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Stories that Shape Spatialities

***Lieu and Milieu de Mémoire* through the Lens of Narrativity**

[p. 31] Ever since the publication of Pierre Nora’s monumental collection (Nora 1996 [1984]), the category of *lieu de mémoire* – translated as ‘place’ or ‘site’ of memory – has offered one of the main conceptual prisms through which to analyse the space–memory nexus. In the introduction to the collection, Nora explains that ‘collective memory was rooted, in order to create a vast topology of French symbolism’, and that the aim of his work is to analyse how ‘the collective heritage of France was crystallised in places of memory’ (Nora 1996 [1984]: xv). According to the historian, the category of *lieu de mémoire* describes *the way* memory assumes and reaches a cultural and collective dimension in our times. Despite the focus on France, the category of *lieu de mémoire* has been used to interpret the meaning of tangible and intangible heritage in other, sometimes very different, national contexts (for Italy see, for example, Isnenghi 1996–1997).

[p. 32] This chapter argues for a semiotic reinterpretation of the notion of *lieu de mémoire* in terms of

a particular and specific way of – among others – forming space and memory, and the nexus between them. In fact, Nora's concept 'tends to emphasise one layer only, one point in the entire life cycle of a given location', preventing any acknowledgment of 'the coexistence of a plurality of meanings and experiences' (Arrigoni and Galani 2019: 164) in the way we produce and connect spatiality and memory. Spaces are polysemic or pluri-isotopic, as Algirdas Julien Greimas (1966) and Umberto Eco (1979) would say, and their potential mnemonic meanings are locally activated according to contexts, circumstances and frames that are at play in any given moment: a dynamicity that the concept of *lieu de mémoire*, as an interpretative category, somehow obscures.

Semiotics investigates the multiple versions – and their articulations – that we can produce of the past, and the multiple ways of forming, interpreting and experiencing the presence of the past, also when the latter assumes a spatial dimension. This approach is consistent with the interpretative theory of memory that stems from Umberto Eco's encyclopaedic model (Eco 2007): a global, rhizomatic space of numerous (but not unlimited) possible connections between cultural units that are pruned, shaped and actualised in local processes of interpretation (Salerno 2021a). Indeed, semiotics does not study what a 'space of memory' is and means, but how it may be and how it may give meaning to the past and co-produce its many (but not unlimited) versions.

Drawing on this approach, the chapter will proceed as follows: first, I will reconstruct the conceptual and historical origin of the notion of *lieu de mémoire*, which emerges from the intersection between Frances Yates's notion of *locus* and Maurice Halbwachs's notion of *collective memory*. I will thus interpret the category differentially against the idea of *milieu de mémoire*, comparing the couple *lieu–milieu* with Michel de Certeau's dichotomy *lieu–espace*, singling out the two logics – of location and of action – that are at stake in the two modalities. I will next unpack the different ways of forming a relationship between space and memory through the notion of narrativity. Finally, I will illustrate my findings through the example of the former Italian concentration camp of Fossoli and its configurations as a *lieu* and a *milieu* of memory.

Lieu and Milieu of Memory: Which Memory, Which Space?

When Nora coined the expression *lieu de mémoire*, he defined it against the notion of *milieu de mémoire*: '*Lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no [p. 33] longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience' (Nora 1996 [1984]: 1). According to Nora, *lieux de mémoire* are 'bastions' that buttress our identities, 'moments plucked out of the flow of history – no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead' (Nora 1996 [1984]: 7), whose fundamental purpose is, on one hand, 'to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things' and, on the other, 'to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections' (Nora 1996 [1984]: 15).

Here, I semiotically reframe Nora's dichotomy *lieu* vs *milieu*, proposing an analytical approach that undo Nora's binary definition and describe the polysemic nature of spaces. In this perspective, *lieu* and *milieu de mémoire* are not mutually exclusive, as they appear to be in Nora's words, but are the results of the different ways in which we form the space-memory nexus – two modalities that discursively and culturally co-exist.

Such a re-interpretation of the notion of *lieu* is actually a return to its philological root: the word *lieu* in *lieu de mémoire* does not stand for 'place', 'space' or 'site', but refers to the social, cultural and political dynamics that give an object or artefact a mnemonic function. For this reason, *lieux de mémoire* are not only 'museums, archives, cemeteries', but also collections, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, private associations and so on (Nora 1996 [1984]: 6): physical places but also documents, commemorative circumstances, rituals. What makes a space a *lieu de mémoire* is not some intrinsic or ontological characteristic of the object, but rather the semiotic processes that give it shape materially, symbolically and functionally (Nora 1996 [1984]: 14), making the absent past present. As Nora says, *lieux de mémoire* are pure signs, which means that their nature is eminently semiotic.

This notion of *lieu de mémoire* is not fully understandable unless we trace it back to Nora's two conceptual sources: Frances Yates and Maurice Halbwachs.

Nora took inspiration for the notion of *lieu* from the concept of *locus*, which Yates investigated in *The Art of Memory* (1966) by studying mnemonic techniques in Greek and Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages.¹ Mnemonic techniques are part of the pre-printing media ecology, in which the scarcity of material means to exteriorise memory required more elaborate ways of memorising and recovering information on a cognitive and individual level:

a locus is a place easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an inter-columnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like. Images are forms, marks or [p. 34] simulacra (formae, notae, simulacra) of what we wish to remember. For instance, if we wish to recall the genus of a horse, of a lion, of an eagle, we must place their images on definite *loci* (Yates 1966: 6).

