

# Tracing the politics of aesthetics: From imposing, via counter to affirmative memorials to violence

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## Abstract

Memorials have become increasingly relevant in societies seeking to come to terms with the past of mass violence and there is a growing body of academic scholarship that scrutinises the politics of memory in divided societies. This article takes a different approach to the politics of memorials: it does not focus on what is remembered, that is, to what a memorial testifies, but how memory at a memorial (supposedly) takes place through the aesthetic strategies put to work. It contributes to emerging literature which explores aspects of performativity and the politics of affect. The objective is, however, to take it one step further by not only shifting attention to studying the engagement with, experience and performance at these sites but also to the politics of the aesthetics choice that promote this engagement. To do so, it differentiates between three aesthetic styles of memorials: imposing, counter and affirmative memorials that were all developed at a particular time in order to pursue particular political and social objectives. The current phenomenon, affirmative memorials, holds that there is a duty to remember and is firmly embedded in efforts to build peace, advance liberal norms and contribute to transitional justice. Pursuing this strategy is however at odds with the aesthetic style of these affirmative memorials that is derived from counter memorials and celebrates plurality and openness rather than wanting to affirm one message.

## Keywords

aesthetics, affirmative memorials, design, memorials, memory politics, peace building, transitional justice

Memorials have become increasingly relevant in societies seeking to come to terms with the past of a violent conflict or dictatorial regime. This new commemorative paradigm (Bickford and Sodaro, 2010) is reflected in the rising construction of memorials and memorial museums. In the context of transitional justice and peacebuilding, memorials are expected to contribute to fostering peace, preventing future violence, promoting reconciliation and healing, as well as introducing a sense of closure (Hamber and Wilson, 2002; Mannergren Selimovic, 2013; Buckley-Zistel and Björkdahl 2016; Torres and García-Hernández, 2016).

In analogy, there is a growing body of academic scholarship that scrutinises the role of memorials in this context and that places the politics of remembrance in divided societies centre stage.

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Analysing peace and the politics of memory has become a vibrant and highly important field of research over the past decades, involving scholars from various disciplines and a large variety of case studies (Ashplant et al., 2000; Björkdahl et al., 2017; Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer, 2014; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 2011). Much of this scholarship understands politics as the struggle over power between various interest groups over who gets to decide the future, and is thus concerned with political conflicts over what is to be remembered.

This article takes a different approach to the politics of memorials: it does not focus on *what* is remembered, that is, to what a memorial testifies, but *how* memory at a memorial (supposedly) takes place through the aesthetic strategies put to work by the memorial (or rather its architects, creators, artists, etc.).<sup>1</sup> Instead of exploring struggles over memory, it zooms in on the style and form of memorials and how these (intend to) affect visitors. The article thus contributes to a growing body of literature in this field which explores aspects of performativity and the politics of affect (Atkinson-Phillips, 2018; Sather-Wagstaff, 2016b; Tolia-Kelly et al., 2016). The objective is, however, to take it one step further by not only shifting attention to studying the engagement with and the experience and performance at these sites but also to the politics of the aesthetics language that stimulate this engagement. This approach thus expands the analysis from what memorials *mean* and what that *do* (Waterton, 2014) to *what it means that they do it in this particular way*. In other words, it does not focus on the politics of memorials in terms of struggles over what and whose memory to remember but on the politics of aesthetics, i.e. *how* they are (supposed to) affect visitors so that they remember in a particular way.

To this end, I draw on aesthetic analysis, which explores the materiality of a particular site and how it affects visitors. Regarding memorials, this requires focusing on specific characteristics, such as matter, style and form, and on how these serve as a metaphor for violent conflict, death and destruction, as well as analysing how they evoke emotions such as sadness or joy, intimidation or liberation, despair or hope, captivity or freedom and so on. In relation to violent conflict, the analysis focuses on ‘heritage that hurts’ (Mannergren Selimovic, 2020; Sather-Wagstaff, 2016a)<sup>2</sup> and argues on the level of the strategic employment of aesthetic form to potentially stimulate particular emotional responses in visitors.<sup>3</sup>

This article identifies three different aesthetic strategies related to three political objectives: imposing memory, countering memory and affirming memory. Each of these strategies employs a particular aesthetic language, which is situated within the prevailing memory culture of the time. While imposing memorials after the First and the Second World War seek to transmit a clear message about strength and certainty without providing space for visitors to think about the experience of violence themselves, the counter memorials after the Second World War are abstract to a point that visitors are left with uncertainty about their meaning and the meaning of memory itself. Visitors thus have to think for themselves. Affirmative memorials, which have sprung up since the 1990s, build on counter memorials yet encourage visitors to engage with them in order to critically reflect on the violent past. They are very clear about the duty to remember, thus affirming the importance of memory as an integral aspect of dealing with the past of violent conflicts. These three categories are of course difficult to delineate, mainly focus on Europe and North America and ignore the multi-faceted aesthetics at the peripheries (both spatially as well as conceptually). Nevertheless, they offer conceptual reference points for exploring the politics of aesthetics in certain spatio-temporal configurations.

