Mediated Memories: The Politics of the Past

“Monumentality is rarely the language of the small social solidarities that make remembrance meaningful.” Jay Winter (1999:5)

“Both a monument and its significance are constructed in particular times and places, contingent on the political, historical, and aesthetic realities of the moment.” (Young, 1999:3)

I

The thesis of this essay is that the age of monumentality, or meaningful memorials and memorialization in the public sphere is over. There are prerequisites for meaningful public memorialization that can no longer be met. Among these is a degree of shared understanding, in broad terms, of the events being memorialized.¹ That this is generally not the case can be seen if one looks at the ways some recent memorials and proposals for memorials (eg Vietnam Veterans Memorial, World War II Memorial in Washington D.C., and the World Trade Center Memorial) have been problematized—emotionally, politically, socially, personally, economically and aesthetically.

I say it is generally not the case that conditions for meaningful memorials can now be met because I do not want to deny that for some, memorials may at times still be meaningful and evocative in the ways that they have traditionally thought to be—as objects of remembrance, meditation and thanksgiving. The occasional personal counterexample of meaningful memorialization in the public sphere neither refutes the thesis nor, more importantly, engages with it. Furthermore, I am confining myself to public monuments and memorials. I have no wish to deny private and smaller scale acts of remembrance and memorialization—those not directly subject to ulterior political and

¹ See MacIntyre (1981). I do not share MacIntyre’s views about what constituted the shared background and common values that provided a necessary background for a more or less common ethics in the western world. Nevertheless, public commemoration of any sort has to rely on shared ways of seeing and feeling—a common worldview and ethos. This has been sufficiently shattered to render public memorial either obsolete or more the ground for contestation than remembrance.
other motives, but are instead partly a product of a common understanding, worldview and ethos—can take place.\(^2\)

For the most part, the design, execution, and even the meanings of public memorials, are subjected to the will of those with the political and economic clout that see to it that their own understanding of events are the one’s represented literally and symbolically in the media and by the memorial. In so doing, they often subvert and disallow alternative and more accurate readings of events; specifically those at odds with the views and values of the political status quo and others who are suitably empowered.

A range of theoretical and empirical considerations will be employed to support the claim that meaningful memorialization in the public sphere has come to an end. At the same time, supposing this hypothesis to be reasonably accurate, some of its significant implications will be drawn out. First, however, there are some interesting corollaries to the thesis.

(i) The conditions that currently make memorialization problematic similarly serve to problematise past memorials and acts of remembrance. Thus, for example, I take it that holocaust memorials—including and most importantly, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, have been and are being, compromised by Israel’s actions towards the Palestinians. Their ability to function meaningfully is undermined, for example, by efforts to identify Israel and attitudes and actions both coming from Israel and addressed towards Israel, with Judaism at large.\(^3\) Such memorials can no longer mean what they once did, or function as

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\(^2\) See Howett (1985) for a useful background discussion. She says, for example (Howett, 1985: 3) “The potential for a wide range of public reaction is even greater [than in public art generally] in the case of traditional public art—monuments and memorials—because these works have as their primary function the articulation of a specific message, no matter how vaguely defined. Also see Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, (1991) for an interesting account of attempts to deal with the commemoration of “a difficult past”—especially the \textit{VVM}.  

\(^3\) No doubt some will object to the specific examples I employ. Nothing in my thesis however relies on the particular examples, and one can substitute the cases I discuss \textit{mutatis mutandis} for memorials they regard as better suited to my thesis. After all, my thesis is that the age of memorialization is over and memorials can no longer (supposing that at one time they were able to) perform their function. So, with the exceptions already mentioned, it applies to memorials across the board. You may take your pick.
they did—at least not for many. They have been taken up and cast in a different and peculiar context by what has happened since—not only in Israel but in seemingly unrelated events like the relative indifference to genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Sudan, and unjustified military interventions and now torture by the U.S. It is difficult to consider public acts of memorialization as discreetly referring only to the particular case at hand. If memorialization is partly a search for meaning, any such act will look beyond its particular historical circumstance. Jay Winter (1999:5) says that “The Search for “meaning” after the Somme and Verdun was hard enough; after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, that search has become infinitely vexed.” Events since those that Winters mentions continue to add to that vexation in their own special ways—qualitatively and quantitatively.

(ii) The thesis is deflationary for architecture and design. As important and relevant as aesthetic and design considerations are for memorials, their significance is to be found largely in their capacity to represent or convey certain meanings and messages and perform certain necessary psychological tasks. It is their meaning, or how they are interpreted and function that counts in terms of the memorial’s success. Discussions that purport to be about the aesthetic value or merit of a memorial frequently either become or mask, moral and political concerns and agendas. Or else, the aesthetic and ethical issues that designers endeavour to resolve in the memorial are intertwined. Thus, questions about the aesthetics of Daniel Liebeskind’s proposal for the World Trade Center site, or Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial are often not about aesthetics but about other things. What, for example, is being represented or suggested, what values portrayed,

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4 Young (1999:2) says “In the eyes of modern critics and artists, the traditional monument’s essential stiffness and grandiose pretensions to permanence thus doom it to an archaic premodern status. Even worse, by insisting that its meaning is as fixed as its place in the landscape, the monument seems oblivious to the essential mutability in all cultural artifacts, the ways the significance in all art evolves over time [my emphasis].”

5 See Lagueux (2004). He argues that architects must seek to resolve aesthetic and ethical problems together since they are, for the architecture, inseparable.
criticized or endorsed? However, the connection between aesthetics, and ethical or political considerations may at times be unavoidable given a connection between the two. Choosing a height of 1776 (the date of U.S. independence) feet for Liebeskind’s proposed tower for the World Trade Center site, or the peculiar chronological arrangement of names on Lin’ Vietnam Veterans Memorial are examples of how aesthetic and moral or political judgments may be inexorably intertwined.

Commemoration has both an aesthetic and political function as well as a personal one. Art and politics are linked in particular and problematic ways in memorials just as they are in public space and in public art more generally. Nevertheless, the significance of memorials is ultimately personal and in the context of memorialization both art and politics are ideally made to serve personal ends.

Some instances of contemporary memorialization are cited for their multivalence and openness to various interpretations (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial), and it is claimed that others should be (World Trade Center Memorial). This openness to interpretation, including conflicting interpretations, is no doubt conveyed by design and material elements in the monument. Nevertheless, it is ultimately the narrative meaning conveyed that is crucial to the success or failure of any large scale public monument or act of memorialization. The ability of a memorial to function as a memorial rests in part in its ability to convey such meaning and for such meaning to be appropriately apprehended.

