

PATRIMONIO CULTURAL Y SOSTENIBILIDAD

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Patrimonio cultural y sostenibilidad

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CAPÍTULO CUARTO

THE ART OF FORGETTING¹

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Artículo de investigación a partir de la conferencia "El arte de olvidar", impartida en el seminario de debate y profundización "Patrimonio cultural y sostenibilidad".

RESUMEN

Este capítulo advierte sobre la importancia que tiene el olvido en la vida cotidiana, no solo por la eliminación de

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- 1 First presented as a contribution to the Heritage Academy Brabant, Is this the selection? - Symposium on choosing, collecting and selling, 28 August 2014, Eindhoven; and as a lecture The Art of Forgetting, at the Film Academy, Amsterdam University of the Arts, 12 November 2014.
 - 2 (La Haya, 1955). Arqueólogo clásico de formación, estudió y vivió en Ámsterdam y Roma (Ph.D. 1987). Trabajó como diseñador gráfico y como productor en televisión pública. Se ocupó en los asuntos públicos nacionales del campo de la arqueología y fue miembro de la junta ejecutiva del Museo Nacional de Antigüedades, que lo inició en su carrera como asesor cultural independiente en 1998 (Gordión), prestando servicios a numerosas instituciones privadas y públicas de patrimonio cultural y del Gobierno, tanto en los Países Bajos como en el extranjero. Desde 2011 es profesor de tiempo parcial de Patrimonio Cultural en la Reinwardt Academie. Además ha sido y es miembro de la junta de varias organizaciones culturales (mediados de los años noventa: presidente del Foro Europeo de Asociaciones Patrimoniales) y movimientos sociales, así como consejero gubernamental municipal, provincial y nacional. Los museos participativos, los estudios de memoria, los movimientos culturales de base y la creación de lugares han sido algunos de los principales temas de sus proyectos de investigación y docencia, también en el extranjero (Moscú, Bangkok y Hangzhou). Le gusta viajar, tocar música clásica y cocinar platos mediterráneos.

información irrelevante, sino para la superación de situaciones traumáticas, lo cual también es válido en el campo del patrimonio y de los museos. Aunque el olvido puede imponerse mediante la represión oficial e incluso por la obsolescencia planeada, en ocasiones “hay que olvidar para poder perdonar”, en una lógica que implica dejar cosas atrás para poder avanzar. Los museos no pueden pretender registrar y almacenar todo artefacto cultural: por un lado, por la imposibilidad logística y financiera; y por otro, porque muchas de las piezas almacenadas van perdiendo su significado bajo nuevos paradigmas. En efecto, los sistemas de valores, incluyendo los valores estéticos, cambian constantemente; por tanto, los museos deben, además de tender puentes que permitan la comunicación con el pasado, proyectarse hacia el futuro preguntándose: ¿adónde queremos ir y qué estamos dispuestos a dejar atrás para conseguirlo?

Palabras clave: olvido, patrimonio cultural, museos.

ABSTRACT

This chapter is about the importance of oblivion in everyday life, not only for the elimination of irrelevant information, but for overcoming traumatic situations, which is also valid in the field of heritage and museums. Although forgetfulness can be imposed by official repression, or even by planned obsolescence, sometimes “you have to forget in order to forgive”, in a logic that involves leaving things behind in order to move forward. Museums cannot pretend to register and store all cultural artifacts: on the one hand, because of the logistical and financial impossibility; and on the other, because many of the stored pieces are losing their meaning under new paradigms. Indeed, value systems, including aesthetic values, are constantly changing; therefore, museums must, in addition to building bridges that allow communication with the past, project into the future

by asking themselves: Where do we want to go and what are we willing to leave behind to get it there?

Keywords: oblivion, cultural heritage, museums.

In *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995), the American psychiatrist Oliver Sacks describes the case of his patient Franco Magnani, a middle-aged Italo-American. In the eighties, after a brain disorder, Magnani started experiencing what we would now call a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which caused him to become unable to function properly, becoming coercive, suicidal and violent. But at the same time he had developed a remarkable talent: painting picture perfect landscapes from his childhood. What had happened to him?

