IN THE SHADOW OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER OR THE ART OF REMEMBERING

On Friday, 25th of October 1946, an encounter took place at the Cambridge University Moral Science Club of King's College, England, that, many years later, would lead to a dramatic controversy – albeit mostly being argued within philosophy circles. Bertrand Russell had invited Raimund Popper to a lecture in the Gibbs Building, a neo-classical building from the 18th century: white limestone, high windows, bays and timber-clad rooms, which at that time, shortly after the war, were only sporadically heated by fireplaces. The chairman of the club, Ludwig Wittgenstein, was also present. And despite Popper and Wittgenstein having grown up in Vienna at about the same time, they had never met before. Indeed, it is to remain the only encounter between Russell, Wittgenstein, and Popper. The most renowned philosophers of their time only met once during their lifetime – namely on this autumnal evening in Cambridge in an under-heated lecture room.

Thus, it was a philosophic, prominent gathering, and the following prosaic remark could be later found in the minutes: 'The meeting was unusually tense.' The guest speaker, Karl Popper, spoke on the subject 'Do philosophic problems exist?' Was this in itself a provocation by the host, Russell? After all, it was known (and Russell must have realised) that Wittgenstein would clearly reject such a concept. Wittgenstein was of the opinion that philosophical problems were mere linguistic conjuring tricks, the epitome of intellectual arrogance. Popper, on the other hand, called this sheer nonsense. According to him, there were fundamental moral problems in the world, and these could and had to be defined. It turned out as expected: A few minutes after Popper began his lecture, the impatient Wittgenstein interrupted him, and the following exchange of words became a legend.

Exchange of words?

By this time, Wittgenstein was consternated and certainly not used to listening. He held forth. Somewhat absorbed and oblivious of all around him and apparently to underline his argumentation, he grabbed a poker from the Victorian fireplace, some say: a red-hot poker, and gesticulated with it. Then, he asked his guest, rhetorically of course, if, in his view, any moral principles existed that he could point out here. Something that anyone could understand. He should name such a general moral rule that was of any value. 'Guest speakers should not be threatened a with a poker.' Popper replied – whereupon Wittgenstein stormed out of the room thin-skinned, peeved, and without a word and was not to be seen for the rest of the evening.

This, at least, is the short version in Popper's autobiography, published about two decades after his encounter with Wittgenstein. Merely an anecdote? Sure. When Karl Popper died in 1994, the whole story boiled up again. Did it actually happen that way? The English philosopher Peter Geach, who was present back then in the Gibbs building, declared that Popper's account was fictitious. Wrong from start to finish! Sir Karl – an arrogant liar? There is no shortage of eyewitnesses of standing. The young Georg Kreisel, for example, a mathematician who was accepted into the Royal Society in 1966; (Sir) John Vinolett, who studied in Cambridge and became a judge at the High Court of Justice of Great Britain; the philoso-

phers Stephen Toulmin, Michael Wolff, and Peter Munz and many more. The New Zealander Munz even begins his book Our Knowledge of the Search of Knowledge with the poker incident. He remembered a glowing object that an angry Wittgenstein held under the nose of a slightly stunned Popper.

The poker is indeed pretty much the only thing that was common to the memories of a good two dozen listeners. Whether in doing so Wittgenstein merely vividly underlined his reasoning or fiercely threatened Popper with it remains uncertain. Opinions also differ on the course of the discussion. The descriptions vary in essential points. Did Popper really establish a sort of poker rule? Everyone remembers it somewhat differently. And, of course, we are not really strangers to such things. To remember something correctly: at times an art. The particular irony of this little story is that the contradictory descriptions of the occurrence all originated from people who dealt professionally with the Theory of Knowledge, the ability to think logically, and the attempt to create knowledge and to define truth – and not to forget it.

Man is known to be a deficient being: The tremendous complexity of the world, the (probable) events, stimuli, and conditions downright demand it. A total recall remains impossible (reserved for American blockbusters only) and may even be dangerous. Not to remember anything, on the other hand, would surely also be so. Cognitively, we are already limited. Inevitably, this has to make an impact on any social life, and so, in the course of history, very different forms, even cultures and systems, have developed, each contributing in their own way to the memory of society. Looking at it from a functional perspective, this goes far beyond the mere ability to remember certain things and to forget others. Art also – and in the form of photographic art that is the real subject of this little essay – is a particular part of this memory, operating in its own way.