In Yates's definition, *loci* are conceived spaces (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]) that work as a structure and a plan of expression for organising knowledge and information to be used in speeches. Hence, in Yates's definition, 'memory' is not a discourse on, or a practice of the past but a cognitive competence that is used and exercised individually for the purpose of organising knowledge and information in the art of oratory. In order to deliver a speech, the orator imagines walking through the memorised place, following a path and thus transforming the paradigm (or ... or, to be in a room or in the other) into a syntagma (and ... and, the sequence and order of the speech), *loci* (places) into *loqui* (to speak). As Eco (1988) explained in one of his first semiotic works, which appeared in Italian in 1966 (but was only published in English more than twenty years later), mnemonic

techniques are about the construction and the connection of a plan of expression – the organisation of *loci* – with a plan of content, that is, what is to be remembered and uttered in speech.

Nora borrows this processual and constructive perspective from Yates; to study memory means to study the processes and rules by which we construct the mnemonic function of an object, namely the relationship between an artefact and pieces of information we want to preserve, organise, recover and transmit. However, Nora does not focus on the individual and cognitive level (for example, the orator's capacity), but on a more cultural and social level: how do societies remember a (supposedly) common past through cultural objects and artefacts made of different materials and semiotic substances? In this shift, a clear broadening of the very definition of *locus* occurs, which for Yates is mainly an architectural form, while for Nora it includes a vast array of – tangible and intangible – objects. Following Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), we could interpret this transition as a shift from the *representation of space* in mnemonic techniques to the *space of representation* in collective memory: the spatialisation of memory is not the simple projection of the past onto a pre-existing physical space/object, but something that brings that very space into existence.

In this conceptual shift, Nora looks at his second theoretical source: Halbwachs and the role of memory in collective identity-making. In this perspective, *lieux de mémoire* are epiphenomena of collective identities. However, while Halbwachs considers social groups (for example, the working class or religious groups), Nora aims at explaining the role of remembering and [p. 35] forgetting in the construction of a national identity (and, more specifically, French identity). Moreover, Halbwachs focuses on the *milieux* of memory as lived spaces in which people – by interacting with each other – agree or do not agree on a common past, whereas Nora focuses on *lieux* as artefacts that have the symbolic and material function of presenting and representing the common past of the nation as a political community.

In the attempt to distinguish a historical from a sociological investigation of memory (that is, Halbwachs's theory), Nora presents *lieu* and *milieu* binarily and as mutually exclusive: *milieux* no longer exist and are replaced by *lieux* as an effect of modernity. In other words, they are two mutually – and almost chronologically – exclusive systems of shaping the space-memory relationship.

By limiting my scope to spaces in the strictest sense of the word, I depart from Nora's position and argue that *lieu* and *milieu* of memory are two narrative modalities for shaping and articulating the space-memory nexus that are not mutually exclusive but actually co-exist. Indeed, space may be experienced as *lieu* and as *milieu* according to the socio-discursive practices and textual genre that form it locally and in any given moment. This implies that the very same space may assume the configuration and function of a *milieu de mémoire* in a given context and circumstance, and that of a *lieu de mémoire* in another context and circumstance. The configuration of a space as an institutionalised *lieu de mémoire* – like a former concentration camp, as we will see – can be re-shaped by putting memories into motion and undoing the 'fixation of things', which seems to be one of the fundamental semiotic operations that defines *lieux de mémoire* as such (as we will see further

ahead).

These possible mutual translations and transformations from *lieu* to *milieu* and vice versa are explored in greater depth in a work that preceded the first volume of Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* by just few years: Michel de Certeau's *L'invention du quotidien* (1984 [1980]), where the notion of *lieu*(place) is defined against the concept of *espace* (space):

At the outset, I shall make a distinction between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*) that delimits a field. A place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the 'proper' rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. [p. 36] A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalise it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities (de Certeau 1984 [1980]: 117).

Although de Certeau's dichotomy *espace-lieu* and Nora's couple *milieu-lieu* are part of two different conceptual frameworks, there is a very evident similarity. In Nora's terms, *lieux* 'immortalise death', that is, they are 'no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded' (Nora 1996 [1984]: 15), whereas in de Certeau's words a *lieu* is 'a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the being-there something of dead, the law of a "place" (from the pebble to the cadaver, an inert body always seems, in the West, to find a place and give it the appearance of a tomb)' (de Certeau 1984 [1980]: 118). It is in the idea of stability, linked to the fixation of a 'state of things' and even of 'death' as the final closing phase of a process, that the two ideas of *lieu* echo each other.

Likewise, *milieu* and *espace* share some – although vaguer – characteristics. Nora links *milieu* to orality and peasant culture, which seems to connote mobility, dynamicity and connection, perhaps also in the nostalgic sense of an old lost world. Similarly, de Certeau's 'space' is clearly and intrinsically constructed by movements and actions within it.

However, unlike Nora, de Certeau argues that place and space are two co-existent modalities for understanding spatiality. What explains the relationship between space and place are stories that 'carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places', thus organising the interaction between their changing relationships (de Certeau 1984 [1980]: 118).

