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# The Character of Contemporary Memorials

Harris Dimitropoulos

A key element of recovering place is frequently the construction of a memorial. But memorial design is vastly different now than fifty years ago. Gone are figural qualities and allegorical content, replaced by minimalism and calculated abstraction. Yet the desire to produce memorials has not abated. It may be stronger than ever.<sup>1</sup>

A memorial is a representational work that stands as testimony to the collective importance of an event, person, or circumstance. In its most successful form, it has continuing value, linking the past to the present and future. I will not attempt to unpack all the complexities of this difficult representational exercise, but I would like to explore how contemporary works of art—memorials, in particular—relate to the subject and to the collective.

In 2003, the *New York Times* published a series of articles commenting on the design competition for a World Trade Center Memorial. On November 22, the Arts and Design section included one by Julie Iovine, “Are Memorial Designs Too Complex to Last?” She wrote: “No one was surprised, given the ages of the finalists, that minimalism was the universal vocabulary of the submissions.” She then argued that because of cultural diversity, we can no longer resort to figurative or symbolic monuments. Memorials can no longer be referential.

Although these statements sound true, I think the age of the participants was of secondary importance. The appropriate explanation is that minimalism both eschews referentiality and provides a perfect surface for the projection of our egos and desires. It functions in a specular manner, mirroring us to ourselves, thus providing an effective strategy for contemporary memorials..

## The Subject and the Mirror

Our contemporary moment is one in which the subject reigns supreme. As Mark Augé has written: “In Western Societies at least, the individual wants to be a world in himself; he intends to interpret the information delivered to himself and by himself.”<sup>2</sup>

Critics have also long pointed out that memorials address their intended audience by accommodating a projection of the individual on their semantic matrix. As a subject, to be drawn to a memorial, I have to find a part of me in it. This act of projection is immediately transformed into what psychoanalysts call “mirroring”: I am engaged because I see me (or one of my traits) in the memorial.

In psychoanalytical terms, mirroring provokes a comparison between this specular image and the person I would like to be. In other words, is the reflection flattering? The part of the superego that performs this function,

that is the keeper of the best possible persons we can be, was for Freud the “ego-ideal,” and for Lacan the “ideal ego.”<sup>3</sup> From the inception of psychoanalysis, the ego-ideal has been identified as a trait of both subject and collective. For Freud, in particular, it connected the individual with the group. He wrote that “Each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego-ideal upon the most various models.”<sup>4</sup>

A memorial thus has to address the positive aspects of who we think we are, whether as individuals or as a nation. It has to act as if we coincided with our best possible self-fantasy. Memorials cannot tell us that we are weak, made mistakes, lost opportunities, or were wrong. If they do, they violate our primal narcissistic impulse, and we experience injury or insult.

In a seminal essay, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,” Lacan described how mirroring allows a subject to form a unified, albeit erroneous, sense of identity—of self.<sup>5</sup> It makes sense, therefore, that the mirroring of a subject, or a collectivity, in a memorial, will be similarly important. In fact, the identity derived therefrom is inscribed in temporality, in a series of moves that inscribe the subject in history. For the Lacanian scholar Jane Gallop, the mirror stage can be understood as “a turning point that ‘projects’ the individual into ‘history,’ that is in the future perfect.”<sup>6</sup> The “moral” conveyed by the memorial thus depends on the temporality implied by this future perfect: the subject identifies what it will have done in order to avert a similar disaster, prepare for a similar victory, etc.

In a 1977 essay “Notes on the Index, Part 1,” the art critic Rosalind Krauss introduced three notions important to understanding this mechanism: the mirror, the index, and the “shifter.”<sup>7</sup> The notion of mirror comes from Lacan; that of index comes from the philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (who remains nameless in her text); and that of “shifter” comes from the linguist Roman Jakobson.