The fact that the storage of experiences is sometimes difficult was already anecdotally addressed. A fitting illustration demonstrating the social benefits of reducing complexity can be found in the tale On Exactitude in Science by the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges. In this tale, the cartographers of a realm were cal-

led upon to draw up a map of the country as accurately as possible. After some back and forth and long meetings, a commission finally presented the exceedingly precise result and rolled out a map on a scale of 1:1. It covered the entire country, dot by dot – and was as unmanageable as fascinatingly useless. In order to avoid such a situation, the sciences designed their own, but highly reductive, maps that emphasised and exaggerated the central aspects (and neglected others completely): theories. Theories are essentially nothing more than maps. Their size, scale and the choice of their elements and their correlations constitute their value as a proposal to cope with reality. And they do so with a unique understanding of time: temporality. Knowledge, according to central scientific understanding, requires permanent review and readjustment by attempting to test and possibly refute only temporarily accepted 'truths'. Scientific memory, as it were, is put to the test every day. 'A good scientist,' said ethologist Konrad Lorenz, 'has a theory for breakfast. Preferably, his own.'

These scientific memory structures in the form of (unstable) theories in the immersion heater of empirical analyses are pretty much the opposite of what constitutes religions. A 'temporary belief' makes little sense. Religions do, however, embrace time in a different manner. Most religions, for instance, recognise what we call 'key events' today: the crucifixion or ascension, for example, the migration of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, or the birthday of Buddha. The corresponding holidays are a temporal guide, like many other religious traditions and rituals, whether they organise the calendar or certain ceremonies. And of course, religions also transcend time when they propagate an eternal afterlife or the forgiveness of sins, for instance. Incidentally, one occasionally finds something like a topographical religious memory: just think of the crucifixes that are omnipresent in Bavaria - a single, permanent reminder.

Based on science and religion, the intention is to sketch out what sociology, or more specifically what the systems theory and Talcott Parsons define as Latent Pattern Maintenance: the function of social systems to create, maintain and occasionally change (cultural) patterns. Somewhat awkwardly, the term structure is often used for this. Such structures, which other social systems also produce in specific

ways – the economy, politics, law, and so on –, are understood here metaphorically as a social memory. 'Money', for example, manifests rules of bartering (and gives it a future), 'power': possibilities of political interests, 'laws': the chance of peaceful coexistence. And 'love' is a particularly beautiful, binding memory of the family system. In such a broad pattern, the situations and experiences conceivable to date consolidate as propositions to decide one way or the other in order to remain capable of acting for a principally open future.

All memories have one thing in common, the fact that they require specific mechanisms to decrease complexity: scripts, prototypes, schemata, cognitive maps. They are prerequisite for forming compatible experiences and for being practical: In most cases, the human being connects what he or she perceives (also the 'new') with past experiences, perceptions, routines, and images and thus produces concepts and associations that may vary according to his or her culture. Such scheme-lead attributes and preferences are also quite flexible in order to do justice to modern society. Memories oscillate, so to speak, between persistence and renewal. And, as to anticipate the reasoning: it is key events such as 9/11 that so drastically broaden the horizon of what is conceivable, the potential of the imaginary (even though, admittedly, Hollywood already knew similar scenarios) that they themselves – as an incident – become a symbol of the turning point, accelerating or even compelling it, characteristically experiencing a memory culture of their own. A further example would be Willy Brandt kneeling before the memorial for the victims of the Warsaw ghetto: a gesture whose power significantly improved the image of post-war Germany abroad. The memory of formative events is different when they diffuse further in time or space, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.

Many other such (memorable) non-commonplace processes could be mentioned here. Public remembrance may then primarily be historical politics, in other words, a social practice in the form of commemorative state iconography. The photograph of the American soldiers hoisting the US flag during the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II was immediately printed as a stamp (to this day the US stamp with the highest circulation with about 137 million copies); it was also used to advertise war loans and earned the photographer Joe Rosenthal the Pulitzer Prize in 1945. In fact, statehood everywhere in the world always (also) seemed to be based upon identity templates and collective memory –¬ whereby, similar to religions, one sets a calendric rhythm, erects memorials, strives for key events suitable for narration – and awards prizes worth remembering. The fact that in modern mass societies such politics of remembrance occasionally provoke discourses on history and even negotiate history leads us directly to the media and their role in society's soliloquy.