Hence, from a semiotic perspective, to investigate the place and space of memory means to understand

the role of stories in the formation and interconnection of spatiality and temporality. How do stories spatialise memory or, in de Certeau's words, 'carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places' where the past is somehow inscribed? This is the central question I will address in this chapter, drawing in particular on a pivotal semiotic concept: narrativity.

This will allow us to unpack the semiotic force of stories in shaping the relationship between spatiality and memory.

[p 37] The Logic of Location and the Logic of Action

If we reinterpret Nora's *milieu* vs *lieu* dichotomy using de Certeau's theory, it reflects two semiotic models of spatiality: the spatiality of position (*lieu*) and the spatiality of situation (*milieu*; on the distinction between these two modalities see Cavicchioli 2002). The first model describes the relationship between elements whose position and mutual relationship is fixed, mainly in an objectivising modality, following a logic of location; the second is about 'programs', in de Certeau's words, namely the relationship between a subject that moves within a space and thus becomes the pivot of its representation, following a logic of action. I argue that the difference between *milieu* and *lieu* as two different narrative configurations in the shaping of the memory-space nexus lies in these two different principles of organisation and formation of spatiality.

Milieu draws on a logic of action and produces a spatiality of situation. In other words, it is about the movement of a subject that observes and experiences the space around him/her. Pragmatically and perceptively speaking, space is formed and oriented around the subject's body schema (for example, left/right, up/down), and described and experienced through it; spatiality is organised according to the aims of the subject, the relationship between the subject and the different elements present in the space, and the way these elements are correlated by an action, on indexical, cognitive and affective levels. The representation and organisation of space (and time) is relative to the position of individual subjects, and it is coloured by their judgements, feelings and emotions.

Lieu is the result of removing any traces of a subjective observer from the representation of space. This does not mean that the representation lacks a point of view but that such a point of view is somehow hidden and presented as natural and objective. This is the case of planispheres that are oriented on the north-south axis, which project a global schema. The orientation north-south does not come from the absence of a point of view but is the result of the naturalisation of a historically constructed vision of the globe in the representation; such a vision is somehow hidden and taken-for-granted, transmitting a sense of objectivation.

In the first modality, the representation of the space is subject-oriented: we use relative references – because they are correlated to the changing position of the subject – such as 'here' and 'there', 'behind' and 'ahead' or – when talking about temporality – 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'. In the second modality, we use

absolute references: toponyms, geographical coordinates or – when talking about temporality – chrononyms (for example, [p. 38] names of days, eras, etc.) and hemeronyms (names of events linked to dates, such as 9/11; see Calabrese 2013).

These two ways of constructing space are mutually translatable. If I use a map in order to reach a place, I orient it in relation to my position, translating the global orientation of the cardinal points into the local orientation of my body: north/south/east/west is thus transformed into ahead/behind/left/ right. This allows me to move from a logic of location (where something is) to a logic of action (where I am and where I want to go): from place to space, from an object-centred representation or practice to a subject-centred representation or practice.

According to Nora, the modern world deprives memory of its social environment – its *milieu* – and asks for a new configuration in the spatialisation of the past that is found in the *lieu de mémoire* as a system of absolute reference that frames the representation within a logic of location and a spatiality of position.

But how is this semiotic work performed, and by whom? Who holds the power and knowledge to pluck out events from history, as Nora puts it, to stop time and fix things in a space, setting an absolute system of reference within a logic of location?

Again, de Certeau offers good examples of this process as well as some answers to these questions. In doing so, he takes into account – better than Nora does – the mutual translatability between place and space, spatiality of position and of situation, the logic of location and the logic of action:

In the traditional language of court proceedings, magistrates formerly ‘visited the scene of the case at issue’ in order to ‘hear’ the contradictory statements (dits) made by the parties to a dispute concerning debatable boundaries

They combined together (the work of a scribe collating variants) the opposing stories of the parties involved: ‘Mr. Mulatier declares that his grandfather planted this apple tree on the edge of his field ... Jeanpierre reminds us that Mr. Bouvet maintains a dung heap on a piece of land of which he is supposed to be the joint owner with his brother Andre ...’. Genealogies of places, legends about territories. Like a critical edition, the judge’s narration reconciles these versions. The narration is ‘established’ on the basis of ‘primary’ stories (those of Mr. Mulatier, Jeanpierre, and so many others), stories that already have the function of spatial legislation since they determine rights and divide up lands by ‘acts’ or discourses about actions (planting a tree, maintaining a dungheap, etc.). These ‘operations of marking out boundaries,’ consisting in narrative contracts [p. 39] and compilations of stories, are composed of fragments drawn from earlier stories and fitted together in makeshift fashion (bricolés) (de Certeau 1984 [1980]: 117).

In his definition of what a place is and how it is produced, de Certeau stresses the role of a strong regulatory element; as this French theorist emphasises, a *lieu* is the result of a ‘law’ that localises and fixes the position of every element – a ‘law of the proper’. He takes the juridical and legal sphere as an example to demonstrate how a type of *lieu* can be exemplified.² The judge collects the different stories linked to the ‘scene of the case’ in order to merge and reconcile them and thus fix *the story* that defines its ‘truthful’ configuration, its boundary and the location and identity of every element. The version of the story that the judge has produced will therefore shape, symbolically but also materially, the very nature and meaning of the space: for instance, through the judge’s authorisation to construct dividing fences. In sum, the story elaborated by the judge holds a ‘veridictory’ force – in the sense that it is the truth, at least at a legal level – but also a performative and normative force, because it brings about juridical and social effects: it becomes the law of the place, to use de Certeau’s definition again.