The fact that there is such a cry for memorials to allow for, if not include, contested interpretations of events memorialized, is a recognition of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of memorialization in this age of deeply divisive and aggressive politics –

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an age where truth and reality are routinely subverted. It appears that contemporary memorial must now allow for conflicting and competing interpretations no matter how mistaken about the events memorialised some interpretation may be. Didier Maleuvre (1999:59-60) says

That every thing deserves monumentalizing means we view reality as something already forgotten. The real itself becomes a cultural heritage—the reminiscence of something which is no longer quite possible in reality. Industrialist culture has so little faith in its ability to remember that, like the neurotic scribbling his every move on a notepad, it commits every thing to the holding tank of commemoration, including itself…. Monuments, then, celebrate the excess of irreducible, untranslated past which cannot be fully remembered. Monuments are historical objects because they cannot be integrated into the present, because they fail to participate in history as it unfolds. Anachronism is the essence of the historical object’s historicity. In order to commemorate, the monument must first signify that is synchronous neither with the past nor with the present in which it demonstrates.

Does Maleuvre think that the conditions stipulated as necessary for commemoration can be met? For several reasons, the implication seems to be that they cannot. Perhaps the fact that monuments are “historical objects” that “cannot be integrated into the present” dooms their efficacy while signifying a cultural repression of what they could mean were they not anachronistic. They are rendered anachronistic not so much by their nature as by current culture’s inability or unwillingness to remember.

The notion of “progressive memorials” like the AIDS Memorial Quilt —ones that seek to challenge the traditional idea of a memorial need to be looked. These are often regarded as examples of successful and forward thinking memorials—ones that by their nature are participatory and integrated into the present. For the same reasons as with traditional memorials I do not think these succeed as memorials, though their failure may be less transparent. A competition brief for a progressive memorial to the stolen generation--the practice of stealing Aboriginal children from their families as a part of
Australian history reads in part as follows: “This competition seeks innovative approaches that challenge the traditional idea of a memorial - that is, the permanent, often heroic object that offers a singular view of history. Instead, this competition seeks proposals for memorials that prompt multiple understandings of the Stolen Generations, be they political, cultural, social or physical. Such an approach might be considered 'anti-memorial' or progressive memorial design.” One wonders just what these “multiple readings” should be or indeed what would make the memorial “progressive?” Should one of readings be the apologetic one: The good Australians at the time who started this policy thought they were doing the right thing? I don’t think so, although this is a line that John Howard’s Australian Liberal government, and many Australians, endorse. For one thing it is as false as the idea that those who supported apartheid in South Africa or slavery in the U.S thought that these things were beneficial to those they harmed. I by no means wish to exclude pluralistic and variant interpretations—but only to limit them. My focus is on the ones that must be excluded--those interpretations that subvert the meaningfulness of the memorial and its ability to function.

In those cases where such things are allegedly believed (“they thought they were doing the right thing”), it is likely they are self-serving belief(s) fostered by deep-seated prejudice rather than vice-versa. After seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the most widely praised memorial of this era, for the first time columnist James J. Kilpatrick said,

We walked. . . and gradually the long walls of the monument came into view. Nothing I had heard of or written had prepared me for the moment. I could not speak. I wept. There are the names. The names! For twenty years I have contended that these men died in a cause noble as any cause for which a war was ever fought. Others have contended, and will always contend, that these dead were uselessly sacrificed in a no-win war that should never have been waged at all. Never mind.... [Quoted in Hubbard (1984: 17)]

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8 See www.eniar.org/stolen.htm, for the Australian Government’s response to the stolen generation report. Also see, library.trinity.wa.edu.au/aborigines/stolen.htm; and www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hrec/sc/stolen/  
9 http://users.ice.rmit.edu.au/sgmemorials/stolen.htm  
10 See Levine (2004b); Levine and Newman (2004a); Young-Bruehl, 1996.
Kilpatrick’s “never mind,” the idea that seeing the names unites those who opposed the war with those who thought it noble, is as self-serving as it is unwarranted. It represses (and also showcases) Kilpatrick’s guilt; and again it is at the expense of those, this time their memory, he exploited during the Vietnam War.

Mary Mcleod also praises *VVM* as an unqualified success. She says (Mcleod, 2004:381), “By all accounts, the memorial succeeds as a ‘modern monument.’ Today it is the most popular monument in the nation’s capital… No structure built since World War II has had a greater impact on public attitudes in the United States. Its construction instigated a kind of national catharsis, dissolving the bitter disputes that divided the nation.” Mcleod’s assessment, based on hearsay (i.e. “by all accounts”) is an illusion. Her view, like Kilpatrick’s is the result of wish-fulfilling phantasy, as such things are according to psychoanalysis. They are an effort to refashion reality in accordance with one’s desires and wishes. Illusions are not necessarily false, but this one is. The idea that the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* dissolved the “bitter disputes that divided the nation” is not a distortion but a lie. It services those like Kilpatrick who have a need to repress since they are unable to forget, and who, having helped perpetrate the war, are immune to meaningful memorialization. The *VVM* may even be more offensive to those who served in Vietnam than to those who protested the war’s alleged legitimacy and rationale from the outset. It is also offensive to those who protested the war and the criminal way in which it was conducted. Here was U.S. State terrorism on a grand scale (cf. Levine and Newman, 2004a). The old “bitter disputes” Mcleod refers to remain unresolved and unmitigated—focused now on Iraq and the alleged war on terror. This is a crucial part the context in which the *VVM* must be seen.
Should the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* allow a reading which suggests that war was a just and righteous one?\(^{11}\) Would that make it progressive? On the contrary, insofar as such a reading is legitimized by the memorial, the memorial and efforts towards memorialization are undermined. That it *does allow such a reading*—that those who served, who died and who also killed did so in the service a just cause and ideals; along with the way the memorial was politicized from its inception, goes some way to explaining why it fails.

It is not so much that this memorial fails on its own terms or that the arguments, largely aesthetic, put forth by the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* critic-supporters, fail. Rather the success or failure of the monument was from the start out of Maya Lin’s hands. She no more controls the conditions that allow a memorial to function than she does those who have sought to undermine its intended significance from the outset; those for example, who affronted it materially and conceptually with the additional statues on site or, even worse, those responsible for the World War II memorial—a conceptual and aesthetic anachronism that defeats its alleged purpose and helps to intentionally undermine the *VVM* as a memorial.\(^{12}\)

(iii) The current fervour concerning memorials, along with the growing demand and number of them requires some explanation in terms of the thesis of this paper—that is in terms of the claim that we are at the end of the age of memorialization, or that memorialization proper is no longer possible. Is there a connection between the need to

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11 Hubbard (1984: 21) says “Maya Ying Lin, has said that she intended a monument that ‘would not tell you how to think’ about the Vietnam War.”

