



DisComPoSE - Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe

Report of the cycle of seminars *Paesaggi della memoria* (Landscapes of memory) / *I luoghi della memoria: la ricerca tra semiotica e trauma studies* (The places of memory: research between semiotics and trauma studies)

***Il trauma, lo spazio, la storia: incontro con Patrizia Violi* (Trauma, space, history: meeting with Patrizia Violi)**

held on 10th and 17th December 2019
at BRAU University library- Piazza Bellini, 56 Naples

organized by G. Alfano e G. Schiano (University of Naples Federico II)

Within the context of the ERC project *Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe. The Making of Emergency Response Policies in the Early Modern Age*, a double seminar concerning the book by Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi della memoria. Il trauma, lo spazio, la storia*, Milano, Bompiani, 2014 took place on the 10th and 17th of December 2019 at the BRAU – the main library of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II.

The first seminar, entitled “*I luoghi della memoria: la ricerca tra semiotica e trauma studies*”, was chaired by Giancarlo Alfano and Gennaro Schiano as an introduction to and an in-depth analysis of the main subjects addressed in the book.

In particular, Giancarlo Alfano offered an overview of the book, which focuses on the problems implied in the construction of places and museums centred on the memory of traumatic historical episodes, analysed from a semiotic perspective. After a brief introduction to the subject known as “trauma studies”, developed in the 1980s and initially centred on Holocaust survivors, Alfano highlighted the complexity of the translation of what has happened into a sort of narrative for present and future generations. The (re)organisation and presentation of facts and testimonies carry, indeed, their own interpretation, which can



be conscious or not, but which has an impact also on future generations. Every representation can choose whether to present certain aspects of the space in such a way as to recreate the situation experienced by the participants of the trauma - and so to inspire the visitor's empathy - or to let the public know about it in a more referential way. In particular, Alfano highlighted how the aspects of the disasters studied in the book, which were not taken into account at first by the DisComPoSE project, can now instead be profitably integrated into the study by the researchers of the group.

The communication delivered by Gennaro Schiano, instead, presented two case studies which effectively show how places of memory can produce a certain meaning, according to the circumstances in which they were developed, always keeping

in mind the difference between “re-presenting” and “representing”.

The first case discussed was the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, established in an ancient school transformed into a detention and torture centre during the Khmer Rouge regime. Tuol Sleng was founded straight after the end of the regime and its constitution was encouraged by Vietnam, legitimizing the invaders as, instead, saviours. The museum re-presents, not only represents, the environment exactly as it was at the time of the regime, preserving for example even the blood stains on the floor, with few historical explanations. This organization consists in the portrayal of a generic idea of universal evil, decontextualized and not oriented towards a deep knowledge and comprehension of the facts and responsibilities.

The second case focused on a variety of torture sites of the Pinochet regime, whose constitution was long delayed and in most cases not managed directly by the Chilean government. The reason behind this difference with respect to the previous case is that in the aftermath of the dictatorship Pinochet himself was still involved in the government and in general the political regime in charge of the state did not want to address the past, which was considered as a divisive factor. Furthermore, the network of torture centres was so secretive that only the survivors' testimonies could really embody the evidence of what had happened. This is why in Chile, for the most part, memorial associations of victims and their relatives played a major role. Thanks to this involvement many sites such as Villa Grimaldi opened, even though in a controversial way. In fact, these sites do not always directly address the genocide and do not assume a pedagogical function, working rather as private and peaceful places far from the city centre.

The two case studies selected appropriately illustrated the partiality behind any narrative about a trauma: on the one hand, “Tuol Sleng” portrays a sort of memory imposed



by the high levels of the government in order to direct the interpretation of facts considered as generically atrocious, whereas in Chile, on the other hand, starting with the very title of the site (Villa Grimaldi is also known as “Parquepor la paz”) the attention is not immediately drawn to the genocide.

One week later, the second seminar hosted the author of the book herself, Patrizia Violi. In particular, Violi highlighted the correspondences she found between the research themes addressed by DisComPoSE and her approach. In fact, even though she as a semiologist has always considered places as symbols of interest while focusing on the memory of trauma, she also recognizes that it is undeniable that texts also are means of memorialising and representing catastrophes.

Her communication delved into the partiality of any narration, whether textual or conveyed by a specific place such as a museum. In fact, narration always aims at an explanation of facts and inevitably carries a final objective linked to a certain system of values. For example, she presented the case of Gibellina, a small town in Sicily destroyed by an earthquake in 1968, reconstructed beautifully by famous contemporary designers, much to the disappointment of its elderly inhabitants who would have preferred just to have the town back as it was. This was offered as an example of how narratives always have systems of values behind them: in this case, aesthetic values overcame traditionalism. Next, Violi returned to the Chilean case, highlighting the relationship between the space – intended as the museum or text representing the trauma, but also the place where the trauma happened – and its narratives, which are hardly ever neutral and in their realization retrace the facts.