What happens in the specific case of memory? What social or political actor has the power to transform a space into a *lieu de mémoire*? And how does such an actor fix a story that regulates its meanings? To answer these questions, we need to turn our attention to stories and their semiotic labour, that is, the formative power of a narrative over spaces and their connection to memory. In what follows, I will argue that the concept of narrativity allows us to unpack this issue and that it contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between space and memory.

Narrativity

In order to introduce the concept of narrativity, let us start from some canonical examples. If we notice a footprint in the ground and this footprint interests us for some reason, we might decide to reconstruct its possible story. It may be a mark left by a person, whose identity, trajectory, intention and aim we will try to infer and reconstruct. This is also the modality of forensics. The investigator aims at identifying what story explains a given [p. 40] state of things: what is the past event that links and shapes them as a whole configuration of meaning? What is the object of the crime? Who did it and to whom?

If we read these processes from a narratological perspective, the investigator first identifies a general narrative frame that may fit and explain the event, which implies a certain number of mutually related roles, which Algirdas Julien Greimas calls ‘actants’ (as the word suggests, actants are the elements that co-constitute an action). For instance, in the case of a murder with robbery, these roles may be: the person who carries out the action (the subject) and something of value (the object at stake in the action) to be taken from another person (the anti-subject). After having identified a general frame with different actantial roles, the investigator reconstructs the story by coupling such general narrative roles with the ‘real’ persons involved in the event, which Greimas calls ‘thematic roles’: the killer, the victim, the object at stake.

Without being professional investigators, we generally understand the world in terms of ‘stories’, which at a deeper and more basic level are frames interconnecting different roles that co-constitute actions. Indeed, when Greimas talks about ‘narrativity’ (Greimas and Courtés 1982 [1979]: /narrativity/; Greimas 1987 [1969]), he considers it the organising principle of how human beings make sense of the world and their experiences in it, regardless of the semiotic substance involved (for example, words, images, sounds, rituals, daily behaviours ...). Thus, narrativity is not a specific discursive genre (for example, fictional tales) or practice, but a deep anthropological principle according to which human beings understand and organise the world in terms of chains of actions.

Beyond this more general and epistemological assumption, what is at stake here is the methodological relevance of the notion of narrativity for shedding light on the role of space in memory-making. Drawing on Greimas’s model, we could say that a space may have different narrative functions; it can be the background of an action (what Greimas calls ‘spatialisation’ as part of the discursive level in his model), but at a certain level it can also represent the very object (what Greimas calls ‘object of value’, according to its actantial model) of the process. These two narrative functions – background and object – can even co-exist in the same process and narration.

For instance, in the case of the detective story, we have two distinctive and connected levels. On one hand, we have the story of the crime, in which the scene represents the final stage of the criminal event, its background. On the other, we have the story of the investigation; from this point of view the crime scene may emerge as an object of the narration – what the investigator [p. 41] is looking for – capable of hiding from or revealing the truth about what happened. As we know from detective stories, the investigator tries to find out and preserve the crime scene and to prevent other people from gaining access to it; delimited, marked out and protected, the space assumes an identity of its own and is therefore a real ‘object’ that the investigator fixes, freezes and – in some way – produces and locates in order to gain information from it. Reading this example through de Certeau’s model and the lens of narrativity, the crime scene may fulfil different narrative functions even within the same story, being shaped as both a *lieu* – the object at stake in the process and in the narration, as in the case of the investigation – and a *milieu*, the background of an action – its ‘environment’, as in the case of the criminal action *per se*.

But what happens in the specific case of memory? What social or political actor has the power to transform a space into a *lieu*, that is, into the very object at stake in the narration?

In Greimas’s narrative theory and actantial model, the task of setting values in a story or practice and to fix meanings and interpretations of what happens or may happen, is assigned to the so-called ‘addresser’. The addresser can assume different forms: a community, a political authority (for example the king in the classical Proppian narratological model [Propp 1928], one of the sources of inspiration for Greimas’s theory of narrativity), a society, the public, a figure of knowledge such as a historian or a witness, a deity, and so on.

The addresser in some way pushes another actor (for example, the hero, again in the fairy tales analysed by Propp) to carry out an action, determining what is at stake in it. Thus, in a story as well as in a social practice (like a ritual), addressers fix values and indicate objects that are at stake in the actions.

The shaping of spatiality in terms of a *lieu de mémoire* implies the presence of an addresser who – like the judge in de Certeau's example – discerns, decides and marks the limits of what is remembered and what is not, what is proper to the place and what is not, which stories are coupled with the space and which are excluded temporarily or permanently, or have no legitimate power over it. In Nora's work, and in the entanglement between knowledge and power, the addresser is the nation-state, with its various possible delegates – including figures of knowledge such as the historian, the witness, or figures with a recognised authority – who can set up a dominant story by using specific discursive genres and linguistic acts. However, contrary to Nora, I argue that the transformation of spatiality into a *lieu* does not exclude practices and elements that locally allow experiencing a space as a *milieu*. Practices and narratives may dynamise and construct [p. 42] spatiality in different ways; they can follow established itineraries, paths and rituals (like following a particular street on a map so as to reach a place), but they can also propose new narratives, new practices and new paths, thus destabilising and disrupting the fixed and established order.

