

## Memoria

### On the necessity of remembering

Karl Hartwig Kaltner

Every era has its dark side. Plagues and epidemics such as the Black Death, cholera, syphilis, tuberculosis, and even the Spanish flu and the coronavirus have their temporal correlations. These events have left traces in our DNA and are engraved in the memory of our cell structure. Man-made disasters, wars and the traumas associated therewith as well as the atrocities of the 20th century aren't an exception either. They are part of our cultural identity, our collective, intergenerational memory and they are also stored within us physically and cellularly. They have shaped us. Even if we do not always want to admit it.

Memory is perhaps the most important aspect of our humanity and the basis of our relationship to reality and our development. Epigenetic coding is part of this memory. You cannot escape it, even if you deny it. Memory means being able to fit oneself and one's environment into a temporal concept of development and reflection, of yesterday and tomorrow, of good and evil. Without memory, it is not possible for us to recognize and question intergenerational imprints and traditions, repression and oblivion.

The individual who loses his/her personal memory loses his/her identity and therefore the possibility of self-reflection and of shaping his/her future. He/She can no longer find a place for him/herself in the scheme of things. A condition that throws us back to vegetative existence. A learning process from what has happened is impossible. In order to act consciously, we need to reflect on what has happened! If we lose this ability, all that remains is to endure the moment. And uncertainty. And perhaps fear at first. But that is also a memory. And the precursor to panic, and this can be instrumentalized politically and economically!

Fears and traumas are not only limited to our personal, conscious memory, they are also hereditary and effective via the cellular memory, as experiments on laboratory rats have shown. To awaken these fears, to draw them out of the primary source of our unconscious, to play with these instincts, is the way of irresponsible populists.<sup>1</sup>

Collective dementia, the escape into oblivion of entire groups, on the other hand, is seen less dramatically. It is rather common practice, represents a calculation, and is a manipulative process that ultimately involves an escape from responsibility. But this also has its consequences. Not only does it mean that centuries-old tradition, character and culture degenerate into folklore, it also prevents the review and reorientation of traditional values that is necessary for every generation. Identity fades. Self-analysis is prevented, rituals and positions become empty phrases that have lost their credibility.<sup>2</sup> People talk about values that they themselves no longer embody. History is thus instrumentalized.

Art may help to keep open approaches that have been deliberately buried by socio-political calculations. Artists often do not choose, they do not consciously decide which topic to take up. The topic finds them. Like a dawning memory. They thus help a collective memory to take shape and create reality. And this reality is a universal reality, even if it is conditioned by civilization and culture. For art is created when the individual is overcome and the anonymous begins.<sup>3</sup> The collective, universally valid statement and

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Erdheim, *Die gesellschaftliche Produktion von Unbewußtheit. Eine Einführung in den ethnopschoanalytischen Prozeß*, Frankfurt/Main 1982, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Breicha, Fritz Wotruba. *Figur als Widerstand*, Salzburg 1977, p. 68.

the effect associated therewith is an essential aspect, an important criterion, also for the quality of art! Giving access to one's own identity, above all to being human, means opening the gates of perception. This may be the best protection against the instrumentalization of identity and history by power and the mighty. Because power, especially unrestricted power, can only be abused.<sup>4</sup> It always involves abuse. And far too often it plays on our fears.

Power and repression are closely linked. There is a close connection here. If a critical mass is reached, it will seek an outlet like an eruption. Physics, socio-cultural and socio-political currents are reflected here.<sup>5</sup> This cannot usually take place without major personal change or social upheaval.

Ethnopschoanalysis, as represented among others by Mario Erdheim, underlines the necessity of this debate, as do the art theories of Josef Beuys, who believed that art only begins where the development of human consciousness is concerned!<sup>6</sup> Scientists such as Eric Kandel and Umberto Eco wrote about this, poets and writers such as Georg Trakl, Giuseppe Ungaretti or Wilfred Owen as well as Thomas Bernhard or Elfriede Jelinek emphasize the necessity of memory, be it personal or collective. Cultural theories assume that memory is the basis of our culture and our world view and thus forms the foundation of our civilization. Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel in particular, as a globally recognized neurologist and art historian, has convincingly demonstrated these connections between memory, art, awareness and social development.<sup>7</sup> The approaches and interpretations may be diverse, but the phenomenon remains.

The First World War undoubtedly brought about an enormous paradigm shift in our civilization. Europe had to reinvent itself, had to rearticulate its civilizational aspirations! It had to look for new forms and new content. Europe had to rewrite its matrix and ultimately failed because of nationalisms, fascism and Stalinism. Despite an unprecedented war euphoria, there were already warning voices in 1914. One needs only to think of the pastoral letters of the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg, Balthasar Kaltner, who repeatedly warned of the brutalization and dehumanization associated with war.<sup>8</sup> Just as Georg Trakl wrote his poem "Grodeck" in a cry of pain and despair, Balthasar Kaltner repeatedly warned of the consequences of war, of the psychological damage caused by an armed conflict. The post-war period was to confirm his warnings.

Old multinational and multicultural empires disintegrated. Identities were destroyed, values and the associated aesthetics had to be rightly redefined. The socio-cultural aspects of these old social structures and the advantages of multicultural thinking were no longer recognized, and nationalisms triumphed.<sup>9</sup> Violence replaced diplomacy.

After the Second World War, it was art that first reacted to repression and idyllic hypocrisy. But the roots of this awareness lie much deeper, going back not only to Sigmund Freud, whose essay "Totem and Taboo", first published in 1913, underlines the importance of art in the process of awareness.<sup>10</sup> One could go back even further, to Franz Anton Messmer and Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, who were already concerned with the

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Simon, *Economic Policy for a Free Society*, Chicago 1948, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Leopold Kohr, *Das Ende der Großen. Zurück zum menschlichen Maß*, Salzburg – Vienna 2002, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Hiltrud Oman, *Joseph Beuys. Die Kunst auf dem Weg zu leben*, Munich 1998, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Kandel, *Auf der Suche nach dem Gedächtnis. Die Entstehung einer neuen Wissenschaft des Geistes*, Munich 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Gerlinde Katzinger, *Balthasar Kaltner. Kanonist und (Erz-)Bischof an der Schwelle einer folgenschweren Wendezeit (1844 – 1918)* (= Veröffentlichungen des internationalen Forschungszentrums für Grundfragen der Wissenschaft Salzburg, vol. 17, Frankfurt/Main 2017), p. 108ff.

<sup>9</sup> Leopold Kohr, *Weniger Staat. Gegen die Übergriffe der Obrigkeit*, Salzburg – Vienna 2004, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu*, Frankfurt/Main 2005, p. 141.

visualization of mental states and the sphere of influence of the unconscious. This is a typically Austrian aspect of art appreciation, which also has a strong cathartic component.

Commemoration and remembrance are therefore of great social relevance, whereby the celebration of anniversaries amidst the patriotic roar of brass bands and the phrases of politicians should not be confused with the necessary remembrance and awareness of one's own roots. For the latter is a highly intimate act that, far from the public eye, leads us deep into the abysses of our identity. And despite all necessity, this does not always have to be an occasion for Sunday speeches.