

Damnatio Memoriae

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Abstract

There were dining-rooms with fretted ceils of ivory, whose panels could turn and shower down flowers and were fitted with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes. The main banquet hall was circular and constantly revolved day and night, like the heavensⁱ

After his suicide, the Emperor Nero's successors buried the dining room of his Golden House under a public bath, and it was not discovered until the sixteenth century, when Raphael named its delicate décor grotesque, because he had encountered it in a grotto.

The Romans called the burial of the golden house *damnatio memoriae*, an act designed to erase any evidence that Nero had ever existed. A cruel and unusual fate, it is shared by all interiors, for if they are always becoming, they must, conversely, also be in permanent entropy.

But the *damnatio memoriae* didn't work, for while it was buried, writers from Suetonius to Martial fabricated the lost room in text. The grotesques Raphael found were perfectly preserved because, as Vasari wrote, 'they had not been open or exposed to the air, which is wont in time, through the changes of the seasons, to consume all things'ⁱⁱ

While the dining room of the Golden House might have been buried, it survived in the memory. Any interior history must likewise deal with memories of things which have disappeared; but these are rarely reliable, and certainly impossible to verify.

Suetonius's vivid account of the room was written decades after it had been buried. The grotesques that Raphael saw crumbled once they were exposed to the air. Archaeologists now debate whether the dining room was on the site that he unearthed, and others doubt whether it existed at all.

Damnatio Memoriae is an act of forgetting – so deliberate that it is, despite itself, a commemoration. This paper is a case study not of Nero's dining room *per se*, but of the fate of its memory. It is written as an experimental story that will challenge traditional interior histories, written as tales of knowable artefacts, positing instead a narrative structure as protean and elusive as interiors themselves.

Suetonius (tr. Graves, Robert) *The Twelve Caesars* Penguin Classics 1957 p230

ⁱ Vasari (tr. Gaston C. DeVere) *Lives of the Artists* 1912/1915

<http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariUdine.html> accessed 10.10.11ⁱ

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0.0 Introduction

In her paper “Towards an Interior History” Susie Attiwill has written: ‘Interior design histories have also ignored temporality in the design of interiors through a focus on objects and built space as static formⁱ; and the concept of the interior as a state of becoming is designed to redress this traditional bias. This paper accepts the premise that interiors exist in perpetual flux. It is written as a group of short stories about four interiors that, at certain points in their history, have changed.

But this paper challenges the notion that change is always a process of becoming, for each of these stories is about how an interior is not created, or developed, but deliberately destroyed. In ‘The Memory Palace and House of Life’ the author explored the interior as a memory device. This paper will, in contrast, examine how the interior – or its destruction – is used to forget.

1.0 Nero’s Golden House

On the 14th January 1506, a marble monster appeared in a vineyard in Rome. It was huge: muscular, nude, and so tightly coiled in the embrace of a serpent that it was almost impossible to tell where the man stopped and the snake began.

The Laocöon was taken away; but even after it was gone, people still turned up to root around, for they were convinced that if the vines had turned up one monster, they must hide others. The painters Raphael and Giovanni da Udine came to find the remains of the palace of Titus, in which Pliny had written, the Laocöon had been kept in ancient times.

They descended into the caves under the vineyard, and hanging from ropes, clutching torches, they found paintings of beasts and men intertwined, of impossible architectures, furniture that grew leaves, and fish that belched feathers, and goats with the faces of sphinxes. *Grotteschi*, they called them, because they were painted onto the walls of grottoes.

Wonderful and wonderfully preserved these interiors might have been; but they didn’t belong to any Palace of Titus. Rather, they were buried under one that had been built in the early second century AD by the Flavian emperors as part of a massive programme that included the Colosseum, and two public bath houses.

These rooms had been used as cellars underneath the palace - as servants quarters, hypocausts, and storerooms, but they clearly hadn’t been designed for these lowly functions, and the patterning of their brick and concrete revealed them to belong to some other structure that predated the palace of Titus.