12 There are memorials that are better, far better, than the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*—conceptually, aesthetically, morally, educationally, and emotionally—that nevertheless fail for similar reasons. The memorials to the Jews by Horst Hoheisel in Kassel and Buchenwald that Young (1999: 3-6) discusses are, I think, examples. Young (1999: 9) says “German artists have attempted to embody the ambiguity and difficulty of Holocaust memorialization in Germany in conceptual, sculptural, and architectural forms that would return the burden of memory to those who come looking for it. Rather than creating self-contained sites of memory, detached form our daily lives, these artists would force both visitors and local citizens to look within themselves for memory, at their actions and motives for memory within these spaces.” The “ambiguities and difficulties” embodied in the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* are however of a different order.
remember or memorialize and the need to forget? Are memorials, like mourning on
Freud’s (1917e) account, also attempts at assuaging guilt? If so, then isn’t the current
proliferation of memorials (memorial mania) indicative on the one hand of guilt and the
need for self-punishment, while at the same time an acknowledgement of
memorialization’s inability to do what they are supposed to do and what they are needed
to do? What else is at play, psychologically, politically and morally speaking, in this rush
to commemorate? Are there parallels between the tricks that memory notoriously plays
upon individuals and that memorials may play upon various groups collectively? Savage
(1999: 14) says “to paraphrase Pierre Nora [1989] it is when we stop experiencing
memory spontaneously from within that we begin to ‘design’ memory, to create its
external signs and traces, such as monuments and historic buildings…. The intensifying
proliferation of the external signs of memory in the contemporary built environment
signals the death of a more organic cultural memory that supposedly existed in the hazy
premodern past.” That memorials and memorialization frequently have a dark side
should come as no surprise.

There are various ways in which the overall thesis and corollaries can be argued
for. For example, it might be useful to consider case studies of contested memorials at
length. To some extent this is done with the VVM in this essay. The better and logically
prior route however is largely theoretical and involves an analysis of the nature of

The historical is the stuff of the past which, by being remembered in the present,
desists from being in the present: it is what cannot be reconstituted in the present.
The real basis of historical remembrance is not what is remembered but what is
left unremembered—the immemorial. Paradoxically, then, we call historical only
those elements of the past that make their way into remembrance as the not-fully-
remembered. Things that are remembered and commemorated de facto signify
their problematic relation to memory. A monument is etched by oblivion, and only
an oblivious culture can give rise to monuments. It takes a culture as oblivious as
modernity to create such numbers of museums for everything, and monumentalize
the past to the degree it did. As the historian Pierre Nora [1989: 7] notes, we build "lieux de mémoire" (places of memory) because there are no more "milieux de memoire" (real environments of memory)…. No doubt this remark evinces the nostalgic illusion that there once existed a form of remembering immanent in existence. Yet it does point to the alienated status of memory in modern times, an estrangement concretized in monuments, museums, and "lieux de mémoire."… The monument tells us that we remember by losing touch with what is remembered; that we remember when memory no longer holds us. Monuments resist memory as much as they celebrate it. For the truly and fully remembered is in no need of being remembered: it abides in the smallest thing, as the substratum of reality.

If Maleuvre and Nora are right, then not only is every monument also, in a sense, an anti-monument enjoining one to forget more than to remember, but the rush to memorialize and build monuments is indicative of a lack of remembrance and a sign of a obliviousness to the past. Freud said that our strongest affirmations are often denials. In the case of memorials, where this unprecedented need for them is alleged to be an affirmation of concern and solidarity with the past, just the opposite may the case. Memorials are indicative of a refusal to remember, to mourn or to engage the past. When is a memorial not a memorial? When real “environments of memory” no longer exist. At times like now.

The thesis of this paper encompasses important empirical claims, but their point is largely conceptual. It is unlikely that empirical studies could do much other than to illustrate areas of contestation. An argument for the end of the age of memorialization; for the impossibility of meaningful public memorials; for a decline in their symbolic efficiency; can be mounted by looking at ways in which memorials can fail. But this involves also theorizing about how memorials, memorialization, and mourning, should function normatively speaking—as compared to how they actually function—personally, politically and socially. How are they meant to function and what are the mechanisms involved? Are these conscious, unconscious or both? If both, how are they related?
Neither the large numbers of visitors to the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* as compared with other memorials in the area, nor its oft cited ability to draw people in closely and privately to the wall can usefully be given as empirical evidence of the memorial’s success—nor can “approval” by some veterans and spouses of the dead, or texts, images and objects left at the site. The success of the memorial is arguably not to be measured in these terms—though there are many who, for subversive and ulterior motives, would like to see it so measured. After all, no one is denying that some may be moved by the memorial or that it may help some remember, grieve, forget or even forgive. It does also after all, however, present an opportunity to publicly “act out” in formulaic, prescribed and self-gratifying ways. Why suppose that touching a name and crying at the wall, no matter how heartfelt, or leaving an object or photo, is a measure of the memorial’s success? Why is it a measure of success anymore than say, the fact that tourists buy and wear t-shirts that say “ground-zero” and “I was at ground-zero”—much like people wear Niagara Falls or Mickey Mouse t-shirts, suggest it’s a failure? It may be a kind of adaptive ritual or an effort to identify in some sense and way—narcissistically perhaps, with what “celebrity” objects or places of significance and perceived “greatness” represent.

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13 Slavoj Zizek argues, for instance - following Pascal, and also Althusser’s theory of ideology - that it is the ritual itself that believes for us. In other words, belief is performative and crystallised within certain external rituals, rather than being an internal phenomenon. Suppose a non-believer who wants to believe takes part in a Catholic ritual: while this person engages in the ritual in a mechanical way, it is the very material performance of the ritual itself that symbolises his faith. The subject’s belief, in other words, is constructed as a retroactive effect of the ritual itself – if the subject asks himself why he performed the ritual, the answer must be that he must have been a believer in the first place without being aware of it. That is to say, the ritual comes first followed by belief; and belief is an effect of performing the ritual rather than the other way round. Zizek uses several examples here: the Tibetan prayer wheels which do the praying for us; canned laughter on TV which does the laughing for us; and ‘weepers’ who in certain cultures are employed by mourners to grieve for them at funerals (see *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso 1989). Perhaps memorials function - or are intended to function - in the same way: purely by engaging in the external ritual of visiting memorials, even in a perfunctory way, we are in effect performing an act of commemoration, while internally we might be thinking of something completely unrelated to the what is being commemorated – shopping for instance. In this sense, buying a “Ground Zero” t-shirt may be just as profound or at least ‘heartfelt’ an act of commemoration as leaving flowers or a photo at the site itself. I do not think it is however and I think these acts have alternative explanations. My thanks to Saul Newman calling my attention to Zizek here.
The idea that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a subtle, elegant, architectural and programmatic invitation to public mourning unique in the comparative history of modern western architecture is a self-serving myth promoted by all parties; the professional design community; those who see the war as a noble failure; and those who see it as a tragic mistake and crime. It is a common ground on which supporters and opponents of the Vietnam War pretend to agree by ignoring differences, falsifying memory and rewriting history. The memorial fails because, like other public memorials, it cannot function as memorials must if they are to succeed as memorials. There is also an implicit narrative to the VVM: that of a small, young, Asian female student winning a blind competition and then taking on the outraged misogynist, militaristic, racist bullies to bring the project to completion. But to suggest that this formidable accomplishment can or should be mapped on to the memorial itself is unconvincing. It is another attempt at a particularly insidious kind of subversion.

