

## HISTORICAL RE-ENACTMENT AS A VEHICLE FOR PUBLIC MEMORY: A LITHUANIAN CASE STUDY<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** commemorations, cultural performances, identity, memory, public rituals, re-enactment.

On a hot day in August of 2009 in one of the busiest streets in the Lithuanian town Palanga a wall made of foam rubber and guarded by two young men wearing Russian soldiers uniforms appeared. Palanga is a Lithuanian seaside resort and August is the peak of the holiday season, so at this time of year J. Basanavičius Street, named after one of the founding fathers of the Lithuanian nation state, is always full of people rushing to and from the beach. Palanga in August is a place where you go to forget, where holidays and oblivion rule. This was exactly the place chosen to serve as a site for the performative commemoration titled *20 Years Without Borders*, meant to celebrate the 48th anniversary of the construction and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, sponsored by the Delegation of the European Commission in Lithuania and the German Embassy and organized by the private agency *Happyendless*.<sup>2</sup>

The reason behind the choice of this particular place was clearly articulated by the organizers of the event – the main criterion was conspicuousness. To gain as much visibility as possible, the performance had to succeed in making the ordinary appear conspicuous, or to create a situation that Arthur Danto calls the “transfiguration of the commonplace” – that is, the transformation of what has been ordinary into components of a quite different experience, be it aesthetic, communal or historical (as in this case).<sup>3</sup>

The re-enactment began early in the morning when

the wall was built and ended in the evening of the same day when, at 9 pm, accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack, the wall was torn down. These two events were followed by a variety of different smaller scale projects: an information fair on the EU, collecting of the EU map out of pasta, the exhibition of houses made of *papier-machè* and decorated with detailed information about the financial support received by Lithuania from the EU, pop quiz shows and pop concerts. J. Basanavičius Street was divided into two clearly demarcated spaces physically separated by the wall – an empty grey zone guarded by Russian soldiers that symbolically revived the mental space of Communist Bloc countries and a lively, colorful and creative space of opportunities located on the other side of the wall, symbolically recreating the realities of free Europe or the Europe without walls.

The strategies of personification of historical experience were actively employed in the commemorative event: passers-by were invited to participate in the decoration of the wall – to leave their hand prints on it, to sign it, to endorse it. Later in the evening, the audience was asked to share their own memories of the historical events that took place 20 years ago and finally they were encouraged to take part in the demolition of the wall.

*The Fall of the Wall* scheduled to occur at 9 pm was the central loudly advertised event of all the commemorative festivities. The performance or the



Fig. 1. 20 years without borders, commemoration of the 48th anniversary of the construction and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, J. Basanavičius street, Palanga, Lithuania, 2009 08 13. Photo: Delegation of the European Commission in Lithuania, <http://www.facebook.com/Europos?v=photos>

re-enactment was designed in such a way as to mimic the structure of popular forms of entertainment: borrowing its syntax from live pop shows, moderated by the master of ceremonies and patterned in a consistent, intensifying cycle of anticipation, exhortation, engagement and climax. The spectators desire for the climactic end was fueled using the extended period in which spectacle was promised but not yet performed. It was clearly calculated to evoke a certain degree of suspense in much the same way as a circus ringleader teases the spectators with the idea that they will soon be treated to the sight of a man putting his head in a lion's mouth. The presenter constantly encouraged audience members to applaud and cheer loudly, because, as he reminded them loudly, that was exactly what Germans did 20 years ago. The wall in Palanga fell with the support of three audience members and a moderately cheering crowd, leaving no wreckage or debris to collect. The crowd was directed away from the fallen wall in the opposite direction (symbolically further to the West) to be entertained by pop singers, while young men dressed like Russian soldiers cleaned the territory and gathered the remaining foam rubber blocks.

The public performance in Palanga that I am describing in such detail can be seen as a cultural practice that attempts to establish continuity with the historical past, at the same time arousing emotions of communality, as well as generating a sense of victory. Commemorations according to John Gillis are the practices of representation that enact and give social substance to the discourse of collective memory.<sup>4</sup> As we are constantly revisiting our memories to suit our current identities, commemorations reinscribe or reinvent the historical events or figures that shape contemporary social life. Therefore, content and genres, as well as functions of commemorative events, constantly transform over the course of history.

Patrice M. Dabrowski, while analysing the memory rituals and nation-building in Poland of the 19th century, declared the final decades of the nineteenth century the age of commemorations, because at that time across Europe much attention was being paid to national rituals and traditions, many of which were being invented during that period.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the age of commemorations coincided with the development of so-called "official nationalisms" or

the processes of nation building across Europe and the height of imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

Commemorations played an important role in the making of nations, and at the same time they served, to cite Patrice M. Dabrowski, as miniature history lessons.<sup>7</sup> To make it even more specific, commemorative events were the means of communicating an interpretation (or multiple interpretations) of the historical event via a variety of media (performance, fine arts, applied arts and narratives) and to a broad and diverse constituency. If executed effectively, these state celebrations were able to represent stability; their “carefully scripted rituals” – to borrow Dabrowski’s terms – were designed to foster or create a certain image of continuity or celebration of new beginnings.