In the last section we will see how this works in practice, focusing on a *lieu de mémoire* linked to the Holocaust and the resistance to Nazism-Fascism.

The Former Camp of Fossoli: a Methodological Case

In this section I will present an exemplary case study, and in doing so I will adopt a methodological approach: to describe the possible operational steps for an analysis of the space–memory nexus as a result of the narrative roles that spatiality plays in processes of remembering and forgetting.³

I have chosen Fossoli because of its extremely rich and multilayered history, and because it covers a very emblematic position in twentieth-century Italy: from 1942, when it was created, to 1970, when it was closed, the camp was used for different purposes, mainly related to forced population displacements during and after the war. It therefore reflects the social, historical and political conditions of Italy in those decades. Changes in the use and organisation of the space created a stratification of architectural remains and stories (see on this Herr 2016; Luppi and Tamassia 2017; Ugolini and Delizia 2017; Cassani Simonetti, Mira and Salerno 2021); during subsequent memorialisation processes, these have been removed or magnified, sidelined or emphasised according to different contexts, circumstances and frames. This makes Fossoli camp an exemplary case study, capable of showing the different ways in which memory is spatialised. The camp is today considered as a *lieu de mémoire*, in Nora's term, in particular with reference to the Holocaust and the anti-Fascist struggle of the Italian Resistance. However, as I will demonstrate, this does not exclude other narrative configurations and meanings that co-exist, consistently or in tension, with Fossoli as a *lieu de mémoire* for

remembering the Holocaust and the Resistance.

The Royal Italian Army built the camp during the Second World War, under Fascist rule. Its original function was that of a prisoner-of-war camp [p. 43] for soldiers of the British and Commonwealth armies who had been arrested by the Axis powers. Fossoli, a hamlet located in the province of Modena (Northern Italy), was chosen for its strategic position and socio-urban characteristics: it was a rural area, far from the most important urban areas but located in the middle of the Po Valley, close to the well-connected railway station of Carpi. This is also the reason behind its tragic future uses.

After the armistice with the Allies on 8 September 1943, Italy was divided into two areas and a civil war started; the north fell to the Fascist forces of the Italian Social Republic, a Nazi puppet state, whereas the Kingdom of Italy in the south came under the formal rule of King Victor Emmanuel III. In this new geopolitical context, Fossoli – under the Fascist Social Republic – was converted into a national camp for Jews and political prisoners. In nine months' time, from December 1943 to August 1944, a third (2,840 persons) of the Jews that were deported from Italy to death camps, as well as 2,700 political opponents, passed through Fossoli. In 1944, because of the gradual advancement of the Allies and the Italian resistance movement, Fossoli was transformed into a camp for civilians and for people to be deported as forced labourers in the German military industry.

After the end of the war, from 1945 to 1947, the Allies and the newly founded Italian Republic used the camp as a prison and as a centre for 'undesired people' (Fascists, foreigners and displaced persons). From 1947 to 1952, the camp became known as 'Nomadelfia', a Catholic community founded by a historical religious figure – the priest Zeno Saltini – with the aim of taking care of orphans (on this see, in particular, Herr 2016). In 1954 the camp was transformed into one of the places in Italy that hosted refugees of Italian origin leaving Istria and Dalmatia following the London Memorandum, which stipulated that these areas should pass to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.⁴ Although the camp – which was renamed Villaggio San Marco – was meant to be temporary, the last refugees left only in 1970. This function represented its main and most durable use, namely as a place to contain and govern population flows caused by the Second World War.

In my analysis of the camp and of the different meanings it acquired, I will adopt a multiscale approach: I will trace a broader and general map of the [p. 44] narratives of and discourses about Fossoli in the media, zooming in on the narrative role that the camp plays in such narratives and discourses. Next, I will describe how such narratives – and their interconnections – construct the memory–space nexus in the case of Fossoli.

Tracking /Fossoli/ as a Signifier

Where, when, how and for what reason did Fossoli appear in the public discourse? In order to answer these questions, I have used digital and analogue archives, in particular the digital archives of *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, *L'Unità* and *La Repubblica* (the main Italian newspapers in terms of daily circulation during the four decades under examination). Although as regards the newspaper reports I focused on the period from 1970

– the date of the closure – to 2010, I also traced the general trend in the use of the word /Fossoli/ from 1940 to 2020, using computational tools such as Google Ngram and Google Trends.

Google Ngram shows a gradual increase in the mentions of the word ‘Fossoli’ from 1940 to the mid-1990s, with a peak in 1974. However, the year in which it recurred most frequently was 1997, with a second peak in the early 2000s. My first hypothesis is that these peaks correspond to what we may consider memorial turning points at a local, national and supranational level. At a local and national level, the president of the Italian Republic inaugurated the Museum-Monument to the Political and Racial Deportee in Carpi in late 1973. Carpi hosts this museum because of the presence on its territory of the former concentration camp, which had then just been abandoned, following the departure of the refugees from Istria and Dalmatia. The other two peaks can be explained by the more general dynamics of Holocaust commemoration. As Robert Gordon (2012) explains, 1997 and 2001 represent two turning points in the memory of the Holocaust, the former because of the exceptional cultural production on the Holocaust (think of the release of *La vita è bella* by Roberto Benigni), the latter because Holocaust Remembrance Day was made an official holiday in Italy. Fossoli being the main concentration camp in Italy (along with the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste), its visibility was very much augmented by these events.