In the following, I begin by introducing political aesthetic analysis in order to then delineate the three aesthetic strategies of memorials – imposing, countering and affirmative – and the politics of their aesthetic strategy. Much of the discussion of imposing and counter memorials draws on existing studies, such as by Young (2000, 2016) and Winter (1998) and provides a foil against which to develop and assess the concept of affirmative memorials. As shall be argued by way of conclusion,

this genealogy helps to understand the aesthetic politics of affirmative memorials and to view them with more critical distance. Importantly, it reveals a paradox in the politics and aesthetics of affirmative memorials. By way of conclusion, I will return to the academic analysis of memorials and make a case for not only studying the politics of memorials and their aesthetics, but also the politics of their aesthetics.

## The politics of aesthetics of memorials

Central to this article are the politics of aesthetics. Instead of following one particular idea about how politics and aesthetics relate to each other – such as for instance suggested by Rancière (2013) – it explores how different styles and forms of memorials are historically situated and therefore based on different political objectives, different understandings of what constitutes a society (and different constitutions of society), different ideas of public engagement and participation, and different concepts of political leadership ranging from authoritarian to democratic. Before discussing this in detail and illustrating it by tracing the aesthetics of memorials, let us look at the notion of aesthetics itself.

Considering memorials from an aesthetic vantage point requires some reflection on what this actually entails. In its broad usage, aesthetics refers to experiencing works of art or to the discipline of studying arts in general. In this context, one can differentiate between knowledge *about* art (art as the object of knowledge, here what we know about a memorial, its age, material, form, purpose, etc.) and knowledge *through* art (art as a vehicle for knowledge, here how a memorial makes us feel about the violent past and what insights we glean from this emotional response) (Brandstätter, 2009: 36). In other words, one can differentiate between what art *means* and what it *does*.

To some extent, aesthetics are free from pursuing objectives such as producing knowledge directly, that is, the purpose of experiencing an object is the experience itself, rather than it being a means to an end that lies beyond it. Memorials are therefore experienced as artistic spaces and not as vehicles to communicate factual information (such as schoolbooks, chronologies, an explanatory plaque and so on) – even though through their design they communicate this message non-verbally and indirectly. And yet, it would be naïve to think that memorials to violence – or other forms of art – are free from politics. Rather, they carry particular assumptions about past and present, values regarding the right form of remembrance and intentions concerning how a memorial can bring this across. Aesthetics and politics hence have to be thought together (Hohenberger and Koch, 2019).

This begs the question *how* the aesthetics of memorials produce a certain kind of knowledge. This article is particularly interested in two ways in which this occurs: first, it is interested in how memorials use representations in the form of metaphors in order to produce meaning. Second, it explores aesthetics as the perception by the senses, rather than cognition, again communicating meaning. Regarding the first, works of art such as memorials function as metaphors in that they communicate something about the violent past by using objects that have similar characteristics or symbolise aspects about this past (Brandstätter, 2009: 33). Art is therefore metaphoric; it gives us the illusion of having a picture (that is, an idea) of reality by producing an image of this reality. We think that a work of art or, in our case, a memorial resembles ‘reality’ and thus believe that – through it – we have access to this particular reality. Metaphors thus help artists to express themselves. In memorials, this is often done by including religious or political insignia or other decipherable symbols, particular materials or colours, or other features that allude to recognisable shapes, figures, styles and the like.

Regarding the second, ‘feeling the past’ (Tolia-Kelly et al., 2016: 3) in the present is central to aesthetic analysis. When visiting a memorial, we see, hear, smell and feel the space, we use our

senses to explore it. This may trigger particular emotions such as sadness, a sense of loss, despair, or despondency. Seeing human remains in a memorial in Rwanda, pieces of cloth in a memorial in Srebrenica, a field of crosses in Verdun, or statues of grieving parents or fallen soldiers triggers emotional responses. Feeling the cold of marble, the heat of an eternal flame, the narrowness of a tunnel in Sarajevo generates sentiments. These sensual experiences thus communicate meaning by stimulating emotions (Stevens, 2009). Even though this is always very personal and individualistic and may differ widely from visitor to visitor, it is by no means random but situated in the wider commemorative practices of a society and the way a society remembers. These emotions are often beyond representation and cannot be captured by words.