Nevertheless, these public displays of social memory were contested events. As John Gills has stated in his research, commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle and in some cases annihilation.<sup>8</sup> According to Ernest Renan, being a nation requires some kind of collective forgetting.<sup>9</sup> These events are employed as representations or symbols, according to John Bodnar, that “coerce” the discordant interests of diverse social groups and unite them into a “unitary conceptual framework” which connects *the ideal* societal structure with *the real* order of things.<sup>10</sup> State or dominant groups employ them as a powerful weapon in order to establish continuity with a favorable historical past and at the same time to galvanize ideals of social stability, national unity and civic loyalty. However, these expressions almost always contain a certain amount of the fantastic, as they demonstrate what social reality should be like rather than what it really is. Therefore, they serve as the acts of “social magic”, applying the famous notion of Pierre Bourdieu. Commemorations in this sense are performances of history and usually possess the same constituents as theatrical performances. According to the theatre scholar Freddie Rokem, who defined the term “performing history” in his seminal book with the



Fig. 2. 20 years without borders, commemoration of the 48th anniversary of the construction and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, J. Basanavičius street, Palanga, Lithuania, 2009 08 13. Photo: Delegation of the European Commission in Lithuania, <http://www.facebook.com/Europos?v=photos>

same title, performances of history always involve a simultaneous mixture of at least three different genres or modes of representation: the testimonial, the documentary, and the fantastic.<sup>11</sup> These three components of theatrical performances of history usually are all present in commemorative rituals of societal unity.

Current works on the 19th century suggest that instead of “magically” unifying and cementing collective identities, commemorations often deepened divisions within societies.<sup>12</sup> As Jonathan Sperber declared, the one thing that the symbolic discourse of national unity could not express was the unity of the nation.<sup>13</sup> Numerous historical examples demonstrate that quite often the very object of commemorative practices – the historical script or, in other words, the memory – is the object of conflicting visions and ideological positions that struggle



Fig. 3. 20 years without borders, commemoration of the 48th anniversary of the construction and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, J. Basanavičius street, Palanga, Lithuania, 2009 08 13. Photo: Delegation of the European Commission in Lithuania, <http://www.facebook.com/Euopos?v=photos>

to dominate.<sup>14</sup> Quite often the official “commemoration” metamorphosed into “contestation”, when dissenting voices and alternative narratives broke through the dominant patterns of “vehicles of social memory”.

It is obvious that commemorations always involve the “memory work” that is embedded in complex power relations that determine what is remembered or forgotten by whom and for what end. However, even if contemporary public memory emphasizes dislocation, paradox and irony in contrast with older, traditional forms, nostalgia for the old models of commemorations survives. The potential of commemorative performances (or commemorations in general) to produce a unitary effect for otherwise inoperative communities (that “act of social magic”) has too long a history to be forgotten. This nostalgia was exactly the sentiment behind the commemorative event in Palanga, where a historical event was appropriated in order to stage, celebrate and promote new transnational identity – namely the EU identity.

At the moment when the concept of common European identity is a contested terrain but at the same time an “ultimate concern”, formation of identity is a very urgent task to perform. This is exactly

the dilemma that some European states faced at the end of 19th century, so, to rephrase the famous saying, “we have made the European Union, now we must make Europeans”. What are the conditions for a Europe to act as a “unity”? How to make the EU the object of love for the Europeans?<sup>15</sup> These questions are being address by various prominent scholars, searching for ways for the EU to become the founding ground for the European political nation. As Evert van der Zweerde has suggested in his essay *Fear, Love, Hope – European Political Passions*, the cool, calm and collected commitment of citizens to their “constitution” or legal frame of the union, is a positive force in line with the concept of civil society, but it is precisely too cool and too rational to found a *demos* or the sense of a political nation and therefore must be supplemented by a relatively “warm” form of emotional and passionate commitment that should act in accordance with the notion of *patriotism*, maybe as he suggests, transformed into *matriotism* – a notion that would refer to Europe as “mat-rie”, instead of *patrie* or nation.<sup>16</sup>

The question, however, is what can be the basis for the Love of Europe? Van der Zweerde answers that question with great certainty – the same options as for love of one’s country – ethnic, religious,

linguistic, historical and political identities. Since ethnic, religious or linguistic factors seem to be the least relevant here, historical and political identity appears to be the most suitable building blocks for the image of the EU as *matric*. As Van der Zweerde points out,

