

Spatial Translation of Symbols: The Construction and Expression of Collective Memory in Anselm Kiefer's Contemporary Art Practice

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ABSTRACT

The construction and expression of collective memory is the eternal theme of Anselm Kiefer's contemporary art practice. Kiefer's multiple identities as a World War II veteran, a Catholic, and a Germanic ethnicity have made him instinctively inclined to portray collective memories such as national culture, religion, and war, and the symbolic expression and spatial turn of contemporary art have also had a significant impact on the formal construction and expression of meaning in Kiefer's artistic practice. This paper interprets the multiple directions of collective memory construction in Kiefer's works, including historical reflection, cultural tracing and human insight, and at the same time analyses the overall influence of symbolic embedding, spatial activation and translation mechanism on Anselm Kiefer's collective memory expression, and proposes a basic path for understanding the expression of the forms and connotations of collective memories in Kiefer's works from a methodological point of view: the spatial translation of symbols.

KEYWORDS

Collective memory; Anselm Kiefer; Symbols; Space

1 Introduction

The concept of collective memory was developed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in 1925. In exploring the social function of memory, Maurice realized the significance and fascination that social memory gives to the "past" and defined collective memory as "the process and result of sharing the past by the members of a particular social group."¹ Distinguished from individual memory, historical memory and collective recollection, collective memory is not the superposition of individual memories, the reproduction of objective history and the narration of specific scenes, but the reconstruction of history based on the present, which is gradually formed in social interaction, and is identified and symbolized by a specific group. The extraction, deconstruction and reorganization of history by collective memory broadens the path of contemporary art writing, and becomes an important medium for contemporary artists to express their individual and collective emotions².

In order to further clarify the interactive relationship between collective memory and contemporary art practice, and to explore the formal construction and expression of collective

1 Halbwachs M. On collective memory[M]. University of Chicago press, 2020.

2 Zhu Cong Xia Zheng. On Collective Memory and Individual Imagination - From the Art of Anselm Kiefer [D]. Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts,2014.

memory in Anselm Kiefer's works, this paper analyses the holistic impact of symbolic embedding, spatial application and translation mechanism on the visual communication of collective memory in Anselm Kiefer's works through interpreting the multiple dimensions and artistic connotations of the expression of collective memory in his works, thus providing a methodological perspective for understanding the path of construction and expression of Anselm Kiefer's collective memory, i.e. the spatial translation of symbols.

2 Symbolic expression and spatial turn in contemporary art

The significance and system construction of semiotics for the writing of art history and the application of art practice is an important theoretical turn in contemporary art, the essence of which is a critique of art positivism. In 'A Discourse on the Positive Spirit', Comte established a positivist philosophy based on the observation and induction of empirical facts, advocating respect for factual experience and the study of social phenomena by the methods of natural science³. Dana, Veron and others introduced the spirit of positivism into artistic investigation and creation, arguing that art is a reflection of social life and comes from the artist's perception and understanding of the real world. Art positivism tries to construct a scientific evaluation system of art through the natural science method⁴, and unifies art in the logic of reality. However, art positivism emphasizes too much on art's observation and reflection of the objective world, ignoring the artist's inner emotional experience, and the accurate reproduction of reality inhibits the imagination and creativity of art, and the artistic vision of sticking to appearances also limits the depth and level of artistic expression. Since the 1960's, the development of critical theories of contemporary art, such as surrealism and deconstructionism, began to pay attention to the plurality and complexity of artistic expression, and the development of theories on the development of contemporary art. Since the 1960s, the development of critical theories of contemporary art, such as surrealism and deconstructionism, have begun to focus on the plurality and complexity of artistic expression, and have questioned the objectivity and authenticity of artistic positivism. Contemporary art's emphasis on the fusion of multiple perspectives, subjective emotional expression, and the infusion of ideological concepts has also led to a systematic critique of the formal aesthetics of artistic positivism in the art world. Against this backdrop, contemporary artists have begun to explore the role of symbols in supporting artists' inner emotions, broadening the boundaries of art forms, and metaphorically reflecting on social history. Symbols have been widely used in a variety of contemporary art forms, including painting, design, sculpture and installation art, performance art, and acting.

