



Telling Histories

images, memories, narrations

The Art of Memory/Counter-Memory

What is an adequate toolkit for depicting the past? For centuries, a firm classic artistic repertoire and traditional narrative strategies were used to depict sacred as well as secular themes with great lustre – this being the reason why history painting occupied such a proud place in the hierarchy of artistic genres – and they remained dominant until well into the twentieth century.



Amsterdam. Auschwitz Monument by Jan Wolkers. 1977

From the 1950's however, confronted with the horrors of the recent past, in particular the Nazi extermination camps, fundamental doubts arose: how far can we get – in film, painting, or monumental sculpture – with this classic repertoire, traditional storylines and mimetic representations, when we seek to depict this history? This was what Theodor Adorno meant by his much quoted aphorism *Nach Auschwitz noch Lyrik zu schreiben, ist barbarisch* ('Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'): the artistic repertoire that served Western civilization for centuries is incapable of even approaching the horrors of the recent past.

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Over time this view has gained wider and wider acceptance, especially since the 1960s, which marked the beginning of a gradual erosion of the great narratives of the Western world, of political ideologies, religion, and nationalism – a process that also marked the end of traditional historical or historicizing art. This development has had a deep impact upon the way memories of the past are mediated – in monuments, film, painting, rituals – giving rise of an art of counter-memory, not only with regard to the second world war, but also to other historical episodes.

This art may express political opposite views towards the past, but also profoundly sceptical feelings towards the very idea that conventional artistic techniques and strategies can do justice to historical reality, experiences or memories.



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Frank van Vree is the Dean of the Faculty of the Humanities of the Universiteit van Amsterdam since 2012. Before becoming Dean he was chairing the Department of Media Studies and full professor of Media Studies, particularly Journalism, in Amsterdam. Previously he also held a chair in Media History at the Erasmus University (Rotterdam). In 2010-2011 he was visiting scholar at New York University and, previously, visiting professor at various other institutes abroad.

Frank van Vree studied modern history and philosophy at the University of Groningen (1972-1979) and received his PhD from the University of Leiden (1989). His publications include a study on the memory of the Second World War, *In de schaduw van Auschwitz. Herinneringen, beelden, geschiedenis* (1995), books and articles on the history of Dutch media and journalism as well as a large number of essays, articles and reviews in the field of historical representation, historical culture and cultural history in scholarly journals as well as newspapers and weeklies. Moreover he was co-editor of *History of Concepts - Comparative Perspectives* (Amsterdam 1998), *Feit & fictie*, a journal on the history of representation, and, most recently, of two volumes, *De dynamiek van de herinnering* (on the dynamics of the memory of WW II, ed. with Rob van der Laarse, publisher Bert Bakker 2009) and *Performing the Past, Memory, History, and Identity in modern Europe* (with Jay Winter and Karin Tilmans, AUP 2010).

Together with Rob van der Laarse (UvA) he initiated a major research program, the Dynamics of War Heritage, Memory and Remembrance, which was granted three postdoc positions by VWS in 2008 and seven more research positions in 2009 by NWO and about ten (semi)public and private funds.

Over the years Frank van Vree has been a member of numerous boards and committees, such as the board of the prestigious Praemium Erasmianum (since 2007), the Netherlands Press Museum (2002-2009), the Amsterdam Expertise Centre of Journalism (2009-2013), the National Biography Series (1995-2003), the Dutch Association for Audiovisual History (GBG, 1991-2000) and the National Cultural Broadcast Fund (Mediafonds 2001-2005).