

# The Art of Commemoration & the Politics of Memory

*Frank van Vree*

Essay – September 30, 2004

**Monuments never exist in isolation. Either they are overrun with visitors or languishing in some dead-end street – in either case they are part of the historical culture in which we live, as the legacy of preceding generations, as a product as well as a formative element of the collective memory. But that is not all. Monuments are not only expressions of sentiments, memories and thoughts that are – or were – present among the population, but also political instruments, in the sense that they promote or support particular representations of history. The way in which a society has shaped its past, in monuments and other public anchoring points of memory, in fact says more about that society than about the history itself.**

On Saturday 29 May 2004, with much fanfare, the National World War II Memorial was dedicated in Washington. Public interest was massive. More than 100,000 people attended the ceremony, including President Bush, flanked by his predecessors, Bill Clinton and Bush's father, a decorated Navy pilot who had served during the war. This monument acknowledged a debt of long standing, said Bush, to a whole generation of Americans. 'Those who died, those who fought and worked and grieved and went on. They saved our country, and thereby saved the liberty of mankind.' The war veterans listened; they had come in their tens of thousands for the celebration of the World War II Reunion and the dedication of the monument, a sea of baseball caps with old uniforms underneath, many in wheelchairs, armed with canes, while elsewhere across the country many thousands followed the ceremony on giant screens via satellite.<sup>1</sup>

For the U.S. administration, grappling with bitter international criticism and a deep national divide over the war in Iraq, this celebratory 'Tribute to a Generation' was not inopportune. In the American public consciousness the Second World War lives on, after all, as 'The Good War', as the war in which the spirit of the nation fully flourished, not only in defending its own country but also in the interest of peace and freedom in the rest of the world. The festivities in this extraordinary memorial year (the ceremonial dedication of the monument, the reunion of the veterans and the 60th anniversary of D-Day in early June) provided the beleaguered president a perfect opportunity to place his war on terrorism in a historical perspective – an opportunity that fell into his lap by coincidence, incidentally, for the plans for the monument date back to 1987, while the definitive decision was taken under Clinton in 1993.

The Good War – in the collective memory the Second World War is not only a symbol of the values upon which the United States is based, but also of the achievement of its historical destiny. An analysis of half a century of Hollywood films could hardly be more clear. The war is said to have healed the old, deep wounds of the Civil War and bridged the wide gap between classes and ethnic groups, and to have given women the opportunity to develop socially – and all for an unquestionably pure ideal, as demonstrated by the repeatedly displayed pictures of the crowds cheering their liberation by Allied armies. In

the Second World War evil was vanquished; the war delivered the historical proof of the power of American democracy and in addition gave the country technological, cultural and political supremacy over the world.

The central place of The Good War in the American collective memory is expressed in all manner of ways in the National World War II Memorial, starting with its size and – above all – its location, on the National Mall in Washington, on the axis that connects the *Lincoln Memorial* with the *Washington Monument* and continues to the Capitol.

The heart of the memorial, designed by Friedrich St. Florian, is formed by two galleries of pillars, interrupted by a stone wall decorated with thousands of gold stars, in the shape of a circle around an existing pool, the Rainbow Pool. Each row totals 28 granite pillars more than five metres high, bearing a laurel wreath and the name of one of the U.S. states and territories, including Samoa and the Virgin Islands. In the centre of the pillar galleries stand the *Atlantic Arch* and the *Pacific Arch*, each 13 metres high, above bronze sculptures symbolising victory on the two fronts of the war. The semi-circular wall of 4,100 gold stars, the *Freedom Wall*, nearly 26 metres long and 2.7 metres high, evokes a huge altar: each star represents 100 soldiers who were killed, who died for freedom, as the large inscription 'Here we mark the price of freedom' also attests.

In the centre of the circular plaza encircled by the pillars and the *Freedom Wall* is the Rainbow Pool, a pool excavated in 1912 along with the neighbouring Reflecting Pool, as a spectacular open space between the *Washington Monument* and the *Lincoln Memorial*. By incorporating this open space the new monument marked its central space in U.S. history. The Mall and the adjacent area on the banks of the Potomac, stretching from Capitol Hill to Arlington National Cemetery, can be seen as a single, imposing, well-nigh imperial field of honour, as a Forum Americanum, with along the edges the White House, the buildings of the Senate and House of Representatives, the great national Smithsonian museums, the Botanical Gardens, the National Archives, the National Academy of Sciences and, tellingly, the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Inside this area are located memorials to the great leaders of the nation, Lincoln, Washington, Roosevelt, Grant and Jefferson, while further on, at Arlington, are the graves of Kennedy and Johnson; closer to the centre – but somewhat pushed out of the way by the advent of the new monument to the Second World War – are the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam Women's Memorial.

