

The Weight of Memory

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In a multidisciplinary book, Catherine Coquio shows that behind the contemporary cult for memory and truth lies a crisis that is preventing us from moving forward.

Reviewed: Catherine Coquio, *Le Mal de vérité ou l'utopie de la mémoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015), 25 €.

Catherine Coquio's book allows us to consider together, as a set of inter-related phenomena, various contemporary issues that are usually addressed separately: our new relationship to individual and collective memory, the trauma of recent wars and genocide, and the truth stakes underpinning testimony.

In a sense, never before has memory been remembered so much as over the past few decades; it has been lost as a mode of social organisation and a structure of temporal continuity, but reinvented within a cultural model, as heritage, as commemoration, as the fantasy of identity, as nostalgia or as a marketplace of antiques. In Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, *memoria* was both a social energy and an ontological collection of identities, social roles, and ways of behaving: it was genuinely a collective memory. Furthermore, it also provided access to the truth. However, modern times have reduced memory to a secondary faculty of the human mind, with old social values lambasted as habits, as routine, as outdated and cumbersome traditions. For some, such as historian Pierre Nora, the end of the farming lifestyle heralded by the First World War saw the last remaining pockets of this collective memory disappear. The Great War became a time for thinking increasingly about the work of this collective memory, as if it were all the more topical because it seemed to have disappeared from ways of valuing the past. Particularly after the trauma of the two world wars and the successive genocides, from that of the Armenians and the Jews to those in Rwanda and Cambodia, memory has regained collective importance while nonetheless remaining a sensitive area: revaluing memory means formatting it culturally (heritage offers a good example of this, where the performance and actualisation of memory are fixed in exemplary figures that we can, at best, visit as tourists). And yet, at the same time, as Imre Kertész stated with his customary irony, 'our time is the time of truth'. The major achievement of *Mal de vérité ou l'utopie de la mémoire* consists in the way it thinks through memory and truth, through current trauma and the search for catharsis, together, in a world marked by what Catherine Coquio, a specialist in the literature of testimony (particularly on mass crimes), calls the 'Catastrophe': 'a complex anthropological phenomenon resulting from a certain political operation, where social ties are broken, life brutally devalued, the human figure altered, humanity split apart, and then, with the aftermath, comes an impossible mourning process and a dread of the truth' (p. 124). This rich and dense book is devoted to a detailed examination of this anthropological phenomenon.

At the root of the “*mal de vérité*” there is a lie

Taking up Jacques Derrida’s expression of a ‘*mal d’archive*’ or ‘archive fever’, referring both to illness or suffering and to burning passion, Catherine Coquio deliberately turns the tables by replacing the archive with truth. Why might we be facing a ‘*mal de vérité*’ or a truth fever today? Because of a lie. A radical political lie that has, in a sense, derealized History. The lie covering up the genocides that punctuated the 20th Century, or rather adding to the destruction of people the destruction of documents testifying to it: this was the ‘colossal lie’ (all the more seductive because it was colossal) staged by Adolf Hitler from 1925 onwards. And this is why writing the history of these exterminations requires both bringing to light and bringing up to date the history of their negation. An event never exists alone, in and of itself; it is always filled with traces that we discover when we look.

For Catherine Coquio, it is not a question of demanding immediate access to truth in order to better counter such a lie and escape deconstructionist critiques of truth, nor is it a question of giving up on retracing regimes of truth within an archaeology of knowledge and power; rather, it is a case of thinking about truth within the dynamic created by the ‘*mal*’ itself, grasping the truth affected by this ‘*mal*’ and understanding how we have come to find ourselves facing a ‘*mal de vérité*’ – a sickness of truth, but also a lack of it, a craving for it. The idea is that the crisis of memory, of politics and of testimony that we are experiencing in fact testifies to a break on an anthropological scale, the effects of which must be measured. The argument defended here is very broad. It underpins an inquiry that, in an original fashion, runs across spaces that are usually fairly separate: law, the sociology of collective memory, history, testimonials, diaries and fictional narratives, documentaries and films.

What truth should we be talking about?

As Catherine Coquio reminds us, Hannah Arendt already believed that totalitarianism had attacked not the truths of reason but factual truths by reducing them to opinions about what had happened: stamped with the opaque seal of contingency, factual truths became a problem of documentation. However, it is important to draw a distinction (as Catherine Coquio does) between ‘veracity-truth’ (which concerns the possible verification of documents) and ‘equity-truth’ (resulting from a reconstruction that allows the issues at stake to be problematized, for example Shalamov’s reconstruction in *The Kolyma Tales*). All these truths have to be able to be heard, even when they may be conflicting. Memory and testimony are indispensable in order to be able to hear them.