In this sense, memorials are effective tools for embodied, political narratives (Tolia-Kelly et al., 2016: 3) communicated through sensual experience (see also Atkinson-Phillips, 2018). They can intentionally evoke a range of powerful emotions by using smell, sound, space, etc., rather than just visuals such as metaphoric symbols that can be deciphered. The emotions evoked in visitors may then produce tangible effects and actions (Sather-Wagstaff, 2016b: 18; see also Waterton and Watson, 2015), for instance wishing to be part of a nation, admiring war heroes, identifying with the pain of victims, wanting to prevent future violence or feeling a sense of closure and healing, as illustrated below.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that this development is not only apparent in memorials but also in memorial museums. Given that the latter differ from memorials in a number of ways, they are not discussed in detail in this article, yet a brief glance at recent developments is insightful. Although museums have always attempted to affect identity (for instance that of a nation), 'many of today's memory sites claim to work to promote liberal ideals such as human rights, democracy and reconciliation by representing past violence and conflict' (Apsel and Sodaro, 2019: 3; Sodaro, 2018). Similar to memorials, they seek to advance a better future through education, often by using individual stories so that visitors can relate emotionally to victims or witnesses (Williams, 2017: 369). To that end, memorial museums have moved from mainly providing information to using visual, kinaesthetic, haptic and intimate bodily experiences (Williams, 2011: 223). Like memorials, they have become less authoritative (Casey, 2005) and seek to 'open up spaces of contestation in which controversial viewpoints can be voiced' (Arnold-de Simine, 2013: 8). In short, here, too, emotions are used to affirm memory.

For Hutchison and Bleiker (2014: 496), much of the work on the topic of emotions imposes a dichotomy of cognitive and affective emotions. Scholars who have a stronger focus on cognition treat emotions as a form of knowledge about an issue at stake (for instance sadness at a memorial) which leads to forming a decision (for instance seeking to prevent future violence). Emotions are thus mainly considered to be thoughts, judgements and beliefs. In contrast, scholars who have a stronger focus on affect see feelings more as non-reflective bodily sensations and moods (Waterton, 2014). These are in the first instance beyond representation and cannot be simply grasped by concepts and language. Hutchison and Bleiker suggest that instead of treating cognitive and affective emotions separately, a hybrid approach is more useful, according to which emotions arise due to a combination of cognitive/conscious and affective/bodily perceptions. Cognitive and affective emotions 'can be seen as intrinsically linked, for affective states are subconscious factors that can frame and influence our more conscious emotional evaluations of the social world' (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014: 502). It is this more conscious emotional evaluation of the social world which can be captured by language and shared amongst visitors and beyond, and which may become collective and acquire political significance. Regarding memorials, it is here that meaning may translate into political awareness or even action. In this sense, aesthetic analysis is also political analysis when it focuses on the values, norms and beliefs memorials (seek to) transmit through emotions.

## Imposing, countering, affirming memory

The aesthetic form of memorials and the meanings they seek to transport are firmly situated in space and time and are thus contingent. Against this backdrop, this section traces the politics of the aesthetics of memorials to violence, that is, how the form of memorials to violent conflicts has developed since the early 20th century,<sup>5</sup> and what politics they pursue. There has been a shift from constructing – and considering – memorials as fixed, static objects that transmit a clear message to providing them with more conceptual, interpretative and fluid forms that do not dictate how to remember, yet affirm the importance of remembrance. I categorise these different types of memorials as imposing, counter and affirmative memorials. Any such clear-cut differentiation can of course only be upheld for heuristic purposes; often the categories overlap and intertwine. The same must be said about the chronological ordering of the three phases, which I trace since the beginning of the 20th century but which, of course, also overlap. The timeframe was chosen because the past 100 years have seen considerable shifts in the way memorials are designed, as a result of the experience of the two World Wars yet also due to an increasing transnationalisation of memory paired with the emergence of a new commemorative paradigm (Bickford and Sodaro, 2010). To understand this for the period after the two World Wars, it is important to not only relate these memorial forms to each other but – in a first step – also to the memorial style before the wars, which shall also be briefly included below.

Even though emotional responses to memorials are very personal, they are situated within the cultural and normative values of a society which inform what counts as sad, intimidating, painful and so on. They are, moreover, firmly situated in the way individuals, groups and societies remember, a process that is constantly shifting due to artistic, political, technological and cultural changes. In this sense, memory reflects society, it is shaped by it, yet at the same time it shapes societies. This focus on the social and political setting is important because remembrance is always conditioned by the present milieu in which we are situated (Halbwachs, 1992). The following genealogy hence presents the characteristics of each phase before describing the aesthetic strategies – and hence politics – of memorials.