Not even an interpretation that sees Lin’s accomplishment as an inversion of the photo from Life magazine of the young girl running from/to troops naked can enable the VVM memorial to memorialize. The memorial’s alleged success cannot rest on a particular interpretation, for there are other tragically mistaken interpretations about the Vietnam War and the memorial itself that one can, and many do, come away with—interpretations engendered by the memorial in context. A public memorial must engage with memory, history and truth in certain ways that helps heal and appease certain anxieties, fears and the like. But as Broszat (1990), Krauss (1988) and Huysseun (1994) have argued, there are reasons based on fact but also conceptual and interpretive, for judging that this is can no longer be the case with such memorials. It is not just the VVM that fails, but so too all memorials in this period at this particular time. Young (1999:3) asserts, that “a monument and its significance are constructed in particular times and
places, contingent on the political, historical, and aesthetic realities of the moment.” Yet he apparently sees nothing incongruent or untoward in present day public memorials—including the effort to construct a memorial to those who died on 9/11 at Ground Zero. What is it then about these current contingencies of reality that now render memorials impotent?

Note that I am not arguing that public memorialization, mourning or remembrance is unnecessary or even that it is wholly impossible. On the contrary, it seems to be just as crucial to our well-being and psychic economy as ever. Nevertheless, why suppose that necessity entails possibility? We are left then with the disarming prospect that memorialization, necessary though it may be, may also be impossible, or highly problematic. What then are the implications of a nation’s or peoples need to remember and memorialize, publicly as well as personally, being situated at a time and place that make it impossible, or nearly impossible, to do so?

There are numerous questions and issues that are relevant to the thesis of this paper and its corollaries as outlined above. What constitutes a good memorial? How do they function or fail to function? Are there any criteria for a successful memorial that are applicable to memorials in general? Is it any longer possible to publicly memorialize? Are we in the midst of memorial mania and if so what does this say about the current cultural climate? What is the relation between memory and memorialization? Is there any single aesthetic, for example, minimalism that is most appropriate aesthetic for contemporary memorialization? Is it possible to have a timeless memorial—one that really does last through the ages, or do memorials have to be specific to times and places? What is an ‘ethic of memory” and is developing such an ethic essential to understanding memorialization and creating functional memorials? Is it possible or desirable to have a memorial genuinely free from politicalization, or is it rather a question of the kind of
politicalization that occurs? Are memorials, as a form of public discourse and as some (for various reasons) have claimed, meant to inspire debate and evoke further discourse? Should they inspire debate? Are they a form of public therapy? What can the case of memorials tell us about the intersection between architecture, ethics and politics—and the interstices between private and public? What do they tell us about notions like nationhood and community? Let’s see if the claim that the age of meaningful memorials has come to an end can be defended and by what means.

II

What is a memorial or monument? Haskins and DeRose (2003: 378) give a functional account. “A memorial is by definition a material expression of mourning for lost lives and opportunities, but it can be more than petrified grief. It can be a stage for cathartic closure and critical reckoning.” Choay (2001: 6-7) too concentrates on the function of memorials. In French, the original meaning of the word is that of the latin *monumentum*, itself derived from *monere* (to warn, to recall) which calls upon the faculty of memory. The affective nature of its purpose is essential; it is not simply a question of informing, of calling to mind a neutral bit of information, but rather of stirring up, through the emotions, a living memory. In this original meaning, one would term a monument any artifact erected by a community of individuals to commemorate or to recall for future generations individuals, events, sacrifices, practices or beliefs. The specificity of the monument is therefore a direct function of the way it acts on memory. Not only does it mobilize and engage memory through the mediation of affectivity, in such a way as to recall the past while bringing it to life as if it were present. But the past that is invoked and called forth, in an almost incantatory way, is not just any past: it is localized and selected to a critical end, to the degree that it is capable of directly contributing to the maintenance and preservation of the identity of an ethnic, religious, national, tribal or familial community. For those who erect it, as for those who receive its messages, the monument is a defense against the traumas of existence, a security measure. It is the guarantor of origins, allaying anxieties inspired by the uncertainties of our beginnings. Antidote to entropy, to the dissolving action of time on all things natural and artificial, it seeks to appease our fear of death and annihilation.

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14 See Vico’s (2001) [1730] discussion of burials, Wordsworth’s (1810) essay ‘Essay Upon Epitaphs,’ and Allen (2004). There are numerous other theoretical perspectives that can be used to support the thesis about memorials. I have focused mainly on those that deal explicitly with memorials.
There is little in the way of detail or support here regarding the psychological mechanisms required for memorials to perform the array of functions Choay claims they do. Nevertheless, if correct, this account goes some way to explaining the motivation and deep need for memorialization. It is also suggestive of the harm caused and the responsibility borne by those who, whether intentionally or not, deprive people or a nation of those conditions that make memorialization at least possible.

Choay (in Maleuvre 1999: 59) also discusses the significance of the need to memorialize, to over-memorialize, as much as we do. The fact that “we create museums for every parcel of reality (so-called eco-museums, which collect and document local artifacts: agricultural tools, mining equipment, automobiles, domestic utensils)… shows that every thing in our self-liquidating culture is now threatened with oblivion.” Some such psychologically grounded account of their function and significance, is necessary to understanding what memorials are about. To say simply that they are about remembering, honouring and the like, hides more than it explains. It is indicative of the inability of memorials to function, largely psychologically, if they are to be memorials instead of mere artefacts or tourist attractions.