Magnani had witnessed the village of his boyhood, Pontito in the Tuscan hills, bombed by the Nazis, late into WW2. Shortly afterwards, his father committed suicide. But he had promised his mother "I shall make it again for you". He had supposedly forgotten all about this episode for the duration of his life, until after the brain haemorrhage. Sacks does not treat or heal his patient, but notes his curious talent to be able to reproduce in painting his native village, in hundreds of works, down to the smallest detail. In fact this made him a celebrity for a while, with a show dedicated to him in San Francisco's science museum, the Exploratorium, called *The Memory Artist* (1988). The point is that Magnani recreated from memory the precise shapes and forms of his hometown just as they appeared right before the calamitous wartime destruction. That is called "freezing": not being able to process the unworkable. Sacks dedicated an essay to it, "The landscape of his dreams", in *The New Yorker* of June 1992.

Similar cases are known from literature, less spectacular but of purer post-traumatic stress levels. After treatment and returning to what we might call normality, the patients invariably lose their picture-perfect reproductive power. I think there is a lesson to be drawn here. The past as such

does not exist—it is a figment of our imagination. Persons with a balanced personality integrate events, images and impressions into a continuous whole. Details will solve, for which we may be thankful, otherwise we would go stark crazy. And to be sure, objects from the past do not coincide with “history”, they are what they are but also function as coat racks for the constant creation and recreation, every time in different form, of narratives about the self, put in historical perspectives. It’s stuff that’s being processed all the time. Only when the past remains unprocessed, as for instance the Battle of Kosovo (1389) in Serbian nationalist imagination, it may serve as an unshakable fact, a self-contained, unchanging “thing” underpinning an ethnic or other identity cause. But once you relate to it, integrate it into your personal identity, make it part of yourself so that you can move on: then you can also deal with it without being a victim of it. We then forget the snapshot, as it were. In fact, PTSS research seems to confirm the need for active integration of traumatic experiences. During a trial series of psychiatric sessions, PTSS symptoms such as nightmares and flashbacks quickly dwindle, though related to a temporary increase in emotional reactivity. It’s forgetting through integrating.

Studying the workings of forgetting seems contrary to what cultural heritage is about, at least it has gone largely unnoticed in cultural heritage studies. Remembrance and memory: celebratory or institutionalized, these two are often considered the pinnacle of civil society’s dealing with the past. But in the academic field of memory studies, a branch of sociology heeded not by many heritage professionals, increasing attention has been paid to its counterpart — forgetting. Among others, most prominently Aleida Assman and Paul Connerton, I wish to point to the latter’s easily accessible “Seven types of forgetting” (2008). Connerton critically remarks on the respect, bordering on religious veneration, in our time for all things connected to preserva-

tion, remembering and recalling. Yet, he posits, there is a long tradition of forgetting, often institutionalized, as part of many cultures. He proposes to identify seven forms of forgetting, from official repression (like the Roman *damnatio memoriae*, the physical erasure in public inscriptions of the name of a disgraced predecessor, but also the disappearance of noble titles after the French revolution or the compulsive denial by the Futurists of any past, or recently the making invisible of BBC presenter Jimmy Saville after he was posthumously exposed as a serial child abuser) to public rituals through which to engage with intolerable suffering, such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committees.

COMPARATIVE CHART 1. SEVEN TYPES OF FORGETTING

1. Repressive erasure
2. Prescriptive forgetting
3. Condition for identity formation
4. Structural amnesia
5. Annulment
6. Planned obsolescence
7. Humiliated silence

Bibliographic source: Connerton (2008, pp. 59-71); (2009).

<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/42/kastner_najafi_connerton.php>.

Some examples may give an impression of the sheer range. The opening sentence of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), ending an excessively bloody period of war and devastation across all Europe, solemnly declares that all parties will not only forgive but also forget all of the wrongdoings mutually inflicted. The ancient Athenians were especially aware of the implications of unduly remembering. What we have come to call civilization could only be started, according to myth and legend, after the vicious circle of blood feud was broken with the institution of a special High Court, on the Areopagus Hill directly opposite the Acropolis. It was here that Orestes was tried for but also purified from

the murder of his mother Klytaemnestra. Institution of rule of law terminates the automatic mechanisms in the eternal cycle of not being able, being allowed or wanting to forget. We all dearly need amnesia and amnesty. This is still the case in modern criminal law: once the sentence has been completed, the slate is eventually cleared (except for sexual offenses, perpetually remaining in someone's criminal record). In addition, forgetting is sometimes a necessity to be able to proceed to a new identity. In the case of relatively high-mobile island communities in the South Pacific, for example, it is more important to know who is in your immediate vicinity than to connect to ancestors who were elsewhere in the wet infinity of the ocean. Horizontal genealogies are then privileged above vertical ones — one's neighbours becoming one's uncles and aunts.