### *Imposing memorials*

Imposing memorials communicate a clear message to the visitors and are beyond contestation. This manifests itself in the use of strong materials, clear (often figurative) forms and easy to interpret metaphoric symbols. In North America and Europe, in particular, prior to the First World War memorials to commemorate (war-related) violence mainly used symbolic representation with religious and secular motifs that were often figurative, descriptive and naturalist, and glorified the war. To that end, memorials frequently depict heroic soldiers or leaders who sacrificed their life for the nation, often in marble or granite, and consist mostly of men made to stand not only the test of war but also of time. Regarding symbols, they copy national and religious memory practices by including crosses, wreaths, candles and the like. Imposing in character, they point to the strength of the nation, its heroes and defenders, in order to tell a story of glory and might. Even though emanating from the experience of war and violence, the conflict at the root of this violence is put to rest. Rather, their purpose is to introduce a sense of closure: ‘Commemoration was a process of condensing the moral lessons of history and fixing them in place for all time’ (Savage, 1999: 14). Their stiffness transports an idea of permanence (Young, 1999: 6), both regarding their form as well as their intended message. The meaning transported by these memorials is not meant to be open to interpretation, it is strictly singular, not plural. An intended side effect of purifying the past of conflict is hence the almost complete absence of people who do not fit the heroic

narrative. Women, people of colour, working class people are thus largely missing in the depictions (Savage, 1999: 17).

After the First World War the certainty and nationalism transported by the memorials continued, yet these messages were increasingly called into question without giving up the memorials' imposing character. The first-hand accounts of soldiers who returned from the battlefields, the awareness of the enormity of death and destruction ruptured previous aesthetics, which were considered to be too uplifting, too patriotic, too unreal (Winter, 1998: 85). This led to a move away from monumental memorials to victories towards unambiguous memorials to death (Koselleck, 2002: 320). Religious motifs such as the pietà or a dead body surrounded by angels were frequently used, but also tombs (with or without religious insignia) without reference to specific victims or in contrast lists of names identifying fallen soldiers personally. This led, *inter alia*, to the creation of memorials and tombs to the Unknown Soldier, democratising death by commemorating ordinary soldiers who lost their life for the country (Kattago, 2015: 185). Aesthetically, these memorials therefore largely remained confined to figurative forms, but instead of heroifying combat they became humbler and open to the pain and suffering associated with war. Instead of celebrating war and the strength of the nation, they were often intended to warn and to prevent future suffering (Winter, 1998: 9). Overall, many memorials seem to create a balance between celebrating nationalism, war (and, if appropriate, victory) on one hand and pointing to loss and pain on the other. The aesthetic shift is powerfully exemplified by the memorial *Grieving Parents* by the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, which she dedicated to her 18-year-old son, who fell in the First World War. The granite sculpture consists of mourning parents (herself and her husband) who strongly exhibit feelings of loss and suffering, and even though they are kneeling down, they tower over a cemetery in Vladslo, Belgium.

Importantly, in the context of the First World War, commemoration continued to be a nationalist project that served 'to affirm community, to assert its moral character and to exclude from it those values, groups or individuals that placed it under threat' (Winter, 1998: 80). This was based on an understanding of the social as fairly stable and spread over only a limited geographic space, leading to an understanding of social memory as confined by space and time. Importantly, commemoration functioned to create some form of bounded community, such as a nation, and thus a coherent collective identity.

Imposing memorials force a particular message upon the visitors by being impressive and by commanding respect. Imposing memorials leave no room for interpretation: they are strongly authoritarian. Through harking back to what is familiar to visitors, such as traditional values, gender and family relations, religion, national identity and so on, they create continuity rather than rupture visitors' expectations. They thus produce and re-produce sentiments such as pride, loyalty, affinity to a nation and the like yet increasingly also pain, sadness and a sense of loss. They do not question but confirm sentiments.

### Counter memorials

Counter memorials introduced a radical rupture into the evolution of memorial aesthetics. In this article, they serve to pave the way for the present memorial style – affirmative memorials – as introduced below. Even though counter memorials mainly occurred in Germany and are thus of a limited geographic reach, their analysis is instructive for understanding the shift memorial aesthetics have undergone in the second half of the 20th century. After the horrors of the Second World War, the freezing of meaning by imposing memorials was fundamentally questioned, leading to the establishment of counter-monuments – a term coined by Young that serves as a namesake for counter memorials, or what Ware (2004) calls anti-memorials – that critically engage with the object of



remembrance, and with remembrance itself. Belief in progress, modernity and a shared humanity vanished in the light of the Holocaust and other devastating events such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the Gulag, challenging the cultural value and legitimacy of memorials and leading to a sense of humility amongst people who tried to create memorialising works of art (Levinson, 1999: 2). Soon ‘*everything* about the conventional monument – both the “who” of victorious military and political leaders and the “what” of honouring war and conquest – was being fundamentally challenged’ (Sommer, 1999: 40).

As a result of growing political activism in North America and Europe in the 1960s, the student protests and the first challenging of the Nazi past by a generation of young Germans, the legitimacy of war and violence itself was heavily contested. According to Levy and Sznajder (2002: 95), it was in this period – between the 1960s and 1980s – that the foundation for the iconographic status of the Holocaust was established. They link this back to an increasing awareness and effort to deal with the Nazi past, represented for instance by the Nazi trials of the time, such as against Eichmann in Jerusalem as well as the Auschwitz Trials in Frankfurt in the early 1960s. Due to these legal proceedings, knowledge about the extermination of Jews spread globally. Moreover, it also served a newly emerging Left in Germany to criticise grand historical narratives and nationalism per se. This coincided with the growing historicisation of events such as the Holocaust as well as with reporting on such events by the media (Levy and Sznajder, 2002: 96).