Not only is Choay’s functional account very different than those that take memorials at face value, psychoanalytic accounts generally are; it may also mistakenly appear to be largely negative when compared with more ordinary accounts. The functions she sees memorials as primarily performing are not the superficial and generally stated ones of honouring the dead and remembering worthwhile causes and sacrifices. However, regarding a monument as a defence against trauma, or an effort to ward of fears of death, is not to see memorialization as a wholly narcissistic, selfish or worthless activity. On the contrary, protecting the ego in varying ways may be a positive and necessary function of repression and other defence mechanisms of the psyche. It is only when repression leads
to problematic neuroses or defence mechanisms lead to damaging prejudices like racism or sexism that they become debilitating and need to be controlled if not excised. The idea that the healthy individual can or should be free from any and all repressive, defensive or neurotic activity is certainly no part of psychoanalytic belief.\textsuperscript{15}

There are of course many variations on psychoanalytic views of memorialization. Curtis (2004: 306-7) gives this account.

[Freud (1991: 299) claims] that there must be a ‘protective shield’ between consciousness and perception that diverts, or perhaps removes, that which is painful to another scene. Through the memorial, trauma is edified to limit the damage. One remembers in order to forget, or, as Lyotard (1990) puts it, ‘One expends to minimize and control absolute expenditure, the threat of liquification (the flood), the undoing of the social bond’ (p. 8). The protective shield …. is political in that the yield is the restoration of the community. What we might choose to call memorial politics, remembers only those differences that might further identity. It remembers antagonism to broker consensus. It remembers silence to extend communication. Memorial, redemptive politics will always exclude and render illegitimate anything that threatens the subject. Always refusing the disaster, the catastrophe, always shoring itself up against dissolution. Politics remembers in order to forget. Memorial politics expends to minimize expenditure.

In Lacanian terms memorials can be theorised as expressing our desire to be the Other; our desire to be heroes for instance because we know that we are not. For present purposes there is there is no reason to choose between these varying accounts. What is important is that these and similar accounts explain the function of memorials, and the need to memorialize, in ways that suggest ordinary understanding and justifications for these activities are superficial or even false.

However, they also provide a theoretical background that can be used to explain both the recent public obsession with memorialization, the need to memorialize, as well as the difficulty, if not impossibility, of adequately memorializing even those things that

\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, to say, for example, that a large part of the reason people enjoy movies is because watching a film allows them to transiently (temporarily and harmlessly) invoke sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic and other wish-fulfilling phantastic tendencies, the fulfilment of which they find deeply satisfying, is not to say this is a bad thing. If enjoying films (or books) substantially depends upon such satisfactions, as well as intellectual and other affective ones, then given that such satisfactions are by and large good, it is a positive thing that film is able to invoke those psychological needs in harmless ways.
need to be remembered. If it is ‘through the memorial’ that “trauma is edified to limit the damage” and memorials can no longer help with such edification, then the trauma and damage remains. Memorial, redemptive politics fails, social bonds remain undone and community not restored. What accounts for memorials’ loss of functionality? For memorials to edify trauma, restore social bonds and a sense of community, memorial politics must be credible--and they no longer are. Redemptive politics, of which memorials are a part, can no longer convincingly “exclude and render illegitimate anything that threatens the subject.” This threat comes from the recognition that memorial politics is manipulative, serves a political status quo, and falsifies memory and truths about the past. Curtis says that it is through memorials and redemptive politics that “Politics remembers in order to forget.” But instead of remembering in order to forget, contemporary memorial politics forgoes the “remembering” and seeks to go straight to the forgetting. It does not work.

The reasons that memorialization has become so problematic can be explained in several ways and on several levels. Part of the reason is due to the unwarranted politicizing of the memorial process-- the co-option and subversion of consciously articulated purposes of memorials for political, commercial and other reasons which have nothing to do with memorialization itself. There have been strong objections, for example, against memorials to the World War II Japanese war dead on the grounds that they both fought a war of aggression and committed atrocities, and yet there have been few against the VVM on the same grounds. (Holocaust and Vietnam memorials represent two great turning points in the aesthetic histories of monuments, but they have also served to problematise memorials as never before.)

This is a small part of a larger problem exacerbated by the fact that even compared to Germany and Japan, the U.S. has yet to come to grips with its own war
crimes—including those in World War II, as well as other violent aspects of its racist and sexist past. Memorialization in the U.S. (and what holds here of the U.S. holds mutatis mutandis for England, Israel, Australia and many other nations) takes place against background in which citizens see themselves as God’s chosen people—well meaning and capable of doing no serious wrong. History belies this outlook in a way that makes genuine public acts of memorialization impossible.

Before Maya Lin’s design was approved, a statue of U.S. soldiers marching stoically through the mud was erected alongside representing the bravery and patriotism of the soldiers and endorsing the purposes of the war. This later monument—part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial arguably undermines not only Lin’s intention, but for many who see that war as unjust and tragic, the memorial itself. It now seems to be honouring the dead on fundamentally misguided political or patriotic grounds, rather than seeing them too as victims more of those responsible for the war—a war manufactured in the U.S.—than of the Vietnamese. It is a cruel twist—not of fate but of forgetting—that allows Yad Vashem, the VVM, and the soon to be constructed World Trade Center

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16 Young (1992; 1993; 1999) seems to regard Germany as a special case and memorials in Germany as a particular problem. He says (1999:1) “perhaps no single emblem better represents the conflicted, self-abnegating motives for memory in Germany today that the vanishing monument.” He is discussing Horst Hoheisel’s competition submission of a “memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe” which proposes blowing up the Brandenburg Gate and sprinkling (Young, 1999:1-2) “the remains over the former site…. At least part of its polemic… is directed against actually building any winning design, against ever finishing the monument at all. Here he seems to suggest that the surest engagement with Holocaust memory in Germany may actually lie it its perpetual irresolution, that only an unfinished memorial process can guarantee the life of memory.” Young’s speculations about Hoheisel’s proposal and what it means are directly relevant to the thesis of this paper. However, insofar as Young regards Germany as a special case rather than an example, he suffers from blind-sight. In many ways, Germany has come to grips with its horrendous and unique past in ways that the U.S. and other countries—Australia (with Aboriginal peoples as well as refugees) and Israel (not only with the Palestinians but with Jews worldwide) are unable to. They cannot even acknowledge their current course.

17 In statements that should be taken as a repudiation of democratic principles George Bush Jr. and Tony Blair have both said that it is God (understood to mean “God, rather than ordinary citizens”) who will judge their actions regarding Iraq—while maintaining that the Iraq war is meant to bolster democracy.