Forgetting in order to be able to move on also applies in, for example, entering into a new intimate relationship. You sometimes have to forget how and with whom you had sex before otherwise your current relationship will falter. To the members of the heritage profession, it is important to be aware that many archiving systems lead to oblivion. Once everything has been stored and safely put away, as in the great 19th-century colonial and imperial bureaucracies, you tend to discard the things in question from your mind. What you've written down you do not have to remember — hence Plato's abhorrence of writing. But anyone with a wristwatch has to use it, because he or she no longer automatically knows what time it is. We still experience that today, with the flood of preserved digital data. There is no period as frighteningly unknown as the last 20 years of our own era thanks to the great automation and digitization of literally everything. Data overload immediately leads to an infarct of information, the most important issue in current archival science and policy. Fortunately, there are natural disasters. What pneumonia is to the elderly are city fires, floods and wars to archives. Yet in this way the system







cleans itself periodically, creating a lull of scarcity in order for us to again get a grip on data, stuff and all that.

Another solution to data overload is the periodic wholesale replacement of knowledge — the things we are supposed to know and have at our fingertips. The discovery by Thomas Kuhn that scientific systems tend to be replaced periodically as a whole by a new paradigm, renders obsolete much of the knowledge acquired and accumulated during the time of in the previous and now abolished paradigm. That is also a form of systematic forgetting. It occurs more often in the exact and natural sciences than in the humanities, which I think are of a more accumulative nature than the sciences, which are more substitutive. In addition, forgetting may occur both as planned obsolescence (in the production and consumption of fashionable commodities) and as the thunderous silence of repression. For example, an imperfect *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is shown by the discomfort in remembering (let alone commemorating) the gruesome saturation bombing of the city of Dresden on Valentine's Day 1945 — mirroring the Coventry blitz five years earlier. A similar embarrassed silence surrounds the manner in which European countries used to deal until recently with the history of slavery and enslavement, in the Netherlands periodically exploding in debates about Black Peter. Sacks's example actually offers a counter template: the frozen image prevents you from acknowledging and owning your past.

It is interesting for the heritage profession to reflect on paradigm shifts as an accepted form of forgetting. Thinking changes, and with it knowledge becomes obsolete. Michel Foucault takes the next step. In the introduction to his *The Birth of the Clinic*, he recalls an 18th-century Parisian physician, still fully operating in the discourse of Greek humors doctrine, describing how from the orifices of a mental patient, after being exposed to alternating hot and cold baths for several days, greenish fumes are seen to

emanate. Foucault’s point is that the doctor had to observe this and even was convinced he did, since these perceptions were part and parcel of his mode of knowing. Taking a step ahead, Foucault (1973) subsumes the whole system of scientific, moral, social and religious beliefs, perceptions and realities under one heading, called *epistèmè* (Greek for knowledge). In Europe, during half a millennium several mutually utterly incompatible epistemai succeeded each other. What is thought, spoken and assessed in any of these systems of knowing, expressing and judging (Renaissance: similarities: God’s hidden wisdom; Enlightenment: differences, the workings of things; Modernity: evolution, processes) is incomprehensible in another.

COMPARATIVE CHART 2.

Period/episteme	Cultural values	Objects selection
Renaissance	Classical tradition	
Enlightenment	Rationality	
Romantic period	Nostalgia	
Nationalism	Roots, countryside	
Modernity	Functionality	
Postmodernism	Quotations, hedonism	

Bibliographic source: Own elaboration.

ILLUSTRATION 1. *THE YOUNG BULL* BY PAULUS POTTER (c. 1647).

The implications for heritage I think are evident. The various, successive modes of knowing intuited by Foucault (he is not very specific about them and never went into the subject of museums) result in different choices for collection acquisitions. For example, the values associated with the Renaissance preoccupation with the imitation of classical examples in form and substance, lead in the field of language to a 17th-century literary and academic Dutch that to our ears is near-inaccessible. Corresponding choices were made in the visual arts and literature of the time. The same applies to the Enlightenment, with Romanticism and, yes, nationalism in its wake. Recall that Paulus Potter's iconic *The Young Bull* (actually *The Countryman*, 1647, Mauritshuis Museum, The Hague) once formed the complete embodiment of the spiritual and artistic ideal of the Low Countries before Rembrandt was rediscovered to represent a more protestant national image. Or recall that the start of the European conservation movements (the Dutch one in 1873 with an outcry by Victor de Stuers against cultural vandalism

and the barbaric sale of Dutch art to the UK) can best be understood as a romantic reaction to the sacrifice of the pre-Industrial Revolution art and architecture to Progress. We tend to think of the first conservationist advocates as early exponents of a conscientious cultural policy. Yet they rather gave voice to a broad sense of painful loss of what was suddenly being felt as a pastoral idyll from before 1850. This date is cloaked in the magic condition “older than fifty years” for heritage objects to become legally protectable in many countries. It was around the turn of the last century that preservation thinking got traction — often delayed by world wars and recession, to take legal shape only much later.