Media primarily serve to make successful communication more probable. Given the omnipresence of the media and their everyday use, we are presumably often unaware of how improbable successful communication actually is. Language, for example, is a fascinating attempt to transform rather incomprehensible sounds and noises into sense. First of all, it enables communication among those present – and the simultaneous control of whether the attempt was successful and whether it allowed for subsequent communication. In addition (which enormously increases the complexity of the world), language 'invents' negation, the naming of things that do not exist. Only through language does the unspeakable become sayable, as paradoxical as it may sound. And this, which is immediately obvious, also has an important consequence for the arts: fiction (and the lie) now comes on the scene. Any difference between fiction and reality can only be named through language.

Writing, given its most obvious characteristic of making communication between absentees more probable, is the preferred medium of dissemination. That is right on the one hand. On the other hand, however, it is first and foremost a memory aid: initially, it is preferably used for oral communication, for example by priests to support the correct presentation of more complex texts. This only changes with the invention of letterpress printing with movable letters; now, the distribution of content really comes into focus. In addition, libraries are established (with some delay) as the infrastructure of a collective memory that is accessible to the public and not just reser-

ved for priests and no longer dependent upon the ability of individuals to remember. Thus, writing categorically delimitates the chance of forgetting and in very different contexts – which is why in contract law, for example, it is so common to fixate rights and duties in writing. As a result, writing 'sorts' our perception of time in an entirely new way: it distinguishes between the past and the future more consequentially than language does. In writing, even a deceased person can speak, in his will.

Of course, this comes at a price. What is laid-out verbally, is enhanced in writing: the risk of deception since there is no immediate control by those present (as is the case face-to-face). This applies not only to the understanding but also to the credibility and meaning of the communication offer. In other words: societies that use characters and symbols in order to communicate are also burdened with the problem of abuse. To counteract this, truthfulness and sincerity are now morally rewarded – and yet they remain continually faltering figures, as one might interject with a view to the fake news discussion. This even constitutes the prerequisite for literature, in view of its texts not being subject to consensus (contrary to news, for example): 'when reading,' says Daniel Kehlmann, 'one can never shake off the suspicion that what one has read is untrue.' However, it has to remain possible in principle. Thus, Umberto Eco once spoke of a fictional agreement between literature and its readers: their stories can be perceived as an illusion or as an imitation; they can be true, but they do not have to be. However, there must be a possibility of them being true – as mentioned earlier: in literature.

The electronic mass media increase the problems outlined so far. On the one hand, the interruption of direct contact and the simple, current mass distribution enables enormous liberties and an excess of communication possibilities. On the other hand, the construction principle, visible for all with its patent technology, arouses further suspicion with regard to manipulation and mental enfeeblement. Programs incorporating and including deception emerge: entertainment assumes that its motive is known and that its content is 'not really' correct. Advertising wreaks the most havoc. Apart from covert advertising,

it operates with blatant, undisguised persuasion and deception. No mention of suspicion anywhere.

By way of contrast, it is the task of journalism to allow the self-observation of society and to provide it with such relevant topics for self-assurance that are not arbitrarily fabricated. These topics are the modules of a fast operating information system. The news of this system is based on a particular information term, that of surprise: information is a 'difference that makes a difference,' as sociologist Gregory Bateson boldly put it. (The only thing that is new when information is repeated is the repetition.) Journalism is a particular form of reality construction and can be described via the selections it undertakes, via the principles on which its publicity is based. For in the era of electronic mass media, the selection is perceived as such. Why do journalists report in this way – and not differently? The selection for the system is also made accordingly, for example through public relations work, which virtually simulates journalism and its decisions. And concurrently, all doors of doubt and conspiracy theory are opened. Fake news has existed for a while. After all, Americans were not on the moon as early as the end of the 1960s. Were they?

What is essential for the argument here is that it is not about a distortion of reality, as one might think. This would premise an objective, non-construed observable reality. How could one report on reality in an undistorted manner at all? Media reports on reality – but does not describe it one-to-one. Realities that allow their recipients the parallel construction, the synchronisation of at least similar worlds. Otherwise 'society's soliloquy', as Niklas Luhmann puts it, would simply be impossible. Otherwise, they would talk entirely at cross purposes. This presupposes trust, for example in professionalism, the non-partisanship of news journalism, and similar virtues that cannot be demanded at gunpoint. The consequences when such a reference to reality (for whatever reason) is no longer assumed, can already be observed not only in the echo chambers of the Internet but also in the town halls of the American heartland when Donald Trump speaks. And elsewhere.