The location of the National World War II Memorial in the heart of this field of glory and remembrance is a statement that is patently clear: the Second World War lives on in the public consciousness as an event that formed the country – America as a world power – and from which it derives its identity to a significant degree.

### **The texture of national memory**

A closer inspection of the war monument likely begs the question of whether something similar should be erected in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe today. Not that its establishment in the United States did not encounter opposition: there was criticism – of the design, but particularly of the location.<sup>2</sup> Opponents of the monument held that the historic Mall would irremediably be undermined by the annexation of the two pools and the open space, which had functioned for almost a century as a place to cool off and relax, and moreover as the site of memorable cultural and political demonstrations, such as the famous demonstration of 28 August 1963, when Martin Luther King electrified 250,000 people with his visionary 'I have a dream...' speech.

The design also met with resistance: some saw in the monument 'an echo of the Nazi Fascist architectural language of triumph and public spectacle'; others called the style and visual idiom kitsch. A columnist from *The Washington Post*, the day before the dedication, wrote that the monument was a signal failure. The concept was of revolting banality, the

symbolism – the pillars with the laurel wreaths and the names of the states, and the gold stars, one for every 100 killed – hollow and evidence of laziness.<sup>3</sup>

There can be doubt, however, that both the design and its execution could count on a warm reception from the public. The huge attendance numbers at the Reunion, but also the great success of the fundraising – more donations were received than had been budgeted: \$195 million in total – are an indication of this. The Second World War occupies a central place in the national self-image, in the culture and in politics, in the American ‘civil religion’ – that odd mix of patriotism, Enlightenment ideals, Christian values and Old Testament religiosity – as do the many Holocaust memorials and museums that have proliferated around the country: they refer to the same period of terror and horror that was ended by American action, as is made immediately clear to the visitor upon entering the permanent exhibition at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In Western Europe, such pontifical, optimistic monuments have not been made for years. For decades the Second World War is instead remembered as a period of horror, which should not be forgotten solely for that reason. In the first years after the Liberation, it was still a different matter. A characteristic of what James Young, in an analogy to the inner structure of matter, has called ‘the texture of memory’, was the ‘weaving in’ of the remembrances of the war into the traditional national political and religious discourse: well into the 1960s – and in some countries even later – most monuments, popular novels, films, remembrance rituals and scientific studies fit in directly with existing historical and political notions, with the ‘great stories’, with nationalism, belief in progress, the traditional religious and political ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

An important aspect of this ‘weaving in’ of war memories in the prevailing worldview was the emphasis on continuity. The *National Monument on the Dam* in Amsterdam, which was dedicated in 1956 but had already become the site of the annual national commemoration of the dead, was to tell posterity about the suffering, the courage, the sacrifice and (above all) ‘the perseverance that led to the future’.<sup>5</sup> This quest was reflected not only in the sculptures themselves, but also in the story of the creation, the location of the monument and the rituals centred round it. To emphasize that this was not a city, but a national monument, the land on which the creation of the sculptor John Raedecker and the architect J.J.P. Oud was erected was sold by the square centimetre to the public. The soil also played a role in another way: in the white wall on the rear side urns were placed, filled with ‘earth, drenched with the blood of martyrs’, from firing-squad sites and burial grounds for the honoured dead.

It was much the same for other commissions for monuments, documentaries and commemorative books, in the Netherlands as well as in other countries. Artists, directors and writers were expected to connect themes like grief and comfort with the idea of patriotic sacrifice, spiritual strength and victory, and in a recognizable, evocative and nevertheless aesthetically appealing way, inspiring and expressive for years to come.

In practice, however, these requirements proved scarcely unifiable, if at all, as can be seen from the difficult process involved in putting up many a memorial. The artist usually got the short end of the stick, for artistically speaking the ‘flood of monuments’ that swept over the Netherlands immediately after the Liberation left little room for less conventional forms – aside from the rare example of Zadkine’s *The Destroyed City* in Rotterdam, but that was only, all things considered, because the city was offered it as a gift. In most instances the commissioners and the sculptors resorted to the classical and Christian repertoire, with a familiar symbolism in which usually no more than a handful of aspects of the experiences, feelings and reflections were expressed: doves of peace, crosses, phoenixes, lions, broken chains, flags, swords, hands, flowers, crushed swastikas and eagles brought to earth. Equally unsurprising were the victory columns, the statues of the man facing the firing squad, the falling soldier, the protective shepherd, the Christ figure and the Corpus Christi, the merciful mother figure, St George and the Dragon, the Good