It is not difficult to see the implications. Over the course of centuries and going from episteme to episteme, museums were stocked with what was important according to the value system of each “knowledge phase”. The selections continued to exist in the next phase, even though the underlying value system had shifted. Reiterate five or six times and the result is that up to 95 per cent of the objects in classical museum collections are never on show. They have become unknowable. The question is whether it is still possible to give them a new life.

That is a particular urgent question for the tsunami of 18th and 19th century objects that crowd many of the European museums storerooms. They are Pandora boxes of romantic nostalgia not readily accessible to present day thinking, feeling and valuing. There’s little meaningful use to put them to. When I started my career as a museum consultant, in 1998, one museum director told me how he, when starting his function in a small city museum, secretly threw out most of the hundreds of late 19th-century cast iron stoves hidden from view in his storerooms. No one cared or even noticed. The UK Museums Association rhetorically asked, in a 2012 policy paper: “Do museums really need to

collect any more 18th-century watercolors, or 19th-century machinery?”.

Another example is the overwhelming amount of relics from the Second World War. There is no period in European history so precisely documented as the 1940-1945s. The point is that there is not much practical use for it —how many WW2 museums can one handle?— except perhaps to serve our feeling that “something important has been preserved”.

Do we have to deaccession all then? Certainly not. Placing myself in a venerable tradition of Dutch writers and essayists, I venture to say that at least some of these now largely superfluous collections are essential stepping stones to physically and empathically approach our predecessors. We wish to relate to previous generations and obtain a feeling, ultimately an understanding of what moved them. Engage in conversation. Take my parents, born in the twenties, with personalities largely determined by what happened during WW2 in into the succeeding years. Now just as the documents, objects and stories about those times (both parents passed away) form a bridge between me and them, and by necessity with an internalized part of myself; so can researching and activating those much older collections, the fruit of perhaps no longer shared values or understood choices, function as bridges for dialogues with our predecessors. I need some tokens for that, but perhaps not full collections. To quote Paul Schnabel, former senior government advisor on social and cultural affairs: “Let’s never forget that it’s acquisitioning, not de-acquisitioning, that may lead to a psychiatric diagnosis when occurring in obsessive and compulsive forms. In a metaphorical sense, this also holds for a museum and even for society: don’t try to hold on to what can be let go off”.

But are these dialogues at all necessary? Many think they are, and I follow them. If we do not conduct any conversation with our “predecessors”, just as the traumatized Italian

from the beginning of this story did not connect to his previous self, then engaging in meaningful dialogue with others may become increasingly difficult. Freezing leads to mental imbalance, lack of flexibility, relativity, distance, nuance. It is open conversation, I think, that enables us to avoid historicism and being trapped or even high jacked by heritage. That was probably what former president Barack Obama meant when, in a famous pre-election speech in defence of his spiritual guide Jeremiah Wright, remarked on the tensions between black and white in the US: “For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past”.

The heritage community, I think, would do well, in addition to collection and preserving, to envisage letting go of things, daring sometimes to clearly deaccession. But that is only possible when we know where we want to go. Obama (2018) continued seamlessly:

It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances — for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs — to the larger aspirations of all Americans.

The question then should be: where do we want to go, and what are we willing to leave behind for that?

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Este libro aborda —a partir de estudios de caso— problemáticas propias de la sostenibilidad de las instituciones culturales, para identificar oportunidades de mejora, reconocer que el sector genera bienestar y contribuir en temas cruciales como la innovación, la libertad de expresión y la preservación de la memoria. Con este propósito, todos los capítulos sitúan a las instituciones culturales dentro de un marco especial que reconoce el valor simbólico, educativo y retributivo de las propuestas productivas (de servicios) que ellas generan para la sociedad en general.

En conjunto, esta publicación presenta avances y resultados de investigación que buscan fortalecer el campo académico y disciplinario de la museología en la región e incidir en el ámbito profesional dedicado a la gestión del patrimonio cultural.

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