Counter memorials thus have their origin in the post Second World War period. The sentiment that it is impossible to represent the pain and horror of the World Wars, as well as the ensuing violent conflict in the second half of the 20th century, led some artists to turn to abstract art to break with modernity and its certainties.<sup>6</sup> This found its strongest expression in counter memorials that emerged mainly in Germany and that can be read as a radical critique of remembering in and of itself. In the words of Young, it is ‘memory against itself’ (Young, 1992). Counter memorials combine the wish to remember in some form or another with the impossibility of finding an adequate material representation on the one hand and the unwillingness to introduce closure on the other, thus standing in stark contrast to the fixedness of the pre-war memorials briefly introduced above. They seek to push the boundaries of both artistic expression and memorialisation.

Representatives of counter-memorial art include Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Norbert Radermachten and Hans Hoheisel (see Young, 2000). Central to their projects is to negate the function of memorials as mediums of redemption and consolation, and to subvert their potential as means to escape the darkness of the past and the burden it lays on a society. To the artists, there should and could not be any redemption from Fascist crimes, rendering the very existence of memorials impossible. In addition, they were challenged by the impossibility of imagining a memorial which does not repeat one central aspect at the core of Fascist ideology: totalitarianism, telling people what to think. Yet how to design a memorial which does not command certainty and authority? One project by Gerz and Shalev-Gerz serves to illustrate how counter memorials can materialise. They constructed the *Hamburg Monument against Fascism*, a memorial in the form of a single stele in the working-class outskirts of Hamburg, onto which ordinary passers-by could write whatever came to their mind. In doing so, in writing little messages and hence engaging with the memorial, people contributed to the memorial’s shrinking, that is, to its sinking into the ground. It eventually vanished, so that today there is only a square plaque in the ground which refers to its past existence (Young, 2016).

Counter memorials that counter imposing monument principles have, however, also been developed outside of Germany (Stevens et al., 2012; Ware, 2004). In the United States, the style began with Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which has the shape of an open wound cut into the lawn of Constitution Gardens close to the National Mall and the Lincoln Memorial. Into the cut, she placed a wall of black granite listing the names of the approximately

60,000 soldiers who died in the war, thus keeping the wound open. Some criticised it for being a 'black gash of shame' (Senie, 2016: 20), yet the memorial has been accepted by the public and is a heavily visited site.

Central to counter memorials is thus the impossibility of remembering; in lieu of closure, comfort and certainty, their objective is to keep wounds open, visitors engaged and thinking. We cannot let memorials do the memory work, they contend, we have to do it ourselves. For Young (1992), this means 'instead of a fixed figure for memory, the debate itself – perpetually unresolved amid ever-changing conditions – might be enshrined' (p. 270).

Counter memorials thus stand in stark contrast to imposing memorials; they are a direct response to the former's authoritarian style. Instead of telling visitors what to think and feel, they want to leave it to the visitors to figure this out for themselves. In this sense, they do not do the memory work for visitors. In doing so, they do not simply question how societies should remember but the whole practice of remembrance in and of itself.

### *Affirmative memorials*

Affirmative memorials assert that it is imperative to remember. They exhibit many of the traces of counter memorials and abstract art, yet instead of turning against memory, they embrace the idea that commemoration is an obligation: there is a duty to remember, some even speak of an urge (Barsalou and Baxter, 2007). This is based on the assumption that memorials can serve as agents and catalysts for human rights activism, transformative action and civic engagement (Bonder and Wodiczko, 2013: 67).

Aesthetically, affirmative memorials are an evolution of counter memorials rather than constituting a rupture, and often continue to use abstract, minimalist and concept art. They take the normative stance of counter-monuments further by using an aesthetic form that deliberately engrosses – and in doing so captivates – the visitor in order to convey (at times ambivalent) meaning(s). Instead of simply appealing to sight as a sense, they seek to stimulate various senses in order to produce a bodily experience and an affective response (Koch, 2019: 68), thus focusing on what is felt, rather than recognised (Atkinson-Phillips, 2018: 383), which is in line with a more general shift to performance and performativity at heritage sites (Bagnall, 2003). This requires an increasing cooperation with artists and scenographers who focus on spatial experience and the staging of objects (Schmidl, 2019).

Activating visitors' reflection emotionally serves the purpose of educating them about the atrocity. Education has always been a component of many memorials in some way. Importantly, however, affirmative memorials are different in the particular aesthetic strategy they employ – which is interactive and engaging rather than confrontational and one-dimensional such as in imposing memorials – thus relying strongly on performativity in order to move from empathy through experience to civic education (Bickford and Sodaro, 2010).