Samaritan, the victims cast to the ground and the victorious male and female figures, Judith and Holofernes, David and Goliath. And the same held for the inscriptions, which were usually taken straight from the Bible or the religious bits of the national anthem – ‘Steadfast my heart remaineth in my adversity’ – and the standard patriotic repertoire: ‘for their country’, ‘may we never forget’, ‘in thanks and remembrance’, ‘not in vain’, ‘to those who fell’.<sup>6</sup>

The hegemony of the conventional and highly idealized idiom of form of the memorial culture extend throughout Europe, from East to West. A striking illustration of this is Nathan Rapoport’s monument to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto *Uprising*, erected in 1948, out of stone that had been prepared – an irony of history – for Arno Breker, Hitler’s favourite sculptor, who was to have made a ‘Victory Monument’ from it in Berlin.<sup>7</sup> Rapoport’s memorial was a clear expression of the dominant socialist-communist politics of remembrance, in which martyrdom and solidarity were the focus. The racist aspect of the mass murder was not addressed.

### **Broken sculptures**

From the 1960s onward, historical culture, which had been the basis of the conventional and idealized memorials, began to erode all across Europe. This change naturally did not occur on its own: it was a product of social, religious and political developments, of decolonization, the rise of the consumer society and the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. In some countries this process unfolded rapidly and radically, such as in the Netherlands and Germany, and in some countries more slowly, such as in France, where a difficult and sometimes intense battle was fought over the legacies of De Gaulle and Pétain.

In essence this turnaround came down to an undermining of the traditional exclusivist notions of history, based on national, religious and political values that had been imposed, as it were, onto the experiences of the past. In their place came a pluralistic historical culture, in many ways less coercive, hierarchical and moralistic. This trend has even become visible in Eastern Europe in recent years, while ultra-nationalist voices, which rose in many countries right after the fall of communism, are getting weaker.

At the heart of this transformation process, another movement unfolded: growing attention to Auschwitz, considered the symbol of the systematic persecution and annihilation of the Jews, Gypsies, mentally ill people and others viewed as inferior by the Nazis. This development was partly spurred by the Eichmann trial, the publication of important scientific studies and the questions of a new, younger generation – but also by the open nature of the new historical consciousness, which became more many-voiced as a result.

This resulted in a remembrance culture that had – and has – virtually nothing more in common with the nationalistic and ideological remembrance culture of the first years following the war. Whereas the traditional representation then were ruled by the idea of historical continuity, from now on the experiences were described in terms of an irreparable break in history. Jean-François Lyotard spoke of Auschwitz as an earthquake, the strength of which we cannot measure because we do not have an adequate set of instruments at our disposal: it was lost with the lives, buildings and objects, so that we can only be silent – a silence that for every mortal will serve as a sign.<sup>8</sup>

We find the same thinking in the monument *Nooit Meer Auschwitz* (‘Never Again Auschwitz’), by the writer and sculptor Jan Wolkers by commission of the Dutch Auschwitz Committee, on the spot where in the early 1950s an urn had been interred containing ashes from the camp. At its dedication in 1977 Wolkers said: ‘How can you devise a form to mark a crime of such horrendous proportions, that you know in your heart that it cannot ever be forgiven. To attempt to find an image to reflect the ignominy and the

suffering transcends the limit of your comprehension. When you look up at the sky, it is impossible to imagine the same sun shining over that destruction as indifferently and peacefully as over a meadow filled with flowers. In a vision of justice, the blue sky above you cracks apart as if the horrors that took place on earth below have desecrated eternity for ever.’<sup>9</sup>

This is in fact exactly what the monument shows: the sky, reflected in broken mirrors, covered by a layer of glass, through which we gaze at a sky that is irreparably damaged. Jan Wolkers’s monument was exemplary for the turnaround in the monument culture in more than one regard. Not only did the monument aim to say something substantially different from the many hundreds of memorials from the 1940s and 1950s, but the idiom of form was also radically different. In the pluralistic remembrance culture, the first rank was reserved for individuals and individual groups, for the senselessness of the horrors and inadequacies of the traditional forms of expression.

The previously mentioned tension between modern art and tradition, between artist and public, was after all not purely a question of taste; it was also rooted in deeper issues: how could this war be commemorated? It was a theme that was addressed immediately after the war by Theodor Adorno, in his often quoted – and often misunderstood – words, ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. The philosopher, in fact, did not mean to say that no poetry should be written, but rather that the traditional aesthetic criteria of Western culture were no longer adequate and that the idea of ‘beauty’ has been irreversibly altered by the experience of the Final Solution.