And finally: journalism as a system working

with the differentiation of information and non-information has a memory virtually unknown in present times! At the moment in which information becomes non-information, it is consumed (i.e. a read message), then the here and now is actually just a fleeting transition from the past into the future. The news is constituted solely by a before and after; it recognises only two things: the state of the system before it becomes known and the state afterwards. The verification of reality via (electronic) media is therefore enormously demanding when enquiring about its contribution to the memory culture of a society. In fact, special formats have developed: among others, the historical film as entertainment and the documentary for the news industry. And this is, at least to my mind, where art comes into play.

Art is a unique way of observing the world and of verifying it. Contrary to all other function systems of society, however, the observation by the art system aims at being observed while observing. As an observation of the second order, art requires to be perceived during the process of its own construction of reality. Not from the point of view of the result, as is the case with journalism, which must at least claim to depict reality. Although art refers to reality, it always exhibits an openly fictional component, a double meaning to which it refers. That is its principle. Thus, in some ways, art resembles advertising, which also does not conceal its motive: nobody is so naive as to believe that what is depicted or exhibited is the reality. Of course, we must mention that there are borderline cases: 'Is this art or can it be thrown away?' – A fine phrase which probably can be ascribed to the erroneous removal of Joseph Beuys' Grease Corner at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. Art needs to be communicated.

This allows us to replace the obvious question 'what is art?' with the consideration of art-specific communication. The focus in doing so is on what Luhmann calls a 'provocation of the viewer': art is distinctive in its ostentation. Thus, it anticipates rejection or acceptance in the sense of acceptance of the observational attitude. But what follows no longer lies in the hands of the artist. Consensus cannot be dictated. However, art has this in common with other social communication systems. Only the Godfather can demand such a thing. Only the

Mafia makes 'an offer that cannot be refused'. Whereas as we have seen, communication systems are always suspected of concealing something, this does not apply to art (it is at best suspected of having no significance): contrary to the news, say, artwork may be ambivalent, ambiguous, and fictional. It is not about any concrete representation (unless for purely aesthetic reasons) either, but merely about observing the discrepancy that the primary viewer (the artist) offers to the secondary viewer. This discrepancy does not have to be particularly obvious; it may be difficult to access – or strikingly obvious. However, art, unlike all other social systems, does not know the stereotypical usage of characters (such as book printing or the economy), which would facilitate access. Only under certain conditions will the stereotype – as with Andy Warhol – turn into style. Naturally, eras, art sequences and series relate to one another as episodes. As a rule, works of art are unique. (Which, by the way, constitutes the creative character of the production of works of art.) Why else all the museums?

Now, I am no art historian. Therefore, I can only assume here that it has always been the task of art, with its discrepancy between reality and artwork, to make generalities appear special – with differing accuracies and all the shades of grey of vagueness. Religious depictions, battle scene painting, Biedermeier portraits, the imitation of nature: symbols of faith, sublimity, the economic prosperity of a whole age and more – and at best, if at all, 'inverted comma realities'. For the wellbeing and edification of the beholder? Perhaps already in the Biedermeier period, the question was asked as to why the artist offered this perspective – and why others did not. And it may even have been perceived as an imposition.

According to Walter Benjamin in 1936, the age of technical reproducibility changes the collective perception of artistic creation through the potential of mass reproduction. Benjamin devoted himself primarily to film, but his theses also concerned photography. Photography had already registered its artistic claim in the 19th century, but it was not until László Moholy-Nagy that it gained broader recognition in the mid-1920s. Above all, however, a distinctly visual newspaper culture developed in the Weimar Republic through modern printing technology: the illustrated magazines pa-

ved the way for new photojournalism and led to a boom in the newspaper industry.

