See ALDO GARGANI, ed., *Crisi della ragione. Nuovi modelli del rapporto tra sapere ed attività umane*, Turin, Einaudi, 1979.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-106.

³ In *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle. La religion de Rabelais*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1942, p. 3.

if each generation experiences and practices the eternal topicality of the artwork, the accumulation through time of questions and answers also has to do with memory as the subject and tool of our research.

As we know, influential images and “*loci*” are the foundations of the art of memory, from Simonides of Ceos to the Early Modern Period; and consequently, also of Giulio Camillo Delminio’s famous “*Theatro della memoria*” (“Theatre of Memory”), on which I worked several years ago, periodically returning to it.¹ A Russian colleague told me that Frances A. Yates’ 1966 study on the art of memory² has recently been translated and published in Russia,³ raising a well-deserved interest. As I recall, the only inaccurate section in that otherwise admirable book is the one about Giulio Camillo’s *Theatro*, a structure which Yates recognises in Andrea Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico. Palladio’s theatre, however, dates only from 1580, and its aspect would have been incomprehensible to anyone at least until Daniele Barbaro’s 1556 edition of Vitruvius, where the enigmas contained in the Roman architect’s V book (the one dedicated to ancient theatre) were finally solved, precisely thanks to Palladio. Camillo, for his part, submitted his project for a theatre of memory to the King of France Francis I only in 1519. And at that time, the word “*teatro*” could be understood only in the sense of “stage”: the presence of a stage was sufficient to transform any hall or yard into a theatre, as illustrated by numerous examples.

Giulio Camillo had devised an ingenious *periaktos*, recuperating an accurate and ancient revolving device for changes of scene, known at least since the second half of the 15th century, as documented by a famous drawing by Francesco di Giorgio Martini.⁴ The structure of Camillo’s theatre, which I found in a convoluted passage of Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque Cosmi* (1617),⁵ enabled a mind-staggering number of mnemonic combinations: seven levels and seven sectors capable of revolving both vertically and horizontally ensure 823,543 possible combinations. Seven raised to the seventh power. And if we multiply this number by the some 300 images, possibly drawn by Titian and somewhat mysteriously described by Camillo in his posthumous

¹ See in particular my essays *L’artificiosa rota: il teatro di Giulio Camillo*, in *Architettura e Utopia nella Venezia del Cinquecento*, ed. by Lionello Puppi, Milan, Electa 1980, pp. 209-212; *La natura discendente. Daniele Barbaro, Andrea Palladio e l’arte della memoria*, in *Palladio e Venezia*, ed. by Lionello Puppi, Florence, Sansoni 1982, pp. 29-54; *Un segreto europeo: il “teatro” di Giulio Camillo*, in *Le Venezie e l’Europa. Testimoni di una civiltà sociale*, ed. by Giuseppe Barbieri, Cittadella (PD), Biblos 1998, pp. 102-111.

² See Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1966.

³ *Искусство памяти*, Фонд поддержки науки и образования «Университетская книга», СПб, 1997.

⁴ See Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Trattati di architettura ingegneria e arte militare*, ed. by Corrado Maltese, transcribed by Lidia Maltese Degrassi, Milan, Il Polifilo editore, 1967: the drawing is featured in the Codice Torinese Saluzziano 148 of the Royal Library of Turin, f. 14.

⁵ See Robert Fludd, *De machina nostra spiritali inventione*, in *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica* [...], I, Oppenheimi, Aere Johan-Theodori De Bry, 1617, pp. 493-497.

Idea del teatro,¹ we obtain an incredible figure of 247.062.900 possible combinations. We can describe Camillo's *Theatro* as a powerful early search engine, combined, at least in its intention, to a boundless amount of cultural memories, to all the knowledge of the present and the past. Camillo, however, was unable to set up the contents rapidly enough, so Francis I grew impatient and stopped funding the project.

If I reasoned for so long on the *theatro della memoria*, it is because it helps us understand that the “influential images” that are the signs of art appear to us – in our eyes and minds – as constantly changing sequences, like the ever-shifting fragments of the kaleidoscope that we are. I shall return to this in my conclusions, when talking of what I call the notion of “uncertain memory”.

Meanwhile, let me clarify the sense of my presentation with two observations. Here is the first. Over the past decades, the artworks produced by contemporary art have often been part of series that are relatively long (or very long), untitled, and marked only by the slightest inner variations.... This feature is indicative of their somewhat documentary nature, which makes them so different from what we (maybe inaccurately) perceive as the isolated and memorable icons from olden times. Thus, the signs of the present also owe their value to the fact of being part of a sequence, of documenting a research that involves but also transcends them.

And here is my second observation. Actually, the documentary nature of the artwork, even ancient ones – was already well understood in the 19th century by the scholars of the Vienna School – to use the term coined by Julius von Schlosser.² The Vienna School refuted the exclusively *monumental* dignity of the artwork and expanded, both chronologically and spatially, the realm of objects deserving attention and study: artworks from dominant periods (such as the Gothic age or the Renaissance) were no longer the only one that mattered, but the same interest could be extended to Mannerism and the Baroque. Likewise, the signs that mattered were no longer those present in capital cities and major collections and museums, but also those coming from more marginal contexts. The artwork and indeed any sign of expressive, meaningful intention stopped being a monument to become a document: of a context, of a period, of an artist's research.

Every document – as we well know – has to do with our memory, whether personal or shared. The signs of art can be very influential – and therefore more easily shared – but they are also changing. This is why they constitute specific series in both modern and ancient art – as we shall see – and inevitably share the same destiny as any other kind of documentary series. Many art historians, including my old master Lionello Puppi, with whom I had numerous heated discussions on the subject, believe that it is possible

¹ See Giulio Camillo Delminio, *L'idea del Theatro*, In Fiorenza, Lorenzo Torrentino, MDL.