It was a struggle from which few found a way out in that first decade after the war. But some did. In literature – often a refuge for dissident voices – in poems and prose, writers such as Celan and Camus, but also Lucebert, Van het Reve and Hermans demonstrated a new consciousness. Even the cinema, though because of high production costs and the attendant orientation on the mass audience a quintessentially conformist medium, occasionally showed signs, in the hands of a new generation of directors in the 1950s, of dissent toward the prevailing remembrance culture. An illustration of this is Alain Resnais’s memorable documentary, *Nuit et Brouillard* (‘Night and Fog’) (1956), in which the memory of the camp (‘l’univers concentrationnaire’, the perverse universe in which everyday words and actions acquire a demonic, through-the-looking-glass significance) was presented not as a finished but an ongoing story. And the same happened on the other side of the Iron Curtain, where not only writers and artists, but also directors took advantage of the unrest and power shifts that followed the death of Stalin. This movement, now known as ‘the Polish school’, searched for new strategies from 1956 to 1963, varying from a clownish approach to the ‘strategy of psychotherapy’, in order to give shape to the experiences of the recent past. Subsequently well-known directors like Andrzej Wajda, Andrzej Munk and Wojciech Has confronted the public with highly unconventional and unedifying images of painful episodes from the nation’s history, the traumas and deeply damaging consequences of the political and social tragedies of the preceding decade.<sup>10</sup>

But, as we noted, seeking and finding alternative forms, away from the traditional remembrance culture, was limited to the few. Competitions for monuments often ended with embarrassing results, as demonstrated by the rejection of the abstract designs of Willem Reijers and Wessel Couzijn for a national monument to the merchant marine in Rotterdam (1950) or the desperation of the international jury chaired by the British sculptor Henry Moore, which in 1957-1958 had to select a design out of 426 entries that would immortalize the suffering of the victims of racist policy. In both affairs the controversy centred on the abstract character of the design. Whereas in the Rotterdam competition it was decreed that an abstract monument ‘cannot speak to the sailor’s wife’, representatives of the International Auschwitz Committee pointed out that ‘we were not tortured and our families were not murdered in the abstract’.<sup>11</sup>

The jury for the monument in Auschwitz did initially succeed in selecting three proposals. One was clearly the favourite: the design by the Polish architects and artists Oskar and Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz and Julian Palka. Their design consisted of a tar roadway 1,000 metres long and 70 metres wide, which would run diagonally across the camp, from the rail line to the crematoriums, where it would abruptly end in the fields and the woods. Everything that still stood along the way – the remains of the barracks, the latrines, the barbed wire, the foundations and pieces of walls, the chimneys – would be included and immortalized in this strip. The designers wanted, as it were, to fix a portion of the camp for all eternity, as a sort of ‘petrified past’, right across the horrors of history, while the surroundings, the rest of the camp, would be left to the ravages of time, to slow decay and be overrun by vegetation. The diagonal roadway would be display the mechanism of the camp – but at the same time the road was an Open Form: a setting that left the viewer free, as it were, to let his thought wander or to leave behind letters. The road monument would elicit the same sensation as the ruins of Pompeii. Starting from the present, from life, the line of death would be crossed.

The proposals ultimately led to nothing. The jury dared not force a decision, leading Moore to wonder doubtfully whether ‘it is in fact possible to create a work of art that can express the emotions associated with Auschwitz’.<sup>12</sup>

The process was illustrative for this period in more than one regard – although there were significant exceptions from a memorial point of view, such as the impressive memorials by the sculptor Franciszek Duszenko and the architect Adam Haupt, erected between 1960 and 1964 at Treblinka, the death camp in which between 23 July 1942 and the autumn of 1943 800,000 people were killed, the vast majority of them Polish Jews. It is an unusual memorial, not only because of its expanse and location in the woods, but also because of the way Duszenko and Haupt managed to link abstraction and tradition: the monument can be seen as an immense cemetery, consisting of three huge concrete tombstones, studded with countless smaller stones, which recall the tombstones of old Jewish cemeteries. This evokes a motif that is traditionally highly prevalent in the East European Jewish culture – that of disturbance and fracture. Like Hansen et al. with their design for the *Auschwitz Monument*, Duszenko and Haupt developed an idiom of form that a decade later would still be praised as relevant and worthy of imitation – as demonstrated not only by the earlier-cited words of Wolkers, but also the recent debate about the Berlin ‘Holocaust monument’ and many other memorials that have been erected in Europe since the 1970s.

