CHAPTER 4

Mnemosyne and Amnesia. Social Memory and the Paradoxes of Monumental Images

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Foreword

The monument is the rememoration device par excellence. It is conceived and erected in order to monere, to remind (but also to make you think, to advice, to admonish, to recommend, to counsel, to exhort, to inspire, to predict and to announce): its agency is therefore pontifical, i.e. literally it bridges; in being a concretion of retention and protention, set upright in the present of a hic et nunc, the monument convokes the past, makes it present and projects it towards the future.

A great material sign, the guardian of memory and the cradle of design: this is monumentality degree zero. Through the monument (the Mahnmal, in German: the “spot [Mal] of the exhortation [Mahnen]”) one thinks of the spot as a meeting place, in the present, of past and future; of course, a meeting place both for the individual subject and for the community. The monument consequently represents a trace physiognomically inscribed on the face of the cities, on the surface of the landscape and on the common feeling (koinè aisthesis), the anonymous connective tissue of all our experiences. In front of the monument, our thoughts reflect upon the three temporal ecstasies; in front of the monument we think of time. “Monument” is not only Mahnmal, but also Denkmal, Denkraum, space of and for thought, interval established by the image between the subject and itself and between the subject and the world. It is the very beginning of distantiation (Entfernung, Distanzierung), defined by Aby Warburg in the "Introduction" (1929) to his atlas Mnemosyne as the original institution of culture, “The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization.”

Exploring the domain of the monument means at the same time investigating the experience of time, of modalities of coagulation of time in space, of possibilities of a certain culture to remember or to forget such a time. It is an aesthetic movement, inasmuch as it reflects on time and space, the two fundamental axes

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of our sensible experience, and on objects that for centuries have represented crucial and critical occasions for our artistic experience as well. But it is also a political movement, inasmuch as it reflects on the modalities of symbolic identification between a community and an object – an object seen and understood by the community itself as the incarnation of a fundamental moment of its own history and as an iconic articulation of friend/enemy and their implicit relations of identity. Here, we encounter the rhetorics and ideology of the image in the polarization between affirmation and negation of the monument in itself.

However, given the structural relationship between remembrance and loss of memory, is it still legitimate to understand the notion of monument under the title of Mneme? Should we rather connect it to the term Lethe?\(^{136}\) This is the doubt raised by Robert Musil in his brilliant essay Monuments, where such objects are described in their ‘waterproof’ capacity to escape our attention. In this world nothing is as invisible as monuments:

One cannot say that we don’t notice them; one would have to say they unnotice us, they withdraw themselves from our senses. [...] Well, doubtless this can be explained. Everything permanent loses its ability to impress. Everything that forms the walls of our lives, so to speak the stage set of our consciousness, loses the ability to play a role in this consciousness.\(^{137}\)

Thanks to Musil’s phenomenological approach and his ability to be amazed by the banal – proper to a philosophical attitude – he highlights the contradictory nature of monumentality: a kind of nature that is there for all to see, and that exactly for this reason nobody sees. We are quite far from the cult value of the monument supported in Proust’s Temps retrouvé, that is, “Monuments and pictures are seen by us under an impalpable veil which the contemplative love of so many worshippers has woven about them through centuries.”\(^{138}\) In Musil the veil is not a tissue realised by loving care, but rather an opaque mantle of indifference. Monuments are erected with the purpose to warn, by a grandiloquent manner of presenting themselves, often centred in the middle of a public square or placed on a high position in order to be seen from anywhere and by anybody. Nevertheless, monuments are literally avoided. We turn around them,