To start with the latter, affirmative memorials can be situated in a more general turn towards dealing with the past since the early 1990s – also referred to as transitional justice – as a result of the supposed triumph of liberalism after the end of the Cold War, global human rights activism and the global distribution of norms such as social justice, an enhanced focus on victims and the like. Affirmative memorials are, moreover, frequently erected to stimulate debates about past violence and future discrimination, oppression and hatred, which is explicitly and intentionally linked to the establishment of democracy (Brett et al., 2007). They emphasise that commemoration is an obligation: there is a duty to remember since it serves *inter alia* to reestablish the dignity of victims. This finds expression in a UN *Resolution on Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious*



*Violations of International Humanitarian Law* (2005), which refers to ‘commemoration and tributes to victims’ as an important means of symbolic reparations. Moreover, it is assumed that memorial spaces can be effective in dealing with traumatic memory by facilitating a mourning process, healing and a sense of closure (Hamber and Wilson, 2002; Tanović, 2015: 59; Torres and García-Hernández, 2016). This is reflected in a booming memorial industry in post-conflict societies, as for instance expressed by the extensive network of the NGO International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, that describes itself as a ‘global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connects past struggles to today’s movements for human rights. We turn memory into action’ (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, n.d.). Constructing a memorial to ‘dignify the memory of the victims’ has even become part of the sentences of an international court (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2009: 113) and is recommended by truth commissions (Viebach, 2018). Affirming memorials thus sit at the convergence of an increased transnational interest in memory and an increased interest in transitional justice (Buckley-Zistel, 2020), reflecting the internationalisation of a new commemorative paradigm (Bickford and Sodaro, 2010).

Importantly, though, some memorials do not seek to reconcile but to assert that a particular perspective or experience has been excluded from the prevailing discourse. They, too, remain strongly affirmative of the importance of remembering. As sites of conscience, they promote the idea of ‘never again’ and call upon visitors to be active in preventing future violence, which ties in with a strong pedagogical focus in workshops, lectures, films and tours at these sites.

Aesthetically, there are a number of similarities which run across various affirmative memorials.<sup>7</sup> Following the shift after the Second World War sketched above, in many instances ‘the traditional involvement with a message and the semantics of the isolated monument is being replaced by a growing regard for contextualisation, both visual and symbolic’ (Michalski, 1998: 202). Instead of figuratively expressing a particular idea, memorials work with installations and symbols, often drawing on minimalism and concept art. Many employ media, such as pictures, moving images, visual installations, sound or objects, and they use different materials, such as water, concrete or reflective glass, engaging the visitor in a multi-layered, ambivalent sensual experience, rather than providing them with concrete meaning. Staging memory spaces is thus becoming increasingly important.

Many affirmative memorials seek to involve spectators by making them walk through and engage with the site; the spectators thus become part of the performance (Stevens and Franck, 2015: 146, see also Sodaro, 2018; Stevens, 2009). Often, memorials are in places where atrocities happened and require the visitors to move around to explore – and thus to experience – the place. Engagement may also be demanded when watching a movie on site, partaking in a guided tour, bending over to look at something in the ground, having to come up very close in order to read small inscriptions or leaving a statement in the visitors’ book. Less physical but more mental introspection is stimulated by reflective surfaces, such as mirrors and glass, but also by the surface of water, which makes visitors appear next to and in the context of what they have come to look at. By regarding the pain of others, visitors look at themselves. The mirroring of one’s own face in the glass of a display cabinet with the remains of a dead person or in the shiny surface of a Wall of Names may serve to reflect upon one’s own deeds then and now, to imagine oneself in the role of the other or to blur the sight of the past as a reminder that we cannot understand what happened simply by looking at it. Importantly, in contrast to imposing memorials, visitors are no longer passive recipients but become agents in the process of memorialisation. Some memorials merge with public spaces, obstructing an us/them dichotomy and bringing the memorials closer to the people (Stevens and Franck, 2015: 22).

One often used feature is that of semi-conceptual open archives, for instance in the form of Walls of Names arranged alphabetically or by dates of death, such as in Potocari-Srebrenica.

Alternatively, walls of portrait pictures are used to depict individuals who have perished, such as in the Kigali Memorial Center, Tuol Sleng and Yad Vashem. In some places, such as in Potocari-Srebrenica, there are also display cabinets with the remains of victims. In many sites in Rwanda and at the *Choeung Ek* Killing Fields, Cambodia, actual bones of the deceased are on display. These archival constructions are meant to serve as evidence of the magnitude of the crime and its horrendous nature; it is here that information is simultaneously stored and made accessible on display. At the same time, names and pictures (yet not bones) personify victims and individualise suffering. Even though suffering is subjective, this is a way of sharing it (Shati Geißler, 2019: 221) and of emotionally affecting the visitors.