The spatial turn of contemporary art resonates with the renewed attention to space in the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s⁵, and the aesthetic tendency of contemporary art towards living and the exploration of social issues breaks down the barrier of interaction between the viewer and the art, and establishes an interactive relationship between the society and the creation of art. This makes contemporary art pay more attention to the interaction between artworks and exhibition space, bringing the viewers closer to the process of art production and emphasizing the influence of specific environment, social interaction and open system on the overall shaping of art. In addition, based on the needs of self-emotional projection and conceptual

3 Auguste Comte, Huang Jianhua. On the Spirit of Empirical Evidence [M]. The Commercial Press, 1996.

4 Li Hongju, Lv Xiuzhi. Paradigm of empirical research in art disciplines[J]. Art Garden, 2014, (04):8-10.

5 Zhao Zhihong. The spatial turn and field construction of art - from the urban public art landscape[J]. Art Hundred, 2019, 35(05):30-37.

construction, contemporary artists regard space as an important medium and means of creative, emotional and conceptual expression, which makes the spatial concept of contemporary art closely related to human senses, feelings and psychological state⁶. The spatial turn of contemporary art realizes the transcendence of the classical and modernist spatial paradigm and establishes a spatial aesthetics characterized by social interaction, environmental shaping and experience. Symbolic expression and the spatial turn have had a significant impact on the expression and content of contemporary art, of which Anselm Kiefer's is a typical representative.

3 Anselm Kiefer: multiple directions in the construction of collective memory

Anselm Kiefer was born in March 1945 to a traditional army officer in the small town of Donaueschingen, Germany, which was already in ruins after the war. Kiefer was born in the cellar of a hospital to the roar of the Allied troops marching into Berlin. During the post-war reconstruction period of Germany, the devastation of the country, the attack of famine and pestilence, the gravel, the wilderness and the corpses all together formed the ruins of the country, and at the same time destroyed the spiritual beliefs of the Germans, which became a traumatizing memory for that generation of Germans that could not be extinguished. This material and spiritual double ruin also deeply influenced Anselm Kiefer's characterization and later art style⁷. In Kiefer's contemporary art works, war, culture and historical reflection are constant artistic themes, and Kiefer often reflects on German history, traces cultural traditions and explores the fate of mankind through the construction and expression of collective memories in his artistic practice, gradually forming the multiple directions of collective memories.

3.1 Reflections on history: memory of 'ruins' and Post-War trauma repair

The expression of collective memory on war and historical reflection is the core dimension of Anselm Kiefer's art. As a witness of the German war and post-war reconstruction, the "ruin culture" shaped by the material scarcity and spiritual collapse of the post-war German society profoundly influenced Kiefer's philosophical thinking about the war, so that Kiefer often conveyed his own thoughts on the nature of war and profound reflection on German history through the construction and focusing on the ruins as well as the portrayal of collective memory about the war and the Nazis in his artistic creation. Kiefer's art often conveys his thoughts on the nature of war and his deep reflection on German history through the construction and focusing of ruins and the depiction of collective memory of war and Nazism. In the face of the national trauma brought by the war, the post-war German society consciously went through a period of "collective amnesia"⁸, deliberately downplaying the memory of World War II and erasing the traces of Nazi images, symbols, signs and words in the historical writing in order to escape from the pain of history and obtain a temporary mental paralysis. Anselm Kiefer, on the other hand, has keenly captured German society's structural escape from the history of World War II, believing that it is only by looking directly at history and collective wounds that we can reshape our national faith and spiritual strength. In his works, he often constructs and expresses the "memory of ruins" of Germany before and after World War II through the use of coarse materials and heavy oils, pictures of ruins, symbols of the body and other forms of symbols, as well as the spatial coordination of color and light, etc., in order to stimulate and

6 Mengyang Xu. Spatial Theory of Art History and its Contemporary Turn[J]. Art Education,2024,(09):89-92.

7 Zhou Jingjing. Research on Anselm Kiefer's "Ruins" Artistic Creation [D]. Central China Normal University,2015.

8 Wu Qiong. Post-war West Germany's Reflection on Nazi History Research [D]. Central China Normal University,2014.

expose the national scars, and to seek to heal the wounds of the nation and reshape its spirit after the war. In his most controversial work *Occupation*, Kiefer recorded the moment he performed the Nazi salute all over Europe in the image of a Nazi officer, using the most straightforward body symbols to reveal the collective national pain, and utilizing electrolysis technology to form the peeling patches on the surface of the work to symbolize Germany's stripping away of the memory of the war and shielding it, which further provokes the viewers to interrogate the nature of the war, morality, and memory.