This photojournalism has a highly documentary character and is immediately suspected of structuring society's visual memory. In terms of media theory, the image conveys a new authenticity to journalism – after all, as we have seen, the suspicion of manipulation immediately goes hand in hand with writing. 'A picture is worth a thousand words,' says the proverb: the linking of photojournalism with the written journalistic report increases credibility, at least latently. In terms of media practicability, it is the compact 35 mm cameras that allow photojournalism a new level of mobility. In fact, stories and contexts that had never or hardly ever experienced any visual depiction to date can now be portrayed photographically. For example, the photo Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange, taken from a series of photographs shot near Los Angeles in 1936, was acclaimed one of the most influential photographs in history. Of course, it is not about the fate of the people photographed and their children, at least not primarily. In a highly emotional manner, the photograph references the hardship of countless itinerant labourers and their families at that time.
It is an appeal.
Thus, the image approximates a core feature that we had designated for art: abstraction; a reality is implied which lies behind the image. However, the enlightening intention of the pictorial statement clearly remains in the foreground. For example, Bertolt Brecht recognised the Arbeiter-Illustrierten-Zeitung of the Weimar Republic as a means against the bourgeoisie's fantasies of concealment; photography did not serve to obscure facts, but to depict reality. Such a politically inspired perspective must actually reject the artistic idea of any fictional component. (Unless one considers the constructivist aspect of one's personal reality.)

In fact, photographs can capture coherencies in a striking, unforgettable manner. The iconic photograph, for example, by Robert Capa, taken during the Spanish civil war in September 1936, which captures a Republican soldier at the moment of his death, is a powerful symbol of the thousands and millions of human tragedies during a war. Admittedly, by processing the photograph one tries at the outset to increase the conciseness of the statement with aesthetic changes (without staging it). Dorothea Lange removed a thumb from her picture because it disturbed the lines. The famous photograph of a Vietnamese girl badly scarred by napalm bombs was narrowed down for publication due to reasons of perspective. And it also happens involuntarily: the eleven photographs published by Life in 1944 of the landing of the allies in Normandy all appeared blurred. This conveys a strong sense of drama. Initially, it was claimed that the photographer (again Robert Capa) had been violently trembling during the exchange of fire. As it happens, the photographs had been badly damaged in a London photo lab at the time. According to his own statements, Capa had also trembled, of course.

At which point are photographs actually authentic? Never, I would say. Since for the beholder, and that is what matters, some uncertainty always remains. Neither authenticity nor consensus can be considered as verified. Nor can authenticity or consensus be considered possible at all. The digitisation and digital processing in modern photography further increase this uncertainty – until they abolish all rules of visual perception and the reality with which the photographer operated becomes merely a question of aspiration: journalistic and documentary or artistic?

For photographic art, digitisation adds to the fact that it is now observed how the artist (presumably) retrospectively edits his or her reality, which is unknown in any case! So a question mark of the 2nd order appears on the scene, which can no longer be grasped in the standard metaphors of constructivism. Digitisation, on the other hand, has led photojournalism into a new crisis of representation. Imagine a photo turns up, showing Donald Trump in the arms of a beauty who is not his wife. Fake News?

For Dorothea Lange and Robert Capa and many other photojournalists, the documentary character of their works surely had priority. In this respect, her photographs play an essential role in the memory culture, at least in the Western world. However, with the digitisation, the artist loses her credibility advantage and joins the list of media under universal suspicion of mental manipulation. And it is

impossible to get off that list. No mention of documentation or recollection. Unexpected events, such as confrontations with events previously unobserved, or the transgression of limits in war reporting, run from now on under the heading of 'inverted comma' reality, to which one has no 'real' access in retrospect in any case. It must, incidentally, always be judged in context: for example, by the credibility of the publication organ, by the multitude of similar accesses to the same event and more.

The situation is different for photographic art. Through digitisation, it enters the realm of historiography in certain respects. If so desired. Now for the first time, without violating the rules of uniqueness of both the historical event and the artistic work, it can offer – convincingly offer – such decisions of selection for observation that relate to historical developments or key events. Art, we said, flaunts its own approach to the world. The observation of the second order, however, can only be fascinating if a minimum contingency underlies the artist's decision: if he or she really had a choice, complete freedom and indeed had to make a decision with regard to ambiguity. Anything else is a snapshot.

With digitisation, photographic art is opening up a niche in memory culture that was set aside for sculptors centuries ago. A photograph of the discovery of the Americas? In the analogue age at best taken from the making-of from 1492. The first ascent of a mountain? Schema. Everyone knows what summit victories look like. Today, not only can the same event be aestheticised in a completely unexpected way, but there can also be a credible attempt to confer to historical memory at least one new, sufficiently complex perspective, a new pattern, and perhaps even a clean-up of schemata that have hitherto reached an impasse. But, mind you, a historical memory that, at the end of the day, is judged and sorted by the beholder and not by the artist. This, however, always takes place in the shadow of the photographer.

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