It is the mirror, the notion of a subject confronting his or her reflection as same and “other,” that structures the relationship between these three notions. The mirror is the device by which the child can encounter himself/herself, and through it form a notion of identity. At the same time, to Lacan, this self-recognition is always fraught with misunderstanding and misrecognition. Caught in a cat’s cradle of specularity, a subject uses imagination to fill the gaps. The mirror introduces the notion of the imaginary.

Mirroring may take many forms. Caregivers mirror back at the infant its sounds and facial expressions,

establishing a rapport. This also affirms to the infant that it exists. Later in life mirroring becomes, metaphorically, the structuring principle of many encounters and situations. Significant relationships with lovers and friends frequently originate from mirroring.

The index and the shifter are each related to the notion of mirroring and then to each other in a semantic triangulation. The shifter has to do with what traditional semiotics would call a sliding signifier, one to which a series of signifieds can be attached. However, Krauss's use of the term implies a carefully constructed placeholder. Within any representation the shifter is an open spot, around which the context remains the same. The subject, as reader or viewer, is invited to fill it in, and in so doing, finds itself in the midst of the representation. This is the mechanism by which a representation is appropriated by a subject to then be used for the subject's own purposes. Imagine a huge mural, and every time a person stands in front of it, he or she is reflected seamlessly in a piece of it. Such is the notion of mirroring coupled with the shifter.

Finally, there is the index. According to Peirce, a sign performs an indexical function when it stands in as an effect of the referent it represents.<sup>8</sup> A shadow is an index of a thing, smoke is an index of fire, etc. A reflection in the mirror is an index pointing at the actual person or object being reflected.

Imagine the mural again. Huge in size, it depicts a scene, and every time people stand in front of it, they are assimilated into it and reflected back seamlessly as if they belonged there. In the case of a memorial, the representation has the additional power of being an index of the events it represents. This is because memorials usually refer to "true history." This is our collective and consensual sense of the past as a series of facts—not individual narrations or, possibly, interpretations.

The literary and cultural critic Andreas Huyssen has also noted that we live in an era that privileges the subject, one that promotes the "I" instead of the "we."<sup>9</sup> For us to find meaning in a work of art or architecture, the work has to include at least a part, a component, that addresses us as separate individuals. This is, of course, a total impossibility. The only way to achieve this effect is by including a void, a nonreferential but essential component, which the subject can be enticed to appropriate. This component is the shifter—the sliding signifier. It is a formless form; but every time it is viewed, it morphs into something and attains a form that refers to specific content. As soon as this "shifter" is identified, the subject will, more often than not, project his or her ego on it, rendering it relevant and

important. Since the projection is that of one's desire, or ego, the shifter automatically functions as a mirror. This is how the subject finds/projects him- or herself in the work.

### The Ego-Ideal

This motivation to see ourselves in the work of art—and in memorials in particular—is governed by a narcissistic impulse. In the case of the artwork that actually allows us to mirror, the process is so much more captivating because the work performs its mirroring actively, actually inviting us to do so.

Our everyday understanding of narcissism is inadequate here, however. It explains the process of mirroring as a simple act where we encounter our virtual other in a relationship of isomorphic correspondence. In fact, this process is fraught with all kinds of distortions and misrecognitions. It is entangled with our desires, our aspirations, our misunderstandings about ourselves—and, most important, our ego-ideal.<sup>10</sup>

Psychoanalytical discourse defines the ego-ideal as a mostly fictional construct representing who we would like to be. Freud saw it as a function of the super-ego; it is part of our consciousness, our psychic editing mechanism. In many ways it is related to the idealized image of our parents that resides in us before we actually encounter and deal with their humanity and fallibility. To use the relevant jargon, it is the "introjected, idealized parental imago." The corresponding term for Lacan was ideal-ego, a concept he tied to the realm of the imaginary, rather than the symbolic. For Lacan, after the mirror stage, the infant has to relate to the world in linguistic terms and use a symbolic structure. This is the structure of laws and interdictions.<sup>11</sup>