3.2 Cultural traceability: cultural memory and glorious tradition summoning

Rooted in the context of Germanic local culture, Kiefer, as a Catholic of Germanic origin, has a natural interest in mythology, religion and national cultural traditions. In Kiefer's works, the embedded cultural elements such as Norse mythology, religious images, historical heritage, literary epics and other cultural elements form a complex and multifaceted cultural landscape, and Kiefer hoped to utilize the symbols and allegories of these cultural symbols to deeply excavate the ideological heritage of the Germanic people and trace the cultural memory of the nation. 1982, Kiefer created a large-scale painting, *Wayland's Song*[with Wing], which is based on the final chapter of the medieval Icelandic epic poem, *The Edda*, 'Ragnarök'. In Norse mythology, Wayland, the god of blacksmiths, was imprisoned and persecuted by the King of Sweden and became so angry that he murdered the king's children, offered their bones to the king in a cup of wine, and made a pair of wings for himself to escape. Through the symbolic remodeling of the image of Wayland as an avenger, Kiefer metaphorically represents the German people's resentment towards the war, and at the same time sends out his own dual thoughts on human nature and nationalism. In terms of visual presentation, Kiefer uses straw, lead and other materials to construct a grand scorched-earth-like landscape, symbolizing the devastation of Germany's post-war country, and in the center of the picture float wings with ribbons, representing Wayland's vengeance and freedom, as well as alluding to the healing of the nation's wounds by the revival of the Germanic spirit and populist ideals. Kiefer ingeniously links the cruelty of Nordic mythology with the cruelty of German reality in a romanticized way, which is both a tracing of the source of national cultural memory and an implicit invocation of the Germanic national spirit and the glorious German tradition.

3.3 Human insight: memory of life and the exploration of human existence

The construction of collective memory in Anselm Kiefer's artistic practice is not confined to social horizons such as national culture and the memory of war. Kiefer often stands in the macro perspective of mankind, nature and the world, and through the artistic exploration of the memory of life, he perceives the connection between man and nature, explores the significance of life, the value of time, and the role of mankind in the world, and ponders on the philosophical connotation of the existence of mankind and the direction of its destiny. On the one hand, Kiefer hopes to establish the intrinsic connection between human and nature through the fusion of environmental elements and the memory of life, and calls for people to pay attention to environmental protection and ecological issues. For example, the work *"Iron Road"* symbolizes the erosion and destruction of the environment caused by the industrialization process with the memory of the industrial era in which the abandoned railroad tracks in the wilderness are driving towards the horizon and the natural scene of withered grass and trees around. On the other hand, through the dynamic capture of life memories, Kiefer transcends the cognitive limitations of ethnicity and identity construction, and gains insight into the temporal logic of human existence, so as to contemplate the essence of life and the common direction of human destiny. In *Sternenfall*, Kiefer uses cold blue lines to outline

the boundaries of heaven and earth, and the darkness of the night that occupies three-quarters of the canvas is filled with falling stars, while on the ground, lying in a semi-rigid state, is Kiefer, who is in his fifties. The junction between the sky and the horizon in the work symbolizes the boundary between life and death, while welcoming the falling stars is a metaphor for Kiefer's attitude towards death and unknown destiny. Through the interception of his own life memories, Kiefer accomplishes the examination of the essence of life, i.e., death, and at the same time expresses his concern for the future destiny of mankind through the rich symbolic language and spatial expression.

By summarizing the multiple directions of collective memory construction in Kiefer's artistic practice, we can easily find that symbolic expression and spatial application play a pivotal role in the construction of the form and extension of the connotation of Kiefer's works. In the following, I will specifically analyze how symbols and space act on Kiefer's artistic expression through a reasonable translation mechanism, becoming an important path for the construction of collective memory in Kiefer's contemporary art.

