

Guarding and Transmitting the Vulnerability of the Historical Referent

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In her essay “Truth and Politics,” Hannah Arendt distinguishes between “rational truth” and “factual truth.”¹ Arendt associates “rational truth” with durability: the human mind will always be able to reproduce axioms, rational discoveries, and theories, so “the burning of all books of geometry would not be radically effective” (*TP*, 230). On the other hand, when it comes to “factual truth,” or the historical referent, we are dealing with something much more fragile that is in danger of being lost forever. Given that historical facts and accounts of events are the outcomes of human beings living and acting together in an ever-changing context — given that historical facts depend on the precariousness of human relationality rather than solitary deductions — Arendt notes that once the historical referent is lost, “no rational *effort* will ever bring [it] back” (*TP*, 231, emphasis added).

Arendt admits that this is a distinction made “for the sake of convenience” (*Ibid.*), in order to call our attention to the fragility of the historical referent. Arendt’s distinction thus prompts us to appreciate the inherent vulnerability of the past and leads us to recognize the *work* of remembrance: the fact that the historical referent needs our effort of referencing and recitation in the present in order to survive, to gain countenance, to gather significance, and so to provide us with our bearings in the world. This is an activity that the individual cannot properly undertake by herself; it is always related to others as part of forging a common world. And forging a common world necessarily implies pining for significance — for “the transformation of the given raw material” into a story that can be told (*TP*, 262). Arendt proposes that the work of preserving the historical referent is vested in a community of interpreters, who can respect the implied double bind in this endeavor: namely, that “even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its history...to rearrange the facts [so that they can convey a meaningful story that will resonate in the present]; we don’t admit the right to touch the factual matter itself” (*TP*, 239).

But who makes up this community of interpreters? Noting that the price of the freedom to act in politics includes both the potential of lying and the devastating erasure of the referent by the “modern lie,” Arendt, by the end of her essay, invokes two public institutions that are vested with the power to shelter the historical referent. Specifically, she names the judiciary and education as two public spaces that, although they are established and supported by the powers that be, stand outside the struggle of politics in their endeavor to preserve and faithfully guard factual truth. The judiciary and education are carefully protected against social interests and political power, and thus simultaneously provide both a *refuge* and an *active site* for the faithful interpretation and dissemination of history. As Arendt writes, “the humanities, which are supposed to find out, stand guard over, and interpret factual

truth and human documents...comprehends much more than the daily information supplied by journalists" (*TP*, 261).

While I appreciate Arendt's particular demarcations of the political and the criticalness of maintaining a certain faithful "guardianship" over a past that threatens to disappear amid the interests of the present, her proposal does not consider the forces, conflicts, and contradictions that cut across any "guardianship" role. And significantly, for the purposes of this essay, Arendt does not consider how educational sites, in particular, are permeated with and implicated within *the prevailing modes of reception* that condition the way we hold, interpret, and disseminate the past. As Edith Wyschogrod recognizes, far from occupying some hermetically sealed space, the study and transmission of history within both the university and the museum are ensnared in a culture of spectacle and information, where the historian "as purveyor and consumer of reproductions" must seriously ponder how she can continue to guard over and speak "in the name of the historical object."² To admit as much does not rebuff the peculiar guardianship over the past that is vested in certain educational sites; rather, it forefronts the need for an attentive concern for the fragility of the referent and the condition of historical study in our particular time.

A variety of thinkers have utilized the notion of spectacle to describe the contemporary condition that structures our attention and our manner of receiving and transmitting, compressing and refiguring, learning and teaching about past events. In the wake of the spectacle's impact on human attention and sensibility, what happens to our relationship to the past? And how might we (keeping Arendt's concerns in mind) give refuge, meaningfully nourish, and extend historical time to that which is beyond our present time or concerns? I will suggest that educational institutions vested with guarding the past must enter into a complex and tireless negotiation with the contradictions, tensions, and peculiarities that are put into play in an age of spectacle and information. On the way to making this point, I begin by describing how I am initially employing the term spectacle. I follow this with a discussion of the particular paradoxical obligations facing those who seek to guard and transmit the past. More precisely, I discuss how an ethical approach to guardianship must account for the way in which historical transmission is simultaneously caught between the poles of *license* and *fidelity*: between putting the past into circulation in terms of present reciprocity and holding onto the asymmetry of the past. I then go on to propose that untangling and cutting loose each pole from the other consequently leads to the pitfalls of a *hyperrelativism* and/or *hyperfidelity* that compromises our learning about, and ethical engagement with, the past. The essay concludes with a discussion of how some of the issues raised in the speculative part of the paper play themselves out in a public site vested with guarding and teaching about the past. Namely, I engage the debates around the pedagogical future of an infamous building in Argentina, which was once used as a clandestine torture center.