18 Curtis (2004:306) says “At the inauguration of the memorial in 1982, complaints concerning the alienation and betrayal suggested by the design precipitated two additions to the site. The first is a figurative bronze of three soldiers standing tall in the face of war; a flagpole and a statue of a group of nurses being added shortly after. Whereas the granite bears witness to something unrepresentable, to catastrophe and the immemorial, the additional bronzes edify loss as bravery and righteous sacrifice.”
memorial to be used as apologia for the types of crimes they are meant to abjure. It is difficult to see them functioning publicly in any other way.19

What is ultimately wrong with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is that it is not an anti-Vietnam war memorial. It allows, for example, for individuals like Ronald Regan to say that “the only thing wrong with the Vietnam War was they we did not win it.” Young (1999:2) says

…the late German historian Martin Broszat [1990:129] has suggested that in their references to history, monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations. As cultural reifications in this view, monuments reduce or, in Broszat’s words ‘coarsen’ historical understanding as much as they generate it…. Rosalind Krauss [1988:280] finds that the modernist period produces monuments unable to refer to anything beyond themselves as pure marker or base… others have argued that rather than preserving public memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community’s memory work with its own material form…. Andreas Huyssen [1994: 11; 1995, 249-60] has even suggested that in a contemporary age of mass memory production and consumption, there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study.

These views either claim or entail that memorials cannot function as memorials must, should or once did; that they obfuscate memory/history and confuse or undermine acts of commemoration and memorialization—which is why they cannot function. Broszat’s view seems overly optimistic if he thinks memorials (like VVM) can “generate” historical understanding. Young (1992), however, appears to disagree with Broszat, Krauss and Huyssen. He thinks that Hoheisel’s memorials in Kassel to the murdered Jews are at least a limited success, if not more. And he has also argued (2006 with Van Valkenburgh) for the World Trade Center memorial to be built—presumably because the thinks that too can function appropriately.

19 Some apologists are keen to point out the quantitative differences and scope between for example the holocaust and other instances of genocide. This too is subterfuge since the issue is surely qualitative rather than quantitative.
One of the four basic criteria that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Inc set for the memorial was “that it make no political statement about the war.” The brochure goes on: “By separating the issue of those who served in Vietnam from that of U.S. policy in the war, the group hoped to begin a process of national reconciliation.” Thus, the memorial was doomed from the outset. How could such a memorial not be political and how can genuine reconciliation take place by refusing to remember and acknowledge misdeed and by attempting to separate things that cannot be separated? Brown (1991: 257) for example, praises Lin’s design. He says, “…the Lincoln and Washington memorials… are incorporated by reference, as it were, allowing them to symbolize the great ideals and traditions for which those in Vietnam fought.” Those who fought honourably in Vietnam, and many did not, did not fight for “great ideals and traditions,” and no memorial which assumes that this is what that war was about can succeed, since it blatantly falsifies history and distorts memory (cf. Broszat et al above).

The idea that those who serve in what they believe to be an unjust war are heroes is unconscionable propaganda. It is an idea that is universally rejected in the case of Germans serving in WWII and yet often embraced in the case of Americans serving in Vietnam.) Vietnam War veterans are not heroes simply because they fought in the war anymore than an Israeli soldier is a hero because he fights in Gaza, or a Japanese soldier is because he fought (unjustly) on Iwo Jima. They are victims before they are heroes. Israeli soldiers who refused to be deployed to Gaza, like soldiers elsewhere and at other times who refused to serve, in the face of enormous abuse and often at great personal cost,

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21 There is no shortage of those who praise Lin’s memorial. See, for example, Charney (1989) who see its success as due in no small part to Lin’s knowingly drawing on the “elegiac tradition” (p. 87). Charney (1989: 92n2 says Betsky (1983:4) “effectively argues that Maya Lin’s abstract design mirrors nothing more significant that the inability of contemporary architecture to symbolize and order our society.” If the thesis of this paper is right, then Lin’s design is evidence of far more important things than such an inability on the part of contemporary architecture. It is evidence of both a need to mourn and come to grips with the past--and at the same time a debilitating inability to do so.
are far more admirable than those who follow orders and do what they may know is wrong. “Political correctness” has its sources in the political right not the left and probably dates from about the time of the Vietnam War. The idea that not supporting the carnage in Vietnam was unpatriotic was/is quintessentially a case of political correctness engendered by the political right. There is irony in the right using it as a term of approbation and disdain, and in successfully managing to direct it exclusively to their “liberal” or left-wing political opponents. It is an extraordinary piece of “spin.”

There are many, indeed the vast majority, who regard Lin’s memorial as a success, aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually. One of the most frequently cited reasons for this is that it allows various interpretations—as if various and diverse interpretations are always a good thing. This view has been briefly challenged above, but is worth revisiting. Consider the view of Haskins and DeRose (2003: 380) and those they cite.

… Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. … became not only a site of mass pilgrimage but also a magnet of diverse judgments about the Vietnam War. … Lin’s black granite wall of names served a public function of mourning and remembrance. As distinct from traditional war memorials, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does not offer a legible narrative of the war but instead creates a setting in which diverse publics can come to terms with its conflicting legacy. According to Mitchell (1990), the memorial’s "legibility is not that of a narrative: no heroic episode such as planting of the American flag on Iwo Jima is memorialized, only the mind-numbing and undifferentiated chronology of violence and death catalogued by the fifty-eight thousand names inscribed on the black marble walls" (p. 37). As "an anti-heroic monument dedicated to a war in which there could be no heroes,” the memorial was "inscribed from the outset by ordinary people capable of reinterpreting the dominant ideological discourse for their own purposes" (Boime, 1998, p. 309).

For one thing, if those they cite, like Mitchell and Boime, are correct, then the memorial is not open to a diversity of interpretations, nor can it properly serve as a “magnet of diverse judgments,” but only as a criticism of the war. And if it does serve as Haskin’s and De Rose claim it does, then it can neither be functioning as Mitchell and Boime claims it is, nor could it serve the “public function of mourning and remembrance.” What
is being mourned and remembered? Is it the Mai Lai Massacre; Christmas invasion of Cambodia; or the mass murder of Americans and Vietnamese in the service of … what?

Isn’t the *VVM* now also about the present atrocities and war crimes at Abu Grahib, Haditha, and U.S enclaves of detention and torture—or are monuments and memories meant to be discreet and univocal in their representations with regard to what they allegedly memorialize? Isn’t it also about a refusal by the U.S. military and political hierarchy to adequately prosecute the perpetrators of those atrocities? At any rate, if Lin’s memorial does fail, this has relatively little to do with its highly touted aesthetics. There may be ways a memorial or monument can have considerable aesthetic merit and even achieve what it sets out to achieve, aesthetically speaking, and yet fail in its broader purpose. This broader purpose is best viewed as ethical in nature since the tasks and purposes of memorializing are essentially ethical as well as psychological.