4 Symbols: the embedding of elements of collective memory

Symbol is the basic unit of collective memory construction in Anselm Kiefer's contemporary art practice. The embedding of multiple symbolic elements enriches the form and connotation of collective memory expression, and the symbolic elements scattered in Kiefer's works act as an index to import the collective memory carried, and the identification of symbols is the first step to understand Kiefer's collective memory expression. Kiefer's embedding of symbolic elements is usually divided into the direct embedding of concrete and abstract symbols, such as objects, images and landscapes, and the indirect embedding of symbols by means of materials, colours and composition. Specifically, Kiefer often embeds figurative symbols such as books and towers in his works to construct national and historical memories and express his thoughts on history and humanity. In his installation masterpiece 'Seven Heavenly Palaces', seven tower moulds made of reinforced concrete are arranged in an irregular spatial order, creating a heavy and solemn spatial atmosphere and unique spatial aesthetics. The concept of seven towers originates from the ancient Hebrew religious bible 'Sefer Hekhalot', and Kiefer uses the symbolic construction of the seven towers to symbolise the collective memory in multiple dimensions of time, including the retrospection of the ancient Hebrew religious memory, the mapping of the memory of the ruins of the Western civilisation of the World War II, and the association of the memory of the future. Secondly, the application of colours, choice of materials and compositional design in Kiefer's artistic practice is itself a symbolic language with metaphorical meanings and cultural representations, which indirectly enhances the symbolism of signs. For example, in 'Quelle des Donau', Kiefer symbolises the connection between land, nature and life through the use of natural materials such as straw and grey earth, echoing the memory of the Danube Fountain landscape in the painting, and together they explore the deeper meaning of the source of life, the flow of history and German culture.

5 Space: visual activation of collective memory

The shaping and construction of space is an important feature of Kiefer's contemporary art practice, and at the same time, it is also the carrier of the visual presentation of collective memory. With a special spatial construction, Kiefer organically links the embedded collective memory symbols together, forming an ingenious layout structure in the picture, thus transforming the static symbolic symbols into a dynamic visual language and activating the symbolic meaning of collective

memory. Generally speaking, the space construction in Kiefer's works includes both open and closed types. The open space includes the upper and lower spatial structure divided by the horizontal composition or the spatial visual extension of the object using the principle of focal perspective. In The 'Die Wildnis von Brandenburg', a greyish-white path in the centre of the picture extends above the horizon, surrounded by a dry wilderness scene. Kiefer uses the spatial technique of focal perspective to organically connect the symbols of the wilderness, the dry grass and the path to form a meaningful whole. Extending from the wilderness to the horizon, symbolising a memory narrative that runs from the past, present to the future, Kiefer organises the multiple memory patterns behind the symbols through spatial transformation and temporal logic, giving the viewer endless associations with the expression of collective memory in his works. In addition, Kiefer often creates a deep spatial effect through the design of closed space, which enhances the visual impact of the picture and deepens the emotional level of collective memory. For example, in 'Nortonk', a sword stands on the floor of the closed attic, and the depressing closed space deepens the emotional bearing of the symbols, making the author's metaphor and presentation of German wartime memories carry heavy emotional power.

6 Translation: an expressive mechanism of collective memory

Symbolic embedding and spatial construction are the basis of Anselm Kiefer's collective memory construction and expression. However, from the viewer's perspective, how to enable ordinary viewers to recognise the symbolic elements of collective memory embedded in the works, and to understand the role of space in activating the symbolic symbols of collective memory, there is still a need to build a reasonable translation channel to establish an emotional link between the viewer and the expression of collective memory, and even to promote the viewer to become a part of the expression of collective memory. Social interaction and openness are the distinctive features of the spatial turn of contemporary art, and Kiefer is particularly concerned about the beneficial effects of environmental shaping and public participation on the integrity of artistic creation. Therefore, Kiefer often promotes the symbolic recognition and spatial translation of collective memory through the design and shaping of the surrounding environment of artworks and the construction of open art co-creation systems, and at the same time pulls the audience into the field of collective memory construction and expression. In the exhibition 'Pour Paul Celan', Kiefer creates an immersive experience space for the viewers through open layout, solemn lighting atmosphere, and integration of poetic elements, and at the same time pays attention to the interaction between the works and the environment, placing the works in a specific ground, and contrasting and echoing with the materials and colours of the ground. This holistic shaping of the environment enhances the audience's visual experience and emotional interaction with the works, and the exhibition space itself symbolises a grand historical and cultural context, providing a translation path for the audience to interpret the symbolic and spatial meaning of Kiefer's collective memory expression.

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