THE ECONOMY OF SPECTACLE

Generally, "spectacle" describes an economy of representation in which stories and images are compressed into readily recognizable forms: quick encapsulations and units of information that can circulate smoothly through the channels of mass

mediation.³ This mode of presentation or preservation outstrips its content, hollowing out and narrowing the details and specificity of its subject within the primacy of the present. To be clear, employing the notion of the spectacle will not allow us to uncover a time of “pure responsiveness” that precedes some supposedly “technological Fall of Man.” It is not a question of finding a more “authentic” source which allows us to overcome the distorting effects of the apparatus of representation — for these modes of circulation are not “in the way,” but remain, in fact, *the way* for images and stories to arrive in our time.

Admittedly, today, most teachers and students are skeptical of the vast amount of images and stories that come our way. The present condition of dissemination, simply by its repetition and multiplication of differing texts referencing past events, allows us to appreciate — perhaps like never before — the media, the practices, the manipulations, and the various interpretations and contexts that are mobilized in order to mediate the past. Yet, while we may appreciate how the past’s implication in the present is selective, incomplete, and imagistic, it is also the case that dissemination in a culture of spectacle and information necessarily presses us to consider how the particular specificity of the past is at risk of being subsumed into that which facilitates the operations of the present economy of representation. If the culture of spectacle and information is the predominately operative and valued model of receiving and transmitting texts today, we must note its potential in diminishing, rather than strengthening, the particular differences embedded in the past that do not fit the present form of mediation. For instead of simply guaranteeing a living link with the present, the vast amount of images and stories in circulation tend to perish or are flattened out through the rhythmic cycles of information. Circulating through the primary currency of information, images and stories from another time have the lifespan of the moment and thus risk not merely the compression of their form, but also running out of time — of being stripped of the necessary time required by the past to make its summons, its contact point, and its transactional claim on the present.

DOUBLY BOUND TO THE REFERENT: AN ETHICAL PROPOSAL

Although mediated through a nexus of contemporary concerns, and temporally refigured by the needs of the present, the past *must* retain “its face,” its summons, and its uncompromising time of otherness. The past in this sense must retain that which does not expend itself as information, in order to teach us and face us *as the past*, in order to be something *different* from the present. And yet, the transmission and condensation of the past through the mediated structures of our present is what gives it circulation and reciprocity, and thus the possibility of a continuous readability.

Historical work is thus entangled within a particular paradox. While the past cannot live in the present without circulating and being digested as an image or a story that will resonate in the present, the past — in order *to face us as the past* — must retain an *unpalatable particularity* that exceeds our present modes of reception. The historian is thus caught between the poles of reciprocity and responsibility: putting the past into circulation in a compelling manner through terms of the present

reciprocity and, at the same time, guarding the alterity and wrinkles of the past from being compressed and smoothly revised within the exigencies of the moment.

Wyschogrod puts it this way: because the historian works with texts of an other who cannot speak for herself, the historian must pledge that she will, in a gesture of pure fidelity, restore the past in its own terms, guarding it against any present condensation. Yet, Wyschogrod admits the impossibility of realizing this promise. She writes, “The historian is placed in a Catch-22. Obligated by her vow to restore the past in its actuality, she nevertheless recognizes the impossibility of doing so” when she attempts to give it representation.⁴ Whereas Wyschogrod’s argument goes elsewhere, my essay proposes that *attending to*, rather than resolving, this double bind gives us an ethical and instructive imperative for historical work.