Moreover, the plurality of perspectives, the non-authoritarian style of a memorial, the multiple memories it may portray – as central to the counter memorials discussed above – is defining for a number of more recently conceptualised sites. Often, they refuse to offer one clear explanation or interpretation but leave it to the onlooker to figure one out. These memorials often seem like work in progress or unfinished; they do not come equipped with a plaque that explains their form or even the past atrocity, or they use symbolism.

Within the category of affirmative memorials, different scales of affecting people – and of affecting them differently – can be delineated, reaching from distancing to spectacle (Koch, 2019: 69). To begin by illustrating memorials that work with distance, there is a particular style in German and Austrian memorials to the Holocaust which Hohenberger and Koch (2019: 11) refer to as aestheticising-rational. It is strongly rooted in historical analysis and works with neutral materials and colours, that is, mainly grey. The style keeps the design in the background in order to create a sense of authenticity and to let buildings, objects and sites speak for themselves. Sites are rendered readable and open to analysis by reducing affective and emotional impulses, with this being in and of itself an emotional response. Putting inscriptions at death camps behind glass, letting visitors access gas chambers on footbridges or only allowing a look inside through a glass pane are ways of keeping victims distant and precluding the visitors from establishing proximity (Koch, 2019: 71). On the other end of the spectrum are strategies that work strongly with empathy, for instance by letting visitors ‘re-live’ atrocities (Hohenberger and Koch, 2019: 11). Here, to affirm the memory of an atrocity, ‘large numbers of people have to be engaged, moved, informed, even if the means of doing so resembles popular entertainment’ (Dannatt and Hursley, 2002: 1). This runs the risk of only portraying one version of the event, so that visitors only acquire a limited understanding of its causes and consequences (Sodaro, 2018: 189). Instead of stimulating reflection, these memorials become captivating – they take visitors captive.

Affirmative memorials engross visitors through multi-media installations and/or careful staging of memorial sites, affecting various senses and consciously and deliberately stimulating visitors emotionally, often with pedagogical objectives. In contrast to imposing memorials they do not communicate one clear, often literally top-down message (from a statue on a pedestal) but more ambivalent messages. Nevertheless, they are adamant that remembering is imperative for promoting peace and human rights, respect for victims, healing and a sense of closure.

## The paradox of affirmative memorials

There is, however, a paradox in the politics of affirmative memorials. The challenge at the heart of this paradox is apparent in the words of the architects Krzysztof Wodiczko and Julian Bonder with reference to their design for a memorial to the abolition of slavery in Nantes:

“Could this project work through difficult memories, past and present injustices, collective traumas, while inviting the public to engage in difficult and necessary transformative, pedagogic, healing and

re-constructive work? Could this be envisioned as a site-specific memorial that . . . will frame collective and spontaneous acts of remembrance? Could such a memorial contribute to the envisioning of a better world by inviting and demanding from visitors an active engagement in continuing the abolitionist struggle towards a world free of slaves and oppression?" (Bonder and Wodiczko, 2013: 64).

Wodiczko and Bonder here express an expectation, or hope, that memorials can serve as agents of change and promote peace and justice, the dignity of victims, civic education and democratisation – and many other liberal values, as specified above. Actors from various backgrounds, including human rights activists, victims associations, etc., hope that 'by confronting the past they will be able to make real and concrete contributions to building a better future' (Bickford and Sodaro, 2010: 68). There is thus a clear objective behind remembering.

But how does this relate to the pluralism, openness and freedom at the heart of the aesthetic language? Even though affirmative memorials retain the open and pluralistic aesthetic form of counter memorials, they replace the politics of freedom with the politics of pedagogy, that is, with attempting to influence what visitors think. The duty to remember that these memorials affirm therefore conflicts with the openness of their style; the singularity of their objective stands in contrast to the plurality of their form. Instead of encouraging visitors to think freely and to critically engage with memory (as introduced by counter memorials), they affirm memory and (intend to) lead visitors into one particular political direction based on liberal values. In this sense, they, too, impose.

This paradox, and its inherent tension, is apparent in some discussions about the design of highly abstract and conceptual memorials. Victims' representatives, in particular, at times criticise architects and artists for not contextualising a memorial sufficiently and leaving too much space for interpretation. Some find the artwork self-indulgent, evasive or kitsch (Young, 2000: 3), others stress the importance of having a place to gather and to mourn the dead that is not offered by a non-hospitable environment such as a field of concrete stele. Discrete and inconspicuous sites such as the *The Memorial at the Frankfurt Großmarkthalle* to commemorate the deportation of Frankfurt Jews between 1941 and 1945 might sometimes even go unnoticed by people passing by on their daily way to work – which is not necessarily in the interest of victims' groups.<sup>8</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, as discussed above, memorials that work strongly with empathy risk surrendering plurality for the sake of a single narrative, and instead of stimulating thought become captivating – in the sense that they take visitors captive. This can be illustrated by some of the earlier versions of memorials in Rwanda – such as the initial form of the Murambi Genocide Memorial – where dead bodies preserved in limestone were displayed on the tables of the former vocational training school, testifying to the horrors of the genocide.