Google Trends, which makes it possible to track the frequency and dynamics of a term as well as the queries used to search for a term after 2004, clearly shows that the peaks of queries are always in January and April, corresponding with two yearly commemorative dates: Holocaust Remembrance Day (27 January) and Liberation Day (25 April). However, there are two exceptions: February 2009 also had a peak, probably due to [p. 45] 10 February, the National Memorial Day of the Exiles and of the Foibe, which was established in the early 2000s, as did November 2013, because of a fire that broke out in a factory located in the hamlet (there was no connection with the camp).

With the exception of this last case, the queries and the topics linked to these dates are predominantly connected to the camp. This shows how the use of the word /Fossoli/ changed over the decades, and that it was used not simply as a toponym but also as a metonymy: the name of this hamlet stands both for a part of the hamlet (the camp) and – depending on the different contexts and circumstances of use in discourse – for an event, or a group of events, that took place there.

The study of newspapers yields similar results. Overall, of the 450 newspaper reports that I collected and analysed, some only mention Fossoli, while others deal extensively with its history. For the 1970s and 1980s, I collected and analysed 59 newspaper reports (none from *La Repubblica*) per decade; for the 1990s I gathered 86 newspaper reports, and 250 newspaper reports for the 2000s. If we compare timing, topics and circumstances concerning Fossoli during the 1970s and 1980s, we notice that these are extremely varied, irregular and heterogeneous: the reports rarely appeared on the same day in all the newspapers examined. It is not until the 1990s and 2000s that coverage of Fossoli gradually became routinised and synchronised, following the

institutional calendar.

The study of newspapers gives us the possibility to trace the discursive and cultural production around the camp. Thus, reviews of movies, shows, TV programmes, books and cultural activities in general allow us to clearly see and map the different discursive domains and social arenas within which the memory of Fossoli is elaborated.

Fossoli as a *Lieu* and a *Milieu*

In the 1970s, newspaper reports mentioned Fossoli mainly in relation to the trials of Nazis in West Germany (in particular of Friedrich Boßhammer), on the occasion of the inauguration of the Museum-Monument to the Political and Racial Deportee (1973) and of the broadcast of the American TV series *Holocaust* (1979). Furthermore, there were mainly local references during the commemorations of prominent figures from the Resistance (for example, reports on the Lombard partisan Leopoldo Gasparotto by the Milanese *Corriere della Sera*) and of the deportations (especially in *La Stampa*, the main newspaper of Piedmont, a region particularly affected by the deportation of its Jewish population, like that from the village of Saluzzo).

[p. 46] There is a lack of synchronicity among the newspapers, with commemorative reports narrating the date of birth, death or deportation of partisans and Jews on a local scale but without offering a more general, national framework. The only two events that bring the camp's memory to the fore on a more national scale –the inauguration of the Museum-Monument and the broadcast of *Holocaust* – still support the hypothesis that Fossoli is at this point not yet a *lieu de mémoire*. Like the German trials, the TV series is still a supranational circumstance, in the sense that it helps to shed light on the existence of an Italian concentration camp, but remains focused on the vicissitudes of those who passed through it. The broadcast of the TV series is the only occasion on which the newspapers examined mention the camp on the same day.

Although the Museum-Monument refers to the camp, its aim in this dynamic is almost 'reparative', assuming the function of a place where to remember the deportations. The project for the Museum-Monument was officially presented in 1962 and implemented in 1963, while the camp was still functional as a village and refugee camp for Italians from Istria and Dalmatia; it was inaugurated ten years later, only a few years after the refugees had left the camp. Indeed, during the inauguration, the camp was defined as a wound and as a place of shame, not only for the Holocaust but also for the complicated history of the eastern border of Italy, which was recalled through the physical presence and the still evident traces of the refugees. In the heroic Resistance framework of the 1970s, the Museum-Monument almost replaced the camp as a *lieu* that could symbolise and embody the memory of the deportations.

Hence, the camp's narrative role in the media in the 1970s was mainly that of background to something else, both figuratively and discursively speaking. In other words, it was not the real object of the narration, which in some circumstances was assigned to the new Museum-Monument. Furthermore, a common framework of

memory was still lacking; as the non-synchronicity of the newspaper reports demonstrates (except on the occasion of the broadcast of *Holocaust*), the nation did not look at Fossoli as a political community (not even when the President of the Republic inaugurated the Museum-Monument), but in accordance with local dynamics and circumstances. Hence, the camp was not the object at stake in discourse and narration, but primarily the background – sometimes transitory and occasional – of a narration, whose focus was always on something else: the life of a partisan, the deportation of a prominent figure or of an entire local community, the Museum-Monument as a new *lieu de mémoire*, the TV series, the legal vicissitudes of perpetrators and survivors/witnesses.

[p. 47] This dynamic started to change in the 1980s; despite the fading public memory of the camp, the process of its institutionalisation gradually began to gain ground. Thus, a national law of 1984 resulted in the camp becoming the property of the municipality of Carpi, in view of the construction of a Museum-Monument and a public remembrance park. In 1989, a number of public figures – including Primo Levi’s family, Norberto Bobbio and Giorgio Bassani – mobilised in order to preserve the camp’s ‘authentic aspect’, signing an appeal entitled ‘Salvate Fossoli, tragico documento’ (Save Fossoli, a tragic document), published in *La Stampa* on 8 August. Three semiotic aspects can be identified in the appeal, and in the newspaper article that announced it: the figure of the addresser, the process of naming and the discussion around the camp’s authentic aspect or meaning.