Doubly bound to a pledge of fidelity to the past and to a necessary infidelity, to a recreative act of interpreting and circulating the past through the terms of the present, the historian comes upon a moment of undecidability. In this moment, the rules for how to proceed become indeterminate: it is not clear exactly how much authority one should give to the past or how much license one needs to take in order to reanimate the past in the present. On such terms, representational practices are in contradiction, not ensured or known in advance. This moment of undecidability thus gives the historian a task, where she must face her decisions between fidelity and licence without recourse to any preset formulas that would ensure the resolution of a conflict or justify an answer through a rule. The undecidability encountered through the double bind thus does not impose paralysis; rather it is the very condition of a responsible approach, of a responsible decision for how to guard and transmit the past.

The gesture to a responsible approach does not seek any final resolution or reconciliation, but rather leads us to constantly preserve and engage the tensions, tangles, and double binds thus described. For the constant vigilance and work of protecting this interminable tension between putting the past in service of the present, or putting the present in service of the past, is precisely what preserves the ethical distance between the past and the present. The tension preserves the particular tense, the particular commitment to time, within each pole and thus (1) holds the possibility of a fidelity to the past as that which subjects the present to something other than what it is, and (2) opens the past to the indelible possibility of being resuscitated through present forms of dissemination and reinterpretation.

DISENGAGING THE TENSION: HYPERFIDELITY AND HYPERRELATIVISM

To the degree that our contemporary condition of spectacle structures the terms of our historical attentiveness, the possibility of working within the tensions of fidelity and license are diminished. In what follows, I discuss how historical attention structured through spectacle ends up disengaging the tension between fidelity and license, consequently collapsing the ethical asymmetry between the past and the present. More precisely, I consider how untangling and cutting loose each pole from the other leads to the pitfalls of (1) hyperfidelity, and/or (2) hyperrelativism: two characteristic features of spectacle that foreclose the ethical possibilities of guarding and transmitting the historical referent.

Disengaged from the questions and task of wrestling with how the past must be mediated through the present, hyperfidelity to the referent ensues. Within practices characterized through hyperfidelity, the words and images of past lives and events are taken as self-sufficient, as self-present entities that possess the capacity to speak for themselves. By privileging a mode of attention that mobilizes an *actuality* of the past in the present without rendering its *artificiality*, the ethical distance between the past and the present collapses.⁵ In other words, the necessary innovation and work of recalling the past in the present is undermined in favor of a reverential regard for the past. Historical figures, objects, or events are elevated and maintained as inspiring icons or moments that are vested with the power to speak not only for themselves, but also on behalf of the present. Deferring all authority to the past, and believing that the past can speak for the present, ultimately defers the work and (im)possible choices that must be made due to the disjunction between the past and present.

Under practices of hyperfidelity, where the past is assumed to be wholly given and transparent for us, the possibility of inheriting something different from the past is foreclosed. As Jacques Derrida writes, “if the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it.”⁶ Our ability to receive the past is thus not truly possible without a sense of our present responsibility in critically and creatively engaging the past through our time and limits. Derrida notes that: the past “always says ‘choose and decide from among what you inherit’...[this injunction] can only be one by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times — and in several voices.”⁷ Practices of hyperfidelity, however, circumvent the work of inheritance, work that reminds us that the past necessarily implicates a connection to the (living, differing/deferring) world. Amid practices of hyperfidelity, critical engagement, the work of facing our present choices, is annulled by a form of thinking that endows the past with an infinite power which takes possession and forecloses human potential (that is, our ability to read, think, learn, and transform our relation to the past).

By contrast, hyperrelativism depicts a mode of attention and identification that strips the particularity of the past so that it smoothly enters, without disruption, into the present terms of exchange. Within practices characterized through hyperrelativism, there is a refusal to bear and care for the proper name of the past as its representation becomes exchangeable and expendable in the market of information. The lack of care for the proper name of the past elides our particular obligation to respect the fragility of the referent and so threatens the transgenerational endeavor of maintaining a world of significance amid the ruin of time. The loss of the means to meaningfully pass on (the proper names of the past) results in an atrophying sense of a common world of significance. Here the sentient complexity of human life and history threatens to disappear in the abstraction of facts and information that smoothly flow through the channels of mass mediation. Circulated through a chain of equivalence, where events treated as information amass and resemble one

another, there is the threat of a pervasive indifference or fatalism — a claim that nothing will ever change. As the past is rendered into a continuous flow of equivalent events, the ability to appreciate the dynamic link between the past and present is reified into the dead weight of a history that appears to be always the same.