It stands to reason that every encounter with our reflection that tells us that we are not who we would like to be is cause for discomfort and distress. As adults, we might take this as an opportunity for self-reflection and growth. Ideally, a memorial that presented a discrepancy between ourselves as a collectivity and our ego-ideal might have a similarly edifying nature. By structuring-in the appropriate mirroring, it could teach us something about ourselves without having to be didactic. Unfortunately, our collective attitude to such memorials will be negative, dismissive, and potentially hostile. Our primary narcissism will cause us to feel injured rather than instructed.<sup>12</sup> As individuals and also as members of a collectivity, we like to pretend we have attained a state of equilibrium. We like to see ourselves as innocent, brave—whatever it takes to preserve the master narratives that purport to describe who we are and why we are that way.

It is one thing to know something, quite another to memorialize it. In a memorial, things take on broader significance and distinct gravity. The memorial is there to preserve memory, and when it comes to something of which a culture is not proud, that culture would rather de-memorialize it—commit it to forgetfulness. Thus, one of the exigencies of the shifter, of the mirror, is that it must also produce a reflection that appeases rather than confronts. The mirror must lie for us to preserve our pride. It must become a false index, as it reveals the illusion produced by fictional distortion.

A reflective component structured into a memorial also tends to secure its diachronic significance. The memorial commemorates an event of the past. The shifter is there to secure its relevance at any historical period, so it may be meaningful not only to its contemporaries but to future users. When it comes to a memorial, the promise of diachronic significance guarantees it will remain significant without guaranteeing the nature of this significance.

This structuring of a gap into the work, the invitation to the subject to see him- or herself in the memorial, is what distinguishes a classical monument from a contemporary one. A classical work leads the viewer to a definite conclusion and a moral. Such is the case of the Parthenon. In its pediments it tells the story of the birth of Athena and the birth of Athens. In the frieze it tells the story of the Panathenaic procession. Contemporary cultural practices, on the other hand, allow for a gap, one that receives the hermeneutic of plural subjects. A perfect example is Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. The project is structured around void spaces that allude to the lack of closure resulting from the trauma of Holocaust.

What I have in mind here is quite close to the way Michel Foucault identifies the mirror as the locus of a heterotopia. Mirrors have the ability to project us in the midst of a situation in which we physically do not belong. They make possible the phenomenal joining of disparate spaces and modalities of being. According to Foucault:

*Starting from the gaze, this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes the place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.<sup>13</sup>*

This commentary really has to do with how the recipient of the memorial, the intended addressee, is conjured by the designer. In a classical sense, the subject is a member of a collectivity and grows up knowing the rules, myths, and conventions of that entity. This inscription into what Lacan called the “symbolic order” is a product of acculturation, and comes after the mirror stage, which involves maternal care and empathy. He identified this realm of representations and language with authority and patriarchy, with the “name of the father.”<sup>14</sup>

As I mentioned before, the notion of ego-ideal for Freud and his followers was also part of this patriarchal realm. The contemporary subject, on the other hand, is first and foremost an individual with desires that have to be addressed and satisfied. Contemporary memorials are asked to play the double and contradicting role of addressing both a loosely defined collectivity and the needs and desires of diverse individuals at the same time. Thus, in a “mirror” monument, the edifying function can appear only in oblique ways.

To function at all these levels the memorial must structure the void in such a way that it guides the subject to place its reflection, to see itself in a context that is, in fact, the point of the commemoration. If the memorial's aim is bravery, a hero, or a loss, the subject is guided unconsciously to see itself in relation to that event. The seemingly infinite possibilities of the “shifter” are harnessed for a purpose. They produce a range instead of an infinite number of signifieds. The promise of a reflection lures the subject into participating, and structures its relationship to the thing remembered.

### **The Positive Void**

To this point I have described the relation between a representation and a void around which it is structured. The void is non-narrative. But most, if not all, representations have a narrative dimension. They tell a story; and because of that, they are biased, principled, and construct a mythology.