In first instance, public figures from civic society spoke in their capacity of figures of knowledge (for example, Norberto Bobbio, Giorgio Bassani), witnesses or witnesses’ relatives (Primo Levi’s family), and prominent figures from Italian-Jewish communities addressing the institutional sphere. Thus, in the 1989 appeal, I found the element that I believe is central to the constitution of a *lieu de mémoire*: an addresser. Like the judge in de Certeau’s example, the addresser is able to mark out the boundaries of the place; to determine its defining narratives by discerning what is true and false, what is authentic and not authentic (a key term in the appeal), what belongs to the place and what does not, and where it should be.

During the 1990s, institutional figures often acted as addresser during institutional visits to Carpi and to the camp. Such visits reveal the long process of definition and gradual construction of Fossoli as a *lieu de mémoire*. Suffice to think of the visit of President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro in 1993, in a moment of deep institutional crisis. In his discourse, the president evoked the image of the partisans in captivity in the camp barracks, envisioning a future after the war: a new, united and refounded nation, after the division of the country into two parts.

Secondly, the word /Fossoli/ indicates the camp as such; it linguistically assumes a succinct and concise name and signifier. This process of naming is essential in that it allows the camp to gain a defined narrative identity as actor and object, which is at stake in stories and history. With a few exceptions, when the signifier /Fossoli/ appears in the examined newspapers, it always stands for the camp, even if the word ‘camp’ is not present.

The third semiotic aspect that emerged from the 1989 appeal is the issue of the camp’s ‘authentic aspect’, that is, what is at its core, what it symbolises, witnesses and remembers (and what it does not remember). The

historian Enzo Collotti offered a very clear and significant definition of Fossoli and [p. 48] its ‘authentic aspect’ as a *lieu de mémoire* on 27 January 2002, on the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day (instituted by law and added to the Republican calendar in 2000):

The memory of Fossoli is bound to the political and racial deportation ... and in its last phase also to the deportation of those who were raided to be sent to work as forced labour for the Reich. It is bound to the memory of the German occupation, but also to the complicity in this of the RSI. After the Liberation ..., the Fossoli camp was used for emergency situations (the Istrian-Dalmatian refugees, the Nomadelfia community), contributing, on the one hand, to keeping the relationship with the area alive, while, on the other, destroying most of the original structures, making current recovery work more difficult.⁵

Collotti describes the forty-year history of Fossoli, but stresses that its ‘original structures’, the meaning and history that are important to transmit (its ‘authentic aspect’, to quote the 1989 document), are linked to what happened in the camp from 1943 to 1945. The different uses of Fossoli after those years ‘destroyed’ – to use Collotti’s exact word – what is ‘original’ and most important in the transmission of memory, making its recovery more difficult.

In so doing, and aligned with a broader institutional effort, Collotti marked out temporal, spatial and narrative boundaries of a *lieu de mémoire*. Collotti ‘emphasises one layer only, one point in the entire life cycle of a given location’ (Arrigoni and Galani 2019: 164), which is consistent with Nora’s concept of *lieu de mémoire* and with the way spatiality as such is formed. Although the historian’s words sound purely descriptive, they actually have a performative power, as they fix a selection of the events that took place in the camp and establish a hierarchy of importance: what matters most for the camp’s collective memory and therefore, in de Certeau’s term, becomes ‘the law of the place’. This reflects what I called a spatiality of position and a logic of location, namely to fix where a certain portion of territory is and should be, spatially but also temporally – in the case of Fossoli, the years between 1943 and 1944.

In 2004, a barracks was reconstructed to look like it did in the 1940s. If we read this architectural intervention through Collotti’s lens, we see how this modification implements the idea of ‘authenticity’ and ‘original meaning’ of the place as connected to the short – but historically and symbolically [p. 49] most significant – period in which it served as a concentration camp for Jews and political opponents.

From a cultural semiotics point of view, the discursive articulation between different practices and socio-cultural domains (that is, historiography, literature, architecture and the legal, political and institutional spheres) is exactly what forms spatiality and temporality – the nexus between space and memory. Nevertheless, no configuration is definitive. In 2004, the inclusion in the Republican calendar of the National Memorial Day for Exiles and Victims of the Foibe, and its first celebration in 2005, again changed this semiotic dynamic and

introduced new elements in the memory of Fossoli.

In the 2000s, the camp became a place of memory on three commemorative days each year: 27 January, 10 February and 25 April.⁶ On each of these dates, different layers and different narratives are activated, while others are sidelined: the memory of the deportation of Jews on 27 January, the memory of the *foibe* and anti-communism on 10 February, and the memory of Italian Resistance and anti-Fascism on 25 April. In this sense, the polysemic and multilayered nature of the place is locally modulated according to the circumstances that are politically determined and institutionalised by the national calendar. Thus, on each occasion, some narratives are temporarily sidelined while others are magnified; some elements are silenced while others gain centrality in a narrative management of history in public memory that also reflects – in particular in the relationship between 10 February and 25 April – memories that are divided along the lines of different political constituencies.