## Conclusions

The main contention of this article is that we (also) need to study memorials through the politics of their aesthetics in order to better understand their role in post-violence societies. It has illustrated how memorials employ certain forms, styles, materials and shapes in order to have an effect on visitors, to affect them emotionally and to transmit a particular message. Emotions arise from a combination of cognitive/conscious and affective/bodily perceptions (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014: 502) and once they are consciously recognised, they can be captured by language, may be held collectively, and may potentially acquire political significance. Aesthetic analysis therefore also constitutes political analysis when it focuses on memorial style and how this seeks to encourage emotions that correspond to prevailing values, norms and beliefs.

In this article, I have traced the politics of the aesthetics of memorials to violence by differentiating between memorials which seek to impose, counter or affirm memory. While imposing

memorials from around the time of and after the First and the Second World War communicate a clear message to their visitors about strength and certainty, the counter memorials after the Second World War, in contrast, seek to open up space for thinking and thus refrain from telling visitors how and what to remember or whether to remember at all. The current phenomenon, affirmative memorials, emerged after the end of the Cold War. They engross visitors with their often highly performative aesthetic style so that the visitors reflect on the violent past. Through affirming that remembrance itself is imperative, they seek to introduce a sense of closure, contribute to healing and educate visitors about liberal values. In doing so, they circle back to imposing memorials, yet, instead of telling visitors what to remember, they affirm – and thus impose – the duty of memory in and of itself.

Aesthetic analysis is thus political analysis. Art is not simply there for its own sake; it communicates norms and values to visitors in order to affect them. Importantly, politics is here not understood in terms of what memorials symbolise – partisan positions, excluded voices, government narratives and so on – but in terms of how the way they communicate is in itself political. The three identified strategies portray very different politics: while imposing memorials treat visitors as formable subjects, give them a clear message and thus function in a rather imposing and authoritarian manner, counter memorials seek to achieve the opposite by challenging memorials' functions of offering redemption and closure; they instead liberate visitors from fixed meaning and give them the responsibility but also the freedom to think for themselves. Affirmative memorials, lastly, seek to keep the horizon of interpretation open while at the same time demanding from visitors to commemorate. They do not turn against memory itself in order to keep memory open but rather as symbolic reparation memorials introduce a sense of closure. Developing the notion of affirmative memorials against the backdrop of imposing and counter memorials shows that they are situated within a liberal normative framework which firmly links memorialisation to democracy, human rights, transitional justice and so on. They are thus often pedagogical and seek to educate visitors by deliberately and consciously engrossing – and thus captivating – them. In doing so, in affirming the duty to remember, they also impose.

To date, academic research on memorials differentiates primarily between *what* is remembered and *how*, between *the meaning of* memory and *doing* memory (see Waterton, 2014). This article suggests that there needs to be a third layer of interpretation: the *what* of the *how*. So far, analysing *what* is remembered has focused on memorials' politics in terms of the struggles over whose memory and what interpretation of the past should be remembered. The new layer of interpretation – the new *what* – presented here refers to a different form of politics, the politics of aesthetics. It explores different understandings of what constitutes a society (and different constitutions of society), different forms of engagement and participation at a memorial site, different responses to authority and different concepts of political leadership ranging from authoritarian to pluralistic – as reflected in the choice of material, depiction, staging of the memorial and so on. Tracing the political aesthetics of memorials opens up a research agenda that provides new and relevant insights into an ever-growing field of memorials, and an ever-growing field of research on memorials.

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## Notes

1. It is important to note that memorials are not the product of one artist, one initiator or one community but often the result of very painful negotiation processes involving many parties.
2. In this article, this is done by investigating the form, style, material, location and so on of memorials yet not the direct responses of visitors, that is, this article does not offer an analysis of recipients' perceptions that specifies their emotional response.
3. So far there has been little research on the perception of memorials, a gap this contribution does not aim to fill. One notable exception is the special issue 'Performative Holocaust Commemoration in the 21st Century' by Popescu and Schult (2020) in *Holocaust Studies*.
4. It is important to note that these are also normative assumptions regarding what memorials *should* promote.
5. See also the work by Young (2000, 2016), Senie (2016) and Winter (1998). For an analysis of memorials that reaches back further in time, see Koselleck (2002) and Winter (1998).
6. The rise of abstract art in Western Europe, in particular, also has to be seen against the backdrop of the Soviet avant-garde and grand post-war sculptures in communist and socialist Europe. From the 1950s onwards, abstract art hence became popular as an ideological antidote to Soviet and Eastern European figuration (Michalski, 1998).
7. It is, of course, impossible to essentialise memorials (as it is to essentialise anything else) and there are always many sites which do not fit this particular paradigm.
8. Based on a personal conversation with a guide at the memorial, Frankfurt, 18.6.2019.

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