Once we introduce specularity as a necessity for the success of a memorial, questions of truth and accuracy become increasingly complex. Ultimately, one must ask whether a memorial can tell the truth at the risk of offending. My own experience tells me there is a limit to the truth-function of a memorial.<sup>15</sup> The subject as an individual and the collective as a plurality of subjects cannot confront negativity. The easiest way to confront something negative is to ignore it or to relegate it to the past. I would hazard that a memorial has no chance of success,

of rooting itself in people's consciousness, if it dwells on negative aspects or on things that have not yet been assimilated or dulled through the passage of time.

What pertains to the individual pertains to the collective. The collective has to maintain its cohesion, its identity in the ideal realm; the myths it shares have to be unchallenged; the causes it shares have to be noble and justified. In short, it has to see itself in a state of narcissistic plenitude and omnipotence. It is at that point that the ego-ideal assumes an editing mechanism, making sure that unflattering representations are kept hidden and forgotten.

The ancient Greeks used the word *heroon* for a memorial devoted to a hero or a collection of heroes, and they used the word *mnemeion* as we use the word memorial today. The *heroon*, a monumental tomb, was devoted to the noblest of the noble, the ones who had attained the standards of their time, who could stand as personifications of that society's ego-ideal. In that capacity they addressed the youth of that culture; they inculcated the desire for the young to grow up into heroes, to exemplars for others. Their function was not only narrative but also instructive. They held up the standard for all to see.

This function is a lot more difficult to fulfill today. Late capitalism and globalization have undermined the notion of the national subject. Today we have to perform as both subjects of a nation and subjects without one. For a memorial to fulfill its role it has to sacrifice specificity of narration in favor of opening up to, addressing, a larger group of individuals.

The collectivity sees itself as an extension of the past. Its members are the progeny of another generation, and historical continuity has to be preserved for the identity of the group to be preserved. Negative acts perpetrated in the past have to be repressed. The editing function of the ego-ideal is motivated through an initial identification. The subject today identifies with its ancestors in order to maintain a historical lineage. Through this identification, the mistakes of the ancestors become the mistakes of the subject and, as such, render its self-image painful and problematic. Thus the negativity has to be omitted.

I have tried to illustrate the specular function of memorials and their relationship to a culture's ego ideal. Simply put, people tend to "see" themselves in a memorial in a process that begins with identification and proceeds rapidly into mirroring.

As the art historian Alois Riegl put it, "Thus modern man sees a bit of himself in a monument, and he will react to every intervention as he would to one on himself."<sup>16</sup>

A memorial functions in many complex ways, and to issue guidelines on memorial design is impossible. It performs a curative role; it connects the present to the past and to the future; it provides closure; at times it even provides forgetfulness. The semantic mechanisms involved cover the arsenal of representation. Memorials by their very nature are structurally positioned to address our psyche, from our narcissism to our idealized self-image.

#### Notes

1. See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 2–3. The notion of memory and the role it plays in contemporary culture is central to the book.
2. Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 37.
3. I use the term "ego ideal" here to signify the Freudian notion as well as the Lacanian notion of "ideal ego."
4. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, with a biographical introduction by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959), p. 78.
5. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), pp. 1–7.
6. Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 83.
7. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, October Books, 1986), pp. 196–99.
8. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 115–17.
9. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 22. Of particular interest here is his reference to a contemporary tendency toward "musealization."
10. A simple, concise, and accurate distinction between the terms "ideal ego," "ego-ideal," and "superego" is to be found in Zizek Slavoj, "How to Read Lacan: 6. Ego Ideal and Superego," <http://www.lacan.com/zizraphael.htm>.
11. Ibid.
12. Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 3. In this instance Freud finds that the separation between individual psychology and group psychology is very small.
13. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Diacritics*, Spring 1986, p. 24.
14. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 67.
15. In 1989 I worked on a project for the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the French Revolution at La Villette. The project was a commemoration of the events that led to the Revolution as well as the entrepreneurial exploitation of the same events. Even though the events cited were historically accurate, officials and public alike wanted to resist and forget all aspects that would be considered "negative."
16. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments, its Character and its Origin," in *Oppositions Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p. 632.