However, this sort of memorial urge and testimonial escalation can also inspire wariness. According to Catherine Coquio, the two emerge in unison when mass crimes give rise to a desire for truth alongside the ‘collapse of the authority of the real’. To make just use of testimony, one would therefore need to link together loss of authority and ‘critical transmission’ of memory. In this case, transmission would not cover over what was lost but rather provide a different form of access to it, in all its uncertainty. It is possible that this therefore results in the transmission of truth becoming the truth of transmission. This ‘truth without authority’ is no less truth because it stumbles when it comes to its mediation. Simply, it forces us to imagine both its performance and the appropriate public spaces in which it can be sought and, above all, expressed. Precisely because its original space of expression poses a problem, the ways in which we choose to listen to it are crucial. This requires tactical work in which the mediations through which the truth is sought and exposed must be thought through in relation to both speakers and addressees. Above

and beyond the need to remember, the intellectual ‘benefit’ to conducting the history of mass crimes could therefore be said to lie in this need to recognize that truth is exposed: placed before our eyes, in all its fragility.

It is therefore understandable that Catherine Coquio analyses at length the logic of testimony: truth becomes knowledge-based content expressed through an act of linguistic enunciation but, at the same time, it also has to take the shape of a ‘life value engaging someone’s word’. The cognitive aspects of attestation and the ethical aspects of embodiment converge here. Without taking up Michel Foucault’s work to the letter, this corresponds roughly to what he called truth-proof and truth-*épreuve*. However, the problem also resides in the fact that this dual dimension to truth has to combine the general scope of the cognitive based on documents with the specific rooting of the ethical that makes a presentation credible. The well-known issue of moving from the specific to the general has a new role to play here, because in the case of mass crimes and truths that must imperatively be passed on, the truth-document also becomes a truth-monument. Catherine Coquio rightly notes that this marks a change in the regime of address: the contract of trust in veridiction is coupled with an act of faith in a specific person’s word recounting events that are, by definition for crimes of this sort, unbelievable.

Testimony and fiction

Examining the turmoil of truth-testimony brings Catherine Coquio to look at how a ‘culture of memory’ appeared just after the First World War and how this culture of memory is linked with a critique of culture (by re-examining the legacy of the Frankfurt School). The author insists above all on ways of thinking about the witness, as well as the now established variant, the ‘witness of the witness’ (to take up Celan’s famous line). This attempt to renew ties with the legacies of memory can also lapse into a certain religiosity surrounding these ties and this community of witnesses, which sometimes obfuscates access to the actual texts of testimonies, to traces, and to their possible critical uses. Testimony, including for mass crimes, had the role of producing truth: now, though, it is also ascribed the task of justifying the mourning process and of passing on a debt. This is where Catherine Coquio suggests taking up the notion of utopia: not as a principle of hope but as a way of working on the literal absence of space, on the borders of existence. As Sylvie Umubieyi, a Tutsi survivor quoted in the book, says: ‘When I think about the genocide, I try and think of where it could be filed away, in life, but I can’t find anywhere for it’.

By exploring the boundaries of language and life, literature can open up this utopian dimension. Shalamov and Kertész both insisted on this. Catherine Coquio attentively retraces their necessarily tortuous characteristics, including in texts about the Armenian genocide that have previously tended to garner little attention (for example, Aram Andonian’s *In those Dark Days*). Another notion that she reworks relating to fiction is that of catharsis, tying together memory, mourning, and recounted truth, giving truth a restorative role. However, while ‘true’ deliverance cannot be decided, it is important to at least grasp the extent to which there is a call, an appeal, for it, which is structural in the chosen forms of testimony.

An educational book?

Rithy Panh, a Cambodian documentary maker and director of *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, returns to his family’s experience of genocide in *The Missing Picture*. He admits that he believes ‘in education more than in justice’ (quoted by C. Coquio, p. 250). His

camera is not a courtroom. This is no doubt why Catherine Coquio suggests a ‘critical philology free of humanist equivocation’ (p. 273). She unfolds some of its possibilities herself, in the way she moves across the most varied of works – philosophical, historical, cinematographic or literary (from Nancy to Lanzmann, from Nora to Derrida, from Nichanian to Ginzburg) – in the process putting back in context some of the controversies or theoretical stances of the past thirty years. This results in a dense book and one might be tempted to criticise its haste if there weren’t something about that very haste that conveyed a sense of urgency.

A fever is the sign of an illness, but it also fights against it. The fever of truth that Catherine Coquio examines in such detail underscores a fundamental aspect of the modern conception of human beings: that we are originally, primitively, caught up in predatory relations that could explain our contemporary massacres and genocides. But where does this predatory truth come from? To my mind, it derives from two factors: conceiving human beings as beings of desire and believing that they are motivated solely by self-interest. If we consider humans on the basis of their equal power to desire and if we immediately translate that desire into the logic of self-interest, then we inevitably have to consider that each and every one of us is essentially motivated by a drive to dominate others or appropriate their possessions. We must therefore hope for a follow-up to this inquiry that re-examines these ‘truths’ that are all the more painful because they perhaps also relate to another lie.

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