² See Julius von Schlosser, *Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte: Rückblick auf ein Säkulum deutschen Gelehrtenarbeit in Österreich*, Innsbruck, Wagner, 1934.

to find consistent connections within the series, thereby achieving a kind of objective memory of the past. Personally I never believed it, and always felt much closer to Jurij Lotman's definition of the more intimate nature of the "historical fact". Allow me two short quotes from him:

Unlike the deductive sciences which construe their premises logically, or the experimental sciences which can observe them, the historian is condemned to *deal with texts*. In the experimental sciences a fact can be regarded at least in the initial stages as something primary, a datum which precedes the interpretation of it. A fact can be observed in laboratory conditions, can be repeated, can be subjected to statistical study.

The historian is condemned to deal with *texts*. The texts stand between the event 'as it happened' and the historian, so that the scientific situation is radically altered. A text is always created by someone and for some purpose and events are presented in the text in an encoded form¹.

And here is the second quote:

Each genre, each culturally significant kind of text, makes its own selection of facts. A fact for a myth is not one for a chronicle, a fact on the fifteenth page of a newspaper is not a fact for the front page. So from the point of view of the addresser, a fact is always the result of selecting out of the mass of surrounding events an event which according to his or her ideas is significant.²

We might therefore conclude that every fact and every sign constitutes a point of view. My experience of archive research has confirmed this over and over again. As we sort through the sources and series of orderly documents, we regularly find out that the missing document is precisely the one we need, the one that would fully answer our question. Each sequence of documents, while apparently preserving and transmitting the memory of a given process, actually exposes the distance that separates the reasons underlying the constitution of that series from our own questions. In other words, we must constantly ask questions, including to ourselves, but often these questions turn out to be anachronistic. We ask the past something that has become relevant only in the future (as insightfully observed by Michael Baxandall³). For a while I believed that at least what I call the "black holes" of research (the missing document, the disappeared name, the undecipherable date) arranged themselves according to a consistent pattern in collective and shared memory. I hypothesized the existence of a "red thread" in reverse, made not of information but of the lack thereof. However, once more I had to face the fact that this was not always the case.

¹ Jurij M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co., 1990, p. 217.

² Ivi, p. 218.

³ See Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 1987.

The memory is ever shifting and revolving in its own theatre, and reveals itself in sequences beyond our control.

This is all the more true when dealing with series of documents that combine different languages, something inevitable in a discipline such as art history that works on images but also on words: the words of the sources, of the critical apparatus, of the interviews and of the programmes (in a more recent or even contemporary period). Not to mention the photographs, videos, archived declarations, and digital files that have become available over the past century and more. On the one hand, all these factors lead to an exponential multiplication of data in our memory; on the other hand, they make it more uncertain. All we have is uncertain memory.

For many years now, my research has been starting with a bibliographical review. The observation is quite trivial. The slight difference is that I am no longer interested in the stratification and development of a critical viewpoint (the state-of-the-art, as it is often called in scientific terms), but rather in visionary positions that have fallen into oblivion, in delayed stances on a specific point, in failed connections between local and general studies. On a bibliographical level too, “black holes” appear once and again but with no visible consistency. Italians often talk of “critical fortune” (*fortuna critica*), but “critical misfortune” is far more interesting, and not only when dealing with individual artists.

As a matter of fact, I am not a great fan of coherence. Changing one’s mind is a sign of good health. However, art history mostly developed by projecting a need for coherence onto the career and artistic research of artists: the catalogues of artists from the Middle Ages or the Early Modern Period (or indeed from any period marked by an artist-donor relationship) are all incomplete. Many years can pass between two artworks attributed to a specific artist (on the basis of documents or not). We are often tempted to connect those distant signs along the shortest possible line (which is the best line to grow cabbage, according to Tristram Shandy), or even along the parabolic perspective that obsessed Giorgio Vasari. Projecting coherence is undoubtedly a way to exorcise death, while our daily life testifies to our actual mode of progression: a slalom between halts and digressions. Yet another respect in which I prefer the memory model of Giulio Camillo’s theatre.

However, in accordance with Lotman’s statement, the inevitably “uncertain” nature of our memory is due to the fact that we deal with images, which are texts, and with proper “texts”. The positivistic notion of “facts” does not concern us.

Lucien Febvre wrote:

All history is choice. It is so by the mere fact that chance destroys some relics of the past while preserving others. By the fact that, when faced with a great quantity of documents, humans tend to simplify, accentuate some episodes and obliterate others. And mostly by the fact that historians prepare their own materials, or recreate them if needs be; historians do not

wander at random through the past as ragmen looking for old junk, but start with a well-established plan in mind, with a problem to solve, a hypothesis to verify...¹

This passage casts a worrying shadow over one of our most-employed tools, namely periodization. I prefer not to dwell on this all too important issue. However, does this mean that we must return to the two historians who accompanied the ancient knights (or, in our case, the artists) in the 9th chapter of *Don Quixote*? That art history is no less an intellectual game than OuLiPo or Uchronia? I do not think so. Philology and the theatre of memory can get along. Let us remember, however, Camillo's over 260 million possible connections to the civilization that preceded us. I believe that our task is mainly to elaborate good questions. And to constantly mistrust the answers.

¹ Lucien Febvre, *Dal 1892 al 1933: esame di coscienza di una storia e di uno storico*, inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, 1933, Italian transl., in Id., *Problemi di metodo storico*, Torino, Einaudi, 1992, pp. 73-74 (my translation).