### **Monuments / Counter-monuments**

Most of the monuments erected before 1970 seem to have little left to say to us today. They leave us unmoved or fulfil only a purely ritualistic function; sometimes they are amusing, more often we look past them. They refer to a remembrance culture, a patriotic and Christian-inspired philosophy to which we scarcely respond any longer, if at all – when they don’t offend us altogether, like the *Van Heutsz Monument* (1935) in Amsterdam, symbol of a violent colonial past.

The monuments that are the subject of debate today, those that create excitement, that spontaneously evolve into gathering places and to which a political significance relevant to our times is still ascribed, are entirely different in nature, in the Netherlands as well in the rest of Europe. There may be great differences, measured by aesthetic, political and historical criteria, but these new monuments are virtually without exception connected with the shadowy sides of our history, with war and destruction, slavery and injustice. Contemporary memorials are primarily linked to victimhood, not only of disasters, atrocities and persecutions of the past, but also exploding factories, random violence and everyday racism. In many cases this has resulted in projects that have the character of a

counter-monument, like Wolkers's monument (1977), Horst Hoheisel's inward-facing, mirrored fountain in Kassel, on the spot where until 1938 a fountain donated by a Jewish resident that was destroyed by the Nazis (1987), the *Holocaust-Mahnmal* in Vienna, an impenetrable cube by Rachel Whiteread (2001), of the *Digitaal Monument voor de Joodse Gemeenschap* ('Digital Memorial to the Jewish Community'), which will be open shortly and which will bring to life the Jewish community of the Netherlands decimated by the Nazis.

If the enthusiasm of Americans for the World War II Reunion and the new memorial in Washington is an expression of the American 'civil religion', which combines patriotism, the ideals of the Enlightenment, Christian values and Old Testament religiosity, it seems obvious to conclude that the experience of history in Western Europe since the 1970s has followed quite a different pattern. The relatively one-dimensional, ideological and collectivist historical culture, so characteristic of the first decade after the war, has had to make way for a pluralistic (and simultaneously personal) culture of remembrance, apparently devoid of political or social dimension, a culture of remembrance that according to some critics is even arbitrary. The evolution of the monument culture since the 1980s, however, shows a different picture: the fact that many monuments refer primarily to the most negative episodes of modern history makes clear how deeply anchored in the collective consciousness is the awareness of human shortcomings, the shortcomings of our culture and society.

**Frank van Vree** is a historian and professor of journalism at the Universiteit van Amsterdam.

## Footnotes

1. Report by *The New York Times* (text, video) 30 May 2004; for a complete description of the memorial, with illustrations, see the official [site](#).
2. See for instance the site of the *National Coalition to Save Our Mall*, as well as for example Daniel Honan, 'Military: Is the New World War II Monument Fascist?', [History News Network](#), 7 June 2001.
3. Ch. Krauthammer, 'Parenthesis to History', *The Washington Post*, 28 May 2004.
4. Frank van Vree, *In de schaduw van Auschwitz. Herinneringen, beelden, geschiedenis*, Groningen 1995; James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven / London 1993.
5. Warna Oosterbaan et al., *Het Nationaal Monument op de Dam*, Amsterdam 1998.
6. B. van Bohemen and W. Ramaker, *Sta een ogenblik stil... Monumentenboek 1940 / 1945*, Kampen 1980.
7. James Young, op. cit., p. 155 onwards.
8. J.-F. Lyotard, *Le différend*, Paris 1983, p. 91.
9. *Auschwitz Bulletin*, 3 (1985), p. 16.
10. Frank van Vree, 'Auschwitz liegt im Polen: Krieg, Verfolgung und Vernichtung in polnischen Kino 1945-1963', in W. Wende (ed.), *Geschichte im Film. Mediale Inszenierungen des Holocaust und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, Stuttgart / Weimar 2002, pp. 44-66; Cf. Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows. Film and the Holocaust*, Cambridge 2003; Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust. Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, Bloomington 1988.
11. Van Vree, op. cit., p. 33 onwards.; Katarzyna Murwaska-Muthesius, 'Oskar Hansen and the Auschwitz "Counter Memorial", 1958-1959', *Artmargins* 2001, [www.artmargins.com](http://www.artmargins.com).
12. James Young, op. cit., p. 24.

## Tags

Art Discourse, Memory, Public Space, Design, Architecture

This text was downloaded on April 3, 2025 from  
*Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*  
[onlineopen.org/the-art-of-comme-moration-the-politics-of-memory](http://onlineopen.org/the-art-of-comme-moration-the-politics-of-memory)