The identity of that structure revealed in an epigram written by Martial to celebrate the Flavian buildings:

*Here where the heavenly colossus has a close view of the stars
And high structures rise on the lofty road
There once shone the hated hall of the cruel king*

*And one house took up the whole of Rome
Here where rises the huge mass of the awesome amphitheatre
In sight of all was Nero's pool.
Here where we admire the baths built so quickly for our benefit
A proud park deprived the poor of their houses.
Where the Claudian temple spreads its wide shade
Stood the last part of the palace
Rome is returned to herself under your rule, Caesar
The delights of their master have become those of the peopleⁱⁱ*

The Emperor Nero was the 'cruel king', his was the 'one house' that 'took up all of Rome'. His was the colossus that was removed to make way for the Colosseum, and the park that deprived the poor of their houses. His 'hated hall' was clearly a crime that the construction of the baths and the other public buildings were designed to correct, ensuring that 'Rome is returned to herself' and 'the delights of their master have become those of the people.'

Martial was not alone in damning the memory of both Nero and his palace, and other historical accounts corroborate the main lines of his accusations.

The very origins of that building lay in a supposed crime. In *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius writes that it had been built after a terrible fire, if not caused, then abetted, by the Emperor himself.

...under cover of displeasure at the ugliness of the old buildings and the narrow, crooked streets, he set fire to the city....Viewing the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas and exulting, as he said, in "the beauty of the flames," he sang the whole of the "Sack of Ilium," in his regular stage costume. ⁱⁱⁱ

Nero certainly took advantage of the destruction, and appropriated the land cleared by the fire, upon which he built himself a home so marvellous that it was called *Domus Aurea* : the 'golden house'. There was a park, lake, a colossus, a palace lined with porphyry, whose rooms were decorated by Amulius, the greatest painter of his time. 'The Golden Palace of Nero was the prison-house of this artist's productions,' wrote Pliny, 'and hence it is that there are so few of them to be seen elsewhere.'^{iv} There was a dining room lined 'with fretted ceils of ivory, whose panels could turn and shower down flowers and were fitted with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes. The main banquet hall was circular and constantly revolved day and night, like the heavens.'^v

But Tacitus levelled a much more serious charge against the Golden House than extravagance:

Its wonders were not so much customary and commonplace luxuries like gold and jewels but lawns and lakes and faked rusticity – woods here, open spaces and views there. With their cunning, impudent artificialities, Severus and Celer [the architects] did not balk at effects that nature herself had ruled out as impossible ^{vi}

For the emperor had turned the city into the countryside. He dined in a dining room that revolved like the heavens. He turned himself, a man, into a colossus. It is ironic that when he moved into the Golden House, Nero is reputed to have said: 'Now I can live like a man.'^{vii} In fact, the house was designed to liberate him from the shackles of humanity.

It did, but not, perhaps, as it should have done, and it became the site of his vilest perversions. Amid the splendour of his gilded halls, or perhaps in some artfully rusticated spot in the gardens Nero

devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust, were dispatched^{viii}

He killed himself within four years of moving in – if he hadn't, his subjects would have done it for him.

Nero's successors decided that the best thing to do with the monstrous Golden House was to forget it, and they built their grand buildings to bury the 'hated hall of the cruel king' who had passed away, and to damn his memory.

2.0 *Damnatio Memoriae*

Damnatio Memoriae, as it was called, was a punishment with ancient origins, and they always involved burial. In a ritual instituted by the second King of Rome, Numa, in mythical times, any Vestal Virgin who broke her vows of chastity would suffer *Damnatio Memoriae*. A room would be excavated for her within the stone mass of the city walls. It would set with a bed, and provided with food and air like a little home. When it was ready, the Vestal Virgin would be led there, and walled into the wall to die. Her name would be erased from the *fasti*, the archives of the house of the Vestals.

Damnatio Memoriae was a punishment with great force in a culture obsessed with memory. The houses of the ancient Romans were not just the dwelling places of the living, but also shrines for ancestor worship. Vitruvius, for example, devotes a whole passage of *De Architectura* to the hanging of ancestral death masks on the atrium wall. The burial of a house involved therefore the destruction not just of the memory of an individual, but his whole family.

Damnatio Memoriae was therefore selectively and skilfully used. In 509 BC one of the first consuls of republican Rome, Publius Valerius Poplicola was forced to demolish his own home on the Palatine Hill, because the people suspected him of wanting to re-establish the monarchy. In 58 BC, when the aristocratic oligarch Cicero was proscribed, his house was pulled down and a temple of Liberty built in its place. In 49 BC a house on the Palatine that had been confiscated from the renegade senator Hortensius was buried under a new one built for Augustus, the Emperor who had condemned him.