“It is against the background of a shared history that Europeans can unite around a set of political ideas that take into account the ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of the continent”.<sup>17</sup>

Precisely this need to demonstrate the common history and to link the history of the nation with the history of Europe stood at the heart of the commemorative impulse in Palanga. The slogans written on the Wall stating *Bunda jau Baltija* (The Baltics are Rising), *Baltijos kelias jėga* (The Baltic Way Rules) were meant to appeal to local audiences, and to reanimate Lithuanian “realms of memory”. The theatrical use of the personifications or “performing history” – strategies of witnessing and participation – were employed to work on the effect of the common history. The message of common good that all citizens can recognize, such as safety, property, financial aid and security was displayed with the help of specific structuring of the space and various complementary events.

However, in order to awaken the desired “warm” effect of feeling towards the common experience, the event itself had to be entertaining and popular. The community was being called into being following the formulas of commercialized mass entertainment rather than the logic of the critical public sphere. To rephrase Zygmund Bauman – history in Palanga was presented as a giant theme park, where the tasks of preaching, entertaining and selling were all intertwined. It demonstrated that collective understanding of the past must be absorbed by all senses, and worked upon in the popular imagination. Moreover the performance repeatedly drew attention to how spectators perceive it by creating shifts between the order of presence and representation. The experience or the effect of being unable to command processes and events entirely – or instead being determined by them to a degree – was

created. Together with the re-animation of the historical sense of shared experience of Europeans, the event also helped the realization – in the double sense of “becoming aware” and “making real” – not only of a common historical and political space as well as, but also of the sense of inevitability. In this way, the use of public memory as a means of constructing a spectacle of identity was exactly the operation of the invisible theatre, staged in order to appear natural.

#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information on this event see <http://www.youtube.com/EUtube>.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981; more on transfiguration of the commonplace in performance practices see Erika Fischel-Lichte, ‘The Performance as Event’ in: *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, London, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 161-181.

<sup>4</sup> John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Patrice M. Dabrowski, *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 3. The concept of *invented traditions* is thoroughly described in Eric Hobsbawm, Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Patrice M. Dabrowski, 2004, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> John R. Gillis, 1994, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? (What is a Nation?)*, trans. by Romer Taylor, Toronto: Tapir Press, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representation of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Patrice M. Dabrowski, 2004, pp. 6-10; Jonathan Sperber, ‘Festivals of National Unity in the German Revolution of 1848/49’ in: *Past and Present*, No. 136, 1992, p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> One recent example is analyzed in Stefan Berger, Paul Holtom, ‘Locating Kaliningrad and Königsberg in Russian and German Collective Identity Discourses and Political Symbolism in the 750th Anniversary Celebrations of 2005’ in: *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1,

2008, pp. 15-37. The article analyses the power struggles between two notions of collective identity (Russian and German) of Kaliningrad / Königsberg region and their reflection in the public debates surrounding the celebration of the 750th anniversary of the city. Many such examples are presented in the study of John Bodnar. See John

Bodnar, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Evert Van Der Zweerde, 'Fear, Love, Hope – European Political Passions' in: *Filosofija. Sociologija*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2008, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

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## **Praeities inscenizacija kaip atminties politikos įrankis: Lietuvos atvejo studija**

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** atmintis, atminties politika, minėjimai, istorijos vaidinimai, tapatybė, viešieji ritualai.

### **Santrauka**

Visuomenės ar bendruomenės savo požiūrį į istoriją ir praeitį įprasmina bei įkūnija įvairiais kultūros vaidinimais arba viešaisiais ritualais: proginais minėjimais, jubiliejais, suvažiavimais, paradais. Jeigu autoritariniams režimams būdingus viešuosius ritualus galima nagrinėti remiantis tradicinėmis teatro formomis, tai šiuolaikinėse demokratinėse visuomenėse vykstantys minėjimai ar pilietiniai ritualai gali būti interpretuojami kaip modernaus ar avangardinio teatro žanrai: partizaninis teatras, gatvės teatras (R. Schechner), nematomas teatras (A. Boal). Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip proginis istorinio įvykio minėjimas (2009 08 14 Palangoje vykusį Berlyno sienos griūtis rekonstrukcija) gali būti naudojamas naujų transnacionalinių tapatybių bei bendruomenių kūrimui ir propagavimui. Straipsnyje taip pat nagrinėjama, kokie inscenizacijos modeliai bei teatro poveikio priemonės pasitelkiamos formuojant tam tikras žiūrovo pozicijas, atsparos taškus, reguliuojančius šventinio įvykio / istorijos įvykio interpretaciją bei kuriant bendros istorinės praeities efektą.

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