Abramson (1999: 80; cf. 1996) also praises Lin’s memorial, but on grounds that are difficult to understand let alone evaluate. He says,

[Its] extraordinary success has depended in large measure on its combination of Modernist memory, traditional history, and one key innovation. In terms of memory’s maxims, the Vietnam Memorial foregrounds and recalls ordinary naming, without rank or hierarchy. It avoids didacticism in favour of subjective emotion and immediacy. Mirrored surfaces, tactile inscriptions, and spontaneous acts of name-rubbing and memento-leaving create a place of profound personal transaction and trauma therapy. In form, the memorial seems a kind of Modernist ‘counter-monument’—abstract, horizontal, and black—which of course is what upset its early critics … Lin renewed many of traditional monumentality’s formal and conceptual themes … the Vietnam Memorial is frontal, unified, legible, and textual. It provides a place for contemplative reading. It links past to present directly, through the orientation of the walls to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. And cautionary lessons are to be learned here about the profound losses of war. Lin’s innovation is to arrange the names of the dead chronologically form the vertex outward to the east and then back around… she creates a timeline—the 20th–century schoolroom’s classic mnemotechnology—which in turn engenders an idealized historiography of the war’s trajectory, perfect in its narrative symmetry and closure. The ground dips and rises as catharsis. The time line’s circularity symbolizes the closure we desire when thinking about this particular war.
Abramson seems to be suggesting that in the VVM Lin has succeeded in making the medium the message. The aesthetic achievement allegedly makes possible the myriad of functions he claims the memorial provides. But whatever the aesthetic merits of the memorial may be, how can these alone provide the conditions necessary for a good memorial to function? Indeed, the aesthetic appeal of the VVM may even detract—probably does detract—from its ability to so function insofar as it is seen as a monument to heroes. This is how many choose to see it. What is the object of the “subjective emotion and immediacy” that Abramson claims the memorial evokes? What is the memento-leaving supposed to demonstrate, and what exactly is the significance of choosing to list names chronologically, without rank? What is it about its form that suggests it’s a counter-monument in form? Can it be a counter-monument or an anti-memorial memorial without it being clearer, more didactic, on the representational level? To say that “profound personal transaction” takes place at the monument, even if true, does not suffice to make it a success. What kind of transaction is taking place?

To assert, as Abramson does, that it is a place of “trauma therapy” with no further explanation—without for example, understanding that the VVM is a condemnation of that war (if it is)—is another way of capitulating to those that brought about the war. It may even subvert and undermine attempts and genuine acts of remembrance and memorialization. What are the “cautionary lessons…to be learned here about the profound losses of war?” Does the legibility and textuality of the VVM consist in anything other than the list of names? If, as Abramson claims, the VVM does represent such a warning, and the warning is somehow tied to the other functions he sees it as performing, then arguably one must judge it a failure. Another cautionary warning about the losses of war seems neither necessary nor efficacious. In this day and age such a

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warning may function as grounds for self-indulgent pity, narcissism, and various political
and power agendas, rather than as an opportunity to provide material conditions that
allow people to grieve, remember, honour, forget, and the like.

Even if (contrary to my view) there was time when the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* functioned more in the way Haskins and DeRose or Abramson claim it does, subsequent political and social events, along with site alterations and the construction of the new World War II memorial facing it, would have undermined that function considerably. The new World War II memorial is seen by many as explicitly countering the “subversive” messages of the *VVM*—staring it down—while others see it as an anachronism; a throwback to an irrelevant era of a patriotism by means of a mode of memorialization inert, empty of meaning, an unable to function. It trades on a way of understanding the world, a world view and ethos, that is moribund and lacks credentials—one sustained by a lack of integrity via deception, lies and self-interest.

Those who regard the *VVM* as a failure will likewise see the World War II monument as a failure for similar and also for different reasons. For one thing, and many veterans of World War II may see it like this, it can be seen as a gross exploitation of the Veteran’s themselves as well as what they were fighting for. The World War II memorial can be seen as no more “honouring” those who sacrificed, than the political regimes can be seen as respecting a military that it involves in a war on the basis of pretence and lies.

What would have been a better solution for a Vietnam War memorial? But that question misses the point of this paper since there is nothing wrong with the *VVM* per se except its inability to function as memorial must. Its functional failure has nothing to do with its aesthetics, and there is nothing that one could do to it, or any other possible Vietnam War memorial, aesthetically speaking, that could improve matters. It could not be improved so long as Lin’s intended anti-war meaning continues to be subverted and
repressed, and so long as guilt goes unacknowledged. The medium, in other words, is most definitely not the message.23

Although aesthetic considerations would conceivably play a large part in a successful contemporary public memorial, if there could be one, it is professional and personal hubris—a phantasy of omnipotence, for architects and designers to think that the success of a memorial lies in their hands. The creation of the political, social, emotional and psychological background that provides conditions needed for a memorial to be successful is decidedly not within the purview or brief of design professionals. This background is inherited in part. However, it is also the product of a people and age responsible for producing or failing to produce those conditions, conditions like accountability and truth-telling, that makes a functioning memorial possible. If memorialization were possible in the U.S. at this particular time and place, then the VVM might have been successful even if it did not achieve the level of aesthetic merit it is claimed to achieve. Insofar as the medium is regarded as the message, or that the focus on the VVM is its aesthetic—as in fact it is by those design professionals and critics who praise it; then its aesthetic features will be just one more aspect and condition that undermines rather than promotes the possibility of the presence of conditions necessary for it to function as a meaningful public memorial must.

III

There are other less obvious reasons why memorialization is so widely sought, the need so great, and yet monuments and efforts to memorialize prove so unsatisfactory. Some of these reasons are more closely aligned with their inability to fulfil the functions of memorialization as Choay and others see it. If the function of a memorial is to act as

23 See Foss 1986 for a quite different view. She thinks the VVM is a great success—appealing both to those who supported the war as well as to those who opposed it. Furthermore, she attributes this success largely to the aesthetic feature of the monument.
“a defense against the traumas of existence, a security measure... allaying anxieties... [and to] appease our fear of death and annihilation,” then the impossibility of memorialization today needs to be traced to its inability to perform such functions.

My contention that the VVM fails has less (but not little) to do with either the artistic merit of its design, or with those that have undermined Lin’s intentions and subverted the memorial’s messages and meanings to their own ends. It has more to do with its failure to function as a memorial must. This is not due to the particular memorial’s inability to inspire, or the reasons cited immediately above, but rather to people’s inability to any longer have their fears allayed or to mourn or grieve meaningfully—at least not in any public way. No memorial or commemoration can overtake the memorial-malaise that has gripped those whose need to remember, mourn and commemorate is genuine. This malaise has been generated and exacerbated by events at large—by lying and duplicitous leaders and complacent citizens.

