



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 4 May 2019



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AUTOTOPOGRAPHIES - PETER WEISS IN AUSCHWITZ

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It is well-known that the concept of postmemory was gradually incorporated in scientific discourse in the wake of the publication of the book *Family Frames*, by Marianne Hirsch, in 1997. Reflection on the transgenerational dimensions of the notion of memory is, however, of course, much earlier than Hirsch's proposal. In particular in Holocaust literature, the construction of a memory of the "not-lived", characteristic of the postmemorial gesture, builds up a model that can be abundantly traced and that, precisely due to the power of the paradigm of confrontation with the Holocaust for the ensemble of studies on violence, trauma and memory, deserves particular attention. In this framework, the essay "Meine Ortschaft", "My Place", by the German writer Peter Weiss, a relatively little-known text, which has not as yet been translated into Portuguese (1), offers a particularly powerful example, due to the articulation it performs between memory and postmemory and its inscription in the space of violence.

Peter Weiss (a persona non grata to the regime of Salazar and Caetano, as the author of the *Chant of the Lusitanian Bogey*, a powerful indictment of Portuguese colonialism brought to the stage in January 1967) visited Auschwitz for the first time in December 13th 1964. At the time, the Auschwitz trial (1963-1965) against several persons formerly responsible for the camp was taking place in Frankfurt am Main. This was an extremely significant moment of confrontation with the national-socialist past in post-war Germany (on the basis of a montage of the court protocols, Weiss would write one of the most relevant texts in the canon of Holocaust literature, the drama *Die Ermittlung (The Investigation)*). Being the son of a Jewish father, the visit to Auschwitz represents, in the eyes of Weiss, the return to a place which was destined to be his (the exile of his family in Sweden allowed him to escape this fate). As Weiss writes at the beginning, all the many places where he had lived had only a provisional character, the only place that is an undeletable part of his identity is Auschwitz:

It is a place for which I was destined and which I evaded. I myself learned nothing in this place. I have no other connection to it beyond the fact that my name stood on the list of those meant to be relocated there forever. Twenty years afterwards I saw this place. It is unchangeable. Its buildings cannot be confused with any others.

At no time does the subject indulge in the fiction that he is able to relive the horror testified by the place he is visiting:

I have come here of my own free will. I was not unloaded from any train. I was not driven into this terrain with truncheons. I come here twenty years late.



The distance in time in relation to the not-lived builds up a never forgotten element of the relationship established by the visitor with the place. The text, thus, essentially conveys, not the illusionary construction of a proximity with the past, but, rather, a thick description which summons up, in very concrete images, the materiality of the space, while, at the same time situating that materiality within an inseparable relationship with the acts of violence that have taken place in that same space. In this way, to use the term coined by Jennifer A. González, an autotopography is constructed, as a reconstruction of identity based on a logics of place - a place where a past history of violence remains disturbingly present, which, however, is no longer accessible and only becomes intelligible through the work of postmemory:

I stood in the courtyard in front of the Black Wall, I saw the trees behind the wall, and did not hear the small-bore rifle shots fired point-blank into the back of the head.

The place, which, as already mentioned, is forever silent in its deeper meaning, the meaning of a past incapable of speaking for itself is, however, described from a perspective of utmost proximity by the visitor. It is through the proximity thus achieved with the materiality of space that the subject is able to make that past speak, while remaining conscious of the distance separating him from that past. The final paragraphs of the essay deserve to be quoted in full:

But after a while silence and numbness set in here, too. A living person came, and what happened is closed off from this living person. The living person who comes here, from another world, possesses nothing but his knowledge of figures, of written reports, of testimonies, they are a part of his life, he grapples with them, but can only comprehend what happens to himself. Only when he himself is pushed away from his table and put in chains, when he is kicked and whipped, does he know what this is. Only when it goes on next to him, rounding them up, beating them down, loading them into carts, only then does he know what this is like.

Now he is just standing in a world that has perished. Here he can do no more. For a while total silence prevails.

Then he knows it is not over yet.

The ambiguity of the laconic final sentence raises the disturbing hypothesis that the past testified by the place the text has been describing in detail, through a series of extremely concrete images, in the end has not passed. By formulating this sentence, the author accepts to situate himself in the framework of a continuum of violence in which he is irretrievably implied. In other words, in his



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analysis, the distance to the not-lived goes hand in hand with a feeling of presence, through the intimate contact with the space of violence that the visit to Auschwitz allows, a feeling materialized in the very discourse narrating the insurmountable character of that distance. Thus, in all its precarity, the productivity of the labour of postmemory proves able to assert itself.

(1) An English translation by Roger Hillman has been published in the journal *Transit*, 4(1), 2008. Extracts from the text in the following are taken from this translation.

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MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.