However, the gradual formation of Fossoli as a *lieu de mémoire* in the 1990s and 2000s does not exclude the narration of Fossoli as a *milieu de mémoire*, in which the logic of action and the spatiality of situation predominate over the logic of location and the spatiality of position. This is particularly evident if we consider the layers in the former camp's history, which are somehow obstructed and sidelined by the establishment of Fossoli as a *lieu de mémoire* of the Holocaust and/or of the Resistance. The periods in which Fossoli hosted the Catholic community of Nomadelfia, or acted as a war camp, emerge particularly in biographical or autobiographical narrations: the life and death of Don Zeno Saltini and the stories of the prisoners of war are some of the circumstances in which other layers of Fossoli's history gain public attention, although in a weaker and more sporadic way. In these [p. 50] narratives, the role of Fossoli is that of a transitory setting. This also keeps happening with events linked to the Resistance and to the Holocaust; if we talk about Fossoli during the commemoration of Leopoldo Gasparotto or specific local deportations, as in the case of the Roman neighbourhood of Quadraro, it is very likely that the camp will appear as the background to the lives and deaths of heroes and victims.

Over the last decades, another practice explicitly framed Fossoli as a milieu, that is, as a space with vectors of direction, velocities and time variables, and did so in a logic of action and spatiality of situation: school visits. This relatively new pedagogical practice consists in organising trips for students that allow them to follow the traces and discover the paths of the deportations. If, for the victims, this was a path towards death, for students this experience is part of an educational itinerary – the transition to the status of young adult.

As in the example of the forensic scene that I offered earlier on, the camp appears during these school visits in its double nature: as an object of value, which gives students knowledge and experience allowing them to grow as citizens and human beings; and as the setting of a lived experience with a spatial (the students' trip) and temporal direction and orientation (the process that transforms adolescents into young adults and citizens). We have, then, a situation and an action, a location and a position, a place and a space, which are connected within the same process and narrative. In other words, something that shows how places of memory articulate different

meanings and different practices that are not mutually exclusive, as in Nora's definition, but that are mutually co-existent.

Conclusion

The example of Fossoli has allowed me to analyse the long and complex processes through which a given space can be formed as a *milieu* and a *lieu de mémoire*. I have argued that the dichotomic and mutually exclusive way in which Nora frames the notion of lieu is at odds with the spatialisation of memory as it discursively emerges in public memory and as captured in media. Mapping and tracking the use of the signifier /Fossoli/ makes it possible to appreciate the cultural production around the camp. The naming of the camp – which went from 'campo di Fossoli' to simply 'Fossoli' – epitomises the gradual construction of a shared and widely recognisable identity of the camp in public discourse: the addresser figure, who marks the spatial and temporal characteristics of the camp and triggers the construction of the [p. 51] camp as a national *lieu de mémoire*, defining its meanings and its authenticity as contained in the layer linked to the Holocaust and the resistance. The other layers are mainly experienced within other narratives, which convey the camp as a setting of the stories.

From a methodological perspective, it is important to stress that Fossoli is not uniquely a *lieu de mémoire*, but that it is experienced according to different modalities within the local discursive practice at play in a given moment, which assigned it a certain narrative role. In this sense, the concept of narrativity methodologically helps us to better understand how this happens.

We have also seen that, in order to understand these processes, we must analyse the relationship with the interlocking semiotic systems (media, legal and institutional discourse, historiography, etc.) that culturally interact with each other. For instance, the addresser is an abstract narrative function that, as such, can appear in a movie or a novel, in a biography, in historiographical discourse, in a legal text or in an architectural practice concerning Fossoli. As it is a principle that organises all discourses, regardless of the substances and genres used, narrativity – and its methodological implementation – functions as a basis for mutual translation and comparison. This allows us to implement a cultural semiotics perspective that is capable of seeing how meanings emerge from the interlocking of different narratives and discursive practices, genres and media, each assigning a different narrative role, a different function and, ultimately, different forms and meanings to the place.

Footnotes

1. [p. 33] On mnemonic techniques in the Middle Ages, see also the earlier work by Paolo Rossi (1960) and the semiotic reading of mnemotechnics by Umberto Eco (1988; 2014 [2007])

2. [p. 39] The English edition uses the word ‘scene’, whereas de Certeau keeps using the French *lieu*: according to de Certeau, the way a judge decides over the status of a space thus produces a *lieu*.
3. [p. 42] For a more complete discussion of the memory of Fossoli camp from a semiotic standpoint, focused more on the object and the result of this analysis, see Salerno (2021b). Here, I will focus mainly on the way Fossoli emerges as a *lieu de mémoire* over the decades, that is, on the figure of the addresser and on the way meanings and narratives are somehow fixed by such narrative figures. I will also demonstrate that the shaping of Fossoli as a *lieu de mémoire* does not exclude other possible configurations.
4. [p. 43] The history of Fossoli is linked to the ‘*foibe* massacres’ of the Second World War (see Franzinetti 2006). *Foibe* are deep natural sinkholes, typical of the Istrian peninsula. During the war, Yugoslav partisans used to throw ‘enemies’ (often still alive) into these deep chasms, targeting the Italian population in particular. The word ‘*foibe*’ thus came to indicate the persecution and killing of Italians in Istria and Dalmatia, and it was linked to the displacement of Italians living in the area.
5. [p. 48] ‘Dare futuro alla storia: l’esempio di Fossoli’, *L’Unità*, p. 29, 20 January 2002.
6. [p. 49] See Salerno (2021a) on commemorative dates as circumstances that filter and shape the narrative of Fossoli.

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