For example, it is because many people can no longer accept the official stories associated with objects of memorialization, even if they wanted to, that they can no longer perform their traditional functions. At a memorial service on the site of the World Trade Center, the Governor of New York, George Pataki, said that the “war on Iraq started right here on 9/11.” Numerous reports found no connection between them, but he wilfully conflated the events of 9/11 with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as Bush’s regime has continuously done. Pataki not only sought (successfully) to subvert the significance and meaning of the events of 9/11 for personal and political gain; he also undermined, the possibility that a meaningful memorial could be take place on such contested grounds. The attempt here is to subvert memory and rewrite history, though
this is notoriously difficult to do. Bush purports to have little interest in what his historical record will be. This may be tied to his wild apocalyptic fundamentalist religious views. It is difficult to see how a disdain for the historical record—or for (pre-apocalyptic) life--can sit comfortably with efforts to remember, memorialize or honour the past.

Given the terms and false story Pataki set out, he made it impossible for some people, even those directly affected, to grieve at that site under those conditions or for a memorial on that site to perform the kinds of functions Choay and others sees as the essence of memorialization. If this is right, then it is evident that the various kinds of reasons, political and personal, that make memorialization so problematic in contemporary terms, are connected in ways that can perhaps be theoretically but not practically discerned and sorted out. How can monuments and memorials function so as to appease fears when those with the power to do so do everything in their power to enhance those fears, to play on them, to aggravate anxiety instead of assuage it, and to add to and even colour-code, worries of annihilation and extinction? And remarkably, they do so partly through the memorials and acts of commemorations themselves.

In discussing their hopes for a work of public art that can more or les adequately memorialize Ground Zero Haskins and DeRose (2003: 380) say:

… a more inclusive test for public art may require that the work create a public space where the experience of seeing is not monopolized by a single artistic or political agenda but offers an opportunity for a plurality of responses. A balance between utopia and critique, therefore, will be one of the tests of how public the memorial at Ground Zero will be. The reward for crafting a September 11 memorial that negotiates a middle ground between these two poles is that such a work “can be experienced both as an object of national mourning and reconciliation that is absolutely inclusive, embracing, and democratic, and as a critical parody and inversion of the traditional memorial” (Mitchell, 1990, p. 3).

What should be sought after of course is not a “plurality of responses” for plurality sake, but a plurality of responses within the limits of reason. This would be one, for example,

24Henry Kissinger is perhaps finding this out, too late, with evidence showing that he sought to delay and undermine the peace plan he was awarded the Nobel Peace prize for. See Abramson (1999) for a discussion about memory and history in relation to monuments.
that does not rest and Pataki’s fabrications. However, in light of the events following 9/11, its subsequent politicizing, and also the cumulative effects of the events of the 20th century; how can any public memorial hope to pass such a test? For a memorial to be meaningful, people must be able to publicly mourn. I have argued that is no longer possible assuming that the theorists discussed are right about the subversion of memory and the purpose of memorials. This inability to mourn or memorialize is dangerous in ways that Freud (1917e; 1930a) and others have called attention to.

Authentic public mourning needs to emerge out of daily life. But this is not to say that the problem can be resolved by architects/clients working with sociologists, ritual/grief theorists, psychologists or religious professionals. A first step is for the public themselves to engage with memory, history, politics and their own lives in such a way that truth and integrity can gain a foothold.

IV

I have argued that memorials no longer function. The basic work of memorialization, according to Choay is "contributing to the maintenance and preservation of the identity of an ethnic, religious, national, tribal or familial community"; and acting as "a defense against traumas of existence, a security measure". And according to Curtis, memorialization serves as a remembering to forget; a facilitator of community, and sometimes serves to do the work of mourning. I have offered at least two distinct arguments for my thesis (and some subsidiary ones); though they are related in a way I will explain.

The first argument is that for memorialization to do any of this work, a community needs to be working with a shared, albeit not wholly uncontested, understanding of the events memorialized and their context. If there is one thing that can be agreed on all sides, it is that we are past the time of uncontested social understandings
of this kind. A plurality of values as well as interpretations notwithstanding, memorials cannot function if the viewer is looking over their shoulder at utterly hostile and fundamentally different counter-interpretations. The work of memorialization is shared work requiring shared understanding. The VVM exemplifies an inert monument and memorial, because it abandons any effort at doing the work of memorialization. It does not invite a plurality of interpretations within the limit of reason. Instead it is a basis for false consciousness, and mutually antagonistic as well as divisive interpretations and practices.

The second argument as to why memorialization, and genuine public mourning, is no longer possible is based on the idea that public memorials are invariably built on lies. The Vietnam War Memorial does not lie—admittedly-- though people lie about it. However, it avoids lying by not really saying anything. It takes refuge in ambiguity and treats it as a virtue. Other memorials--like the one to be built at the World Trade site (cinematically called “Ground Zero”)--are built on politically convenient lies. This second argument evokes the idea that a memorial cannot do the work of memorialization without “remembering”--coming to terms with the past in an honest and non-self-serving way. The parallel with psychoanalysis is self-evident. An interpretation can’t do its work based on just any set of lies, particularly self-serving lies. To cure a neurosis its casue (the underlying repression, must be found and aired.

The connection between the two arguments may seem obtuse. What I have in mind is that the necessary condition stipulated in the first argument for a memorial to work, that of a largely shared understanding of the events memorialized, cannot be present not only because public memorials are built on lies, but also because of the more pervasive subversion of truth—by politicians and the media to be sure, but also by others that create the milieu in which such conditions flourish and such travesties occur.
Given the first argument, it may seem that some memorials, say, memorials of colonial conquest in Victorian times, can be and in fact are, true and effective memorials. Shared understanding was then a false consciousness, but it was really shared. On the second argument however, it is hardly ever the case that an event is truly memorialized. What is different now from the Victorian era, is that we realize this and the game is up.

While I do not deny that memorials of colonial conquest may at one time (in the Victoria era) have been able to do the work of memorialization, I think that one of the corollaries to my thesis rules out such memorials as being able to continue to do such work. Events and understandings may overtake prior events and understandings in such a way as to undermine the ability of what may once have been an adequate attempt at memorialization to continue. That is what has happened with the memorials of colonial conquest, and that is what has also happened, for different reasons, with Yad Vashem. They too are now embedded in a web of lies and a way of living that prevents the tasks of memorialization from being fulfilled.*25

*My thanks to Damian Cox, Marguerite La Caze, Felicity Haynes, Helen McLaughlin-Jones, Saul Newman, William M. Taylor, Nicole Sully and an anonymous reader for Angelaki.

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25 For this final section I am indebted to Damian Cox who delineated the two different arguments for me as well as pointing out the consequences of each. He raised the objection about memorials of colonial conquest in Victorian times that I have tried to respond to. Some of the wording in this section is his.
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