CONSIDERING THE TENSIONS AND FOSTERING SPACES FOR UNDECIDABILITY:

THE ESMA DEBATE

In this last section of the essay, I want to trace how some of the concerns discussed above are playing themselves out in a public site invested with guarding and teaching about the past. Specifically, I consider the debates around the future of the building *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which was used as a clandestine torture center during the last dictatorship.

This notorious Navy School building (known by its Spanish acronym ESMA) stands on a busy thoroughfare in Buenos Aires. ESMA was one of the 600 clandestine detention centers operative during the military's "dirty war." An estimated 5,000 people were imprisoned there, of whom only 400 survived. If one building is to symbolize the repression in Argentina it is ESMA, which is known to have scattered remains within its site. In 1998, then President Carlos Menem issued a decree to demolish ESMA, so as to remove its haunting presence in the name of "national unity." In a type of public exorcism, Menem proposed replacing ESMA with a monument to "national reconciliation." A brochure advertising condominiums across the street promised views onto "the national unity park" that was to cover the ESMA site. Literally, in the overturned burial grounds of the "disappeared," the sense of a redeemed "we" sought its monumentalization. But ESMA was well known; it was entrenched in the public imagination as a type of monumental crypt attesting to the worst memories of the repression. Opposing the use of the grounds of a past atrocity to justify the terms of the present, an urgent public mobilization unfolded to prevent the state from undertaking the demolition project. Eventually Menem's decree was annulled through a lawsuit launched by rights groups.

While the building remained standing, various groups involved in the preservation effort were consequently faced with complex debates about what to do with the building so as to guard its legacy. There is broad agreement that ESMA will become a pedagogical space of some kind, which will hold archives detailing the past brutality. There is also talk of including artworks, installations, and an art gallery within ESMA, but this is a highly contested issue. One of the central questions in the ongoing debate about the pedagogical mandate for guarding this building is whether art has any role to play here at all. Some human rights groups worry about the appropriateness of art in such a place, claiming that the building "speaks for itself," and that therefore only descriptive documentary information is appropriate.⁸ The worry is that placing artistic works or a gallery space in ESMA would distract from, or worse, further spectacularize the facts. At issue is the suspicion that art's inherent license toward the referent — for neither artists nor the proposed gallery can predict in advance how they will represent the past — renders it ineffective for properly educating and enlisting succeeding generations in the ethos of a human rights culture, or for loyally guarding the past. In a gesture of hyperfidelity to the referent,

some propose that the building should remain empty, in order to allow the building to speak for itself. Others propose that, instead of artworks, the building should be filled with an exhibit that has a human-rights pedagogical agenda, with facts and information detailing the past atrocities.

An important voice here has been that of the artist-photographer Marcelo Brodsky. Brodsky, whose own brother Fernando was at ESMA and remains “disappeared,” notes that it is appropriate to ask, as many have done, whether art fits in this space, marked by its bloody history. The debates that surrounded the limits of representation in relation to the Holocaust, the debates in the wake of Theodor Adorno’s comments, and the “historian’s debate” in Germany resound here too. Emptiness has a certain quality that provokes a form of attentiveness to a traumatic site that is both personal and meditative. Emptiness can also help to foster a type of negative witnessing that may account for both the unrepresentable gaps that remain in people’s lives, and, importantly, point to our own epistemological gaps. Such gaps are significant to acknowledge, lest we too easily settle the disruptive force of this site.

However, Brodsky makes the point that in Argentina, “emptiness is not project enough,”⁹ for it leaves the building vulnerable to future unknowns — to changes of mind and alternative social agendas that might be imposed on what are still politically volatile commitments. Clearly, buildings do not speak for themselves; they require artifice and purposely placed objects to bring humans together to draw out their significance and forge a commitment to a desired future. For Brodsky, art has a role to play in the pedagogic project of ESMA. Visual art, in a particular, nondidactic form, has the ability to offer up objects in an interpretative space where evocative interminable questions around representation and relations to the past can emerge, rather than merely informing about the horrors that happened there. Such an approach is needed, Brodsky proposes, because it guards the significance of the building and gives it a better chance for a future: “No one will want to repeatedly return to hell.”¹⁰ Brodsky’s point is that humans need sites that can support complex mediation through objects, things, interpretative networks, and intricate structures that allow people to come together and grapple with a moment of undecidability that presents the (im)possible task of transmitting the past into the present. Rather than merely teaching about the factual horrors of the past, which risks exhausting our interest, art has the ability to sustain a future concern with these issues.

