

## CONJUNCTIONS OF MEMORY

I remember asking a stage actor how he went about remembering his lines. After seeing his solo performance, I was amazed this man could talk for more than an hour, never losing his track, never having to peek on a piece of paper. He told me he practised his lines while taking his regular walk around his own neighborhood. Every passage of this text he would stick to a certain tree, fence or another object or landmark. He would never change the order of his walk and he would always make sure that there was some logical link between the landmark and the part of the text, like a rhyme or a visual resemblance. He would add imaginative objects on his walk if his text required them. He would always use the same walk but would change the objects or links according to whatever text he had to internalize. When he was abroad, in his dressing room or waiting for the bus, he would always have his walk in his mind and therefore always able to practise his lines.

Years later, when studying the concept of memory on the faculty of humanities, I realised that this actor was a modern practitioner of the classic art of memory or mnemotechnics, as it was practised throughout antiquity up until the renaissance. Written texts have been around for millenia, but printed pockets, handy notebooks and ballpoint pens are of course recent inventions. For ages, people used walks around houses and cityscapes as a means of internalising texts. Since the physical writing surfaces were scarce – the parchment had to be scraped clean again<sup>1</sup> – people passed on texts by committing them to memory. Until modernity, the built environment was a writing surface in a much more literal sense. Human memory is actually pretty poor in fulfilling the task of conserving facts and abstract knowledge and much better accustomed to spacial orientation in the living environment. A lengthy list would be rewritten to a walk in the park as a memoryscape. One of the most important things the research concluded was that personal memory has been a medium for preserving objective knowledge for ages before it became a guideline for the personal sentiment in modernity; it used to be much more

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the palimpsest metaphore in Tymen's text.

about saving things for prosperity than focused on personal nostalgia. History had turned memory inside out, so to speak.

Years after that, I find myself earning a living as a bikemessenger. Cycling up to 350 kilometres a week, visiting more or less the same clients on a daily or weekly basis, is almost like a long and complicated commute or walk in the park, one that begins around nine and ends somewhere between five and six. Every time the company acquires new relations, my memoryscape of the town develops, gets not so much bigger as more detailed. It keeps astounding me how I can still find new pathways and shortcuts, in this relatively small geographical area, after living here all my life. Manoeuvring around town on a bike gets very easy when you spend 30 or more hours a week doing so. While I'm on autopilot doing the usual choreography that is the Amsterdam traffic, I'm constantly daydreaming, drifting off in my own memoryscape. Certain memories keep creeping up to me through the same places. Some of these memories have a very clear connection of place; this is where I almost got into a crash, that is where a friend used to live. But other memories seem to have lost their logical tie to the place where they keep creeping up to me, or don't have a sense of place at all. If memories can be tied to places and ordered in sequences, then it follows that these places can bring them back. As a messenger, my first priority is getting people's documents across town. By doing so I am also playing an archaic sort of memory game, or sometimes it feels like my memory is playing tricks on me.

The cityscape is constantly changing, as is my memoryscape. It feels that this town is changing more rapidly over the last couple of years. Or maybe it's not the streets and buildings that are being revamped as much as I am constantly updating my memoryscape. Street renovations can be hard to deal with, forcing me to change my regular path down memory lane. When the city is changing so rapidly, it does not feel so much like a new layer of meaning is added, but more like living memory is destroyed; like an involuntary lapse of memory. Of course memory is very plastic and adaptable, so after a while new memories are invested in the new slabs of concrete and renovated bikelines, making it ever harder or maybe redundant to remember the prior situation.

The city as a memoryscape can be a tabula rasa or a palimpsest, as well as a diary or an encyclopedia. Every house, street or park has a certain historical

value as well as a multitude of personal memories invested in it. Experiencing this on a daily basis, I have wondered what it was like for the messenger in ancient times. Probably a slave, but a noble one, initiated in the fair art of memory, they would walk from town to town delivering the word of lords and kings. They would not put documents in their bag, but rely on their personal memory for knowing their way around as well as for transferring the message. I imagine they would use the very paths they frequented not just as distance to cross, but also as a memoryscape to internalise whatever message to be delivered. The path would be filled with words, the medium would be the message.

Technology has made it superfluous for me to remember the messages I bring around, but I still get these personal memories as an excess baggage. History has turned memory from a public storageplace to a personal refuge for sentiments. These sentiments that used to be just a tool for preserving knowledge are now the very core of memory.<sup>2</sup> As a messenger, I am constantly moving in and out of private spaces and public buildings to deliver peoples official documents and personal belongings. Memory has everything to do with the conjunctions of inside and out, of public and private. After finding this out through research, I am experiencing this hands on, constantly moving through the conjunctions of memory, trying to give a new meaning to the word streetwise.

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the conclusions of a seminal work on the memory/history debate; Assmann – *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*.