Certainly, the concern of various rights groups to recover and preserve ESMA from the “politics of reconciliation” — a politics that threatens to demolish the specificity of this site — is an important undertaking. But there is also the worry, as expressed by Brodsky, that, amid this recovery operation, we might risk the very futurity of this site when, through the logic of hyperfidelity, we assume that the building “can simply speak for itself.” And there is the worry that, when we render ESMA primarily a site for conveying “historical information,” supposedly without artifice, we risk the pitfalls of a hyperrelativism, where the knots and troubling complexity of the event disappears into the swamp of facts and statistics. By privileging a pedagogical strategy that either empties the building or fills the

building with supposedly transparent, horrible facts we make ESMA susceptible to either the future whims of politics (since emptiness is not project enough) or to a numbing disinterest in the event (since no one wants to return repeatedly to hell).

Brodsky's comment suggests that the more pressing threat to ESMA resides in the way in which the pedagogical proposals to empty or fill ESMA foreclose the present public memorial potential afforded by this site. To prioritize ESMA either as a site of emptiness (hyperfidelity) or as a site filled with facts (hyperrelativism) disregards how the placing and relating of objects, and the use of artifice, within ESMA can forge collective scenes of orientation toward the past and future. What is at issue, then, is to recognize how ESMA potentially offers a site where publics can gather around the traces and objects of a forlorn past through memorial artistic acts that can allow individuals and publics to be powerfully affected and therefore apprehend how the past faces and calls out to the present through the tension between (1) an interdiction that obliges us to guard the particularity of the referent and (2) the injunction that equally obliges us to transmit the past so that it makes a contact point with our present.¹¹

While Brodsky and others are loath to specifically prescribe what type of art should go into ESMA, the suggestion is that there is something about the very nuance and interruptive potential of art that opens us to the work of undecidability that is so necessary for allowing the past to teach us and face us *as* the past, as something *different* from the present. Since visual art is opposed, in Brodsky's opinion, to information, placing artworks within ESMA can provide a mode of attentiveness and memorial practice substantially different from the narration of historic facts. Through the passage that art opens, Brodsky hopes that ESMA can become a complex space for reflection and dialogue that is not easily exhausted or rendered obsolete by passing political trends. The hope is also for a site that can preserve and animate the particular relevance of the past across time: A place for reshowing and reinserting the past into an elsewhere, allowing new configurations to emerge, so that we may see a unique event instead of a continuous flow of equivalent events that disappear into the swamp of information.

1. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993). This work will be cited as *TP* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics Of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 76.

3. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 60.

4. Wyschogrod, "An Ethics of Remembering," xii.

5. See Jacques Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).

6. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New Industrial International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16.

7. *Ibid.*

8. See Horacio Gonzalez, "Las sombras del edificio: construccion y anticonstruccion" [The Shadows of the Building: Construction and Anticonstruction], in *Memoria en construccion: el debate sobre la ESMA* [Memory Under Construction: The Debate About ESMA], ed. Marcelo Brodsky (Buenos Aires: La Marca Editoria, 2005).

9. Marcelo Brodsky, "Arte y Memoria" [Art and Memory], in *Memoria en construccion: el debate sobre la ESMA*, ed. Brodsky, 207.

10. Ibid.

11. I am following Derrida's emphasis on undecidability. Whereas in Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical model, the apparent conundrum between the injunction and the interdiction is overcome by the will to understand, for Derrida the relation between the injunction and the interdiction does not produce any circular or reciprocating movement that would lead to gradual integration, emerging totality, or ongoing continuity. The relationship is precisely a "double bind": an unresolvable tension that conditions our approach. See Jacques Derrida, "This Is Not an Oral Footnote," in *Annotation and Its Texts*, ed. Stephen Barney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 192–205.