The burial of the Golden House of Nero was classic *Damnatio Memoriae*; and we may be sure that the accounts of that house written by Martial, Suetonius, or Tacitus after the act (and by imperial approval) were also part of the same punishment: the misdeeds and personality flaws of the fallen emperor were expressed in the indecorous extravagance and unnaturalness of his palace. It worked. The name of Nero is, if not forgotten, still synonymous with Roman decadence.

Damnatio Memoriae is still practiced today, although it may not always involve burial. The looting of the palaces of Colonel Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein are a form of the practice, as is, in a different mode, the desire of every first lady to redecorate the White House upon her husband's election to the American presidency.

In origin, focussed as it is around the act of burial and rebuilding, *damnatio memoriae* is architectural; but this paper will proceed to examine three acts of *damnatio memoriae* that relate specifically to interiors: one concerning furniture, the next a collection, and the third, a decorative scheme. These cases will be used to explore how the punishment is made to fit the crime; and how interiors unfold not just in becoming and creation; but in their deliberate destruction.

3.0 The trial of Charles I

When Charles I was put on trial for his life in Westminster Hall in 1649, he famously demanded: 'I would know by what power I am brought hither'^{ix} for the trial was a constitutional perversion: the king had been put on trial by a courts of justice that was, by tradition, constituted to act on his behalf. The world had, in the words of Christopher Hill's classic work on the English Revolution^x, been turned upside down.

The King did not need to be told this, for it was evident in the way in which the furniture had been arranged.

In happier times, the King usually sat at the King's Bench, at the south end of the Hall. It had been the place where his medieval forbears had once sat to feast in front of their knights and thegns, and to dispense justice in the sight of their people. By 1178 an edict was passed licensing judges appointed by the king to dispense this justice on his behalf while he was away

While the King had been present, the bench had been made of oak, but once he had left, it was remade in marble – a chair of this material is recorded in 1215, and the bench itself in 1245. Over time, the court that sat at the Kings Bench appropriated the name, and in 1649 both of them, the kings bench and the Kings Bench were still there.

But at his trial, the King was not led to his usual seat. Rather, he was led to one facing it, in the position of the accused. The Kings Bench had been buried under a wooden dais, upon which sat three rows of wooden benches, filled with the commoners who had been drafted in to sit in judgment upon him. No single one of them dared condemn the king; and so they answered Charles' question as to their authority with their number:

the Commons of England, assembled in Parliament,...according to that fundamental power that is vested, and trust reposed in them by the People (other means failing through your default) have resolved to bring you to trial and judgement, and have therefore constituted this high court of justice before which you are now brought.^{xi}

Just as the trial was a constitutional perversion, so the furnishing of Westminster Hall was deliberately inverted for its duration. After King Charles had been condemned to die, the dais was removed, the King's Bench smashed, and its broken pieces buried under the floor of the Hall.

The architecture of medieval palaces like Westminster was generic; and it usually fell to the furniture temporarily arranged within them to articulate the intricacies of household politics. It is significant that medieval depictions of palaces, of parliaments, courts, and banquets never include architecture: the interiors in which they take place are defined by furniture alone. The *damnatio memoriae* of Charles I, then, was effected less by the burial of his bench than by the movement of his seat in relation to it. He was damned by an arrangement of furniture.

4.0 The *Wunderkammer* of Rudolf II

'What he knows, he feels obliged to have'^{xii} wrote Maria, Archduchess of Styria, of her uncle the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II; and the curiosities he collected in his cabinet in Prague castle stretched the boundaries of Renaissance knowledge. They included paintings by Veronese and Durer, antique cameos, Japanese armour, two dodos, the largest collection of scientific instruments in existence, the horn of a unicorn, and the Holy Grail. Rudolf was a firm believer in alchemy, and somewhere in

his collection, he hoped, he would find the philosopher's stone that could turn base metals into gold, and turn time on its axis.

But by 1607, Rudolf, his brother Matthias claimed, had taken his interest in magic too far, and was dealing with the devil. Matthias marched to Prague and demanded he abdicate his political power. He imprisoned his brother in his *Wunderkammer* with his grail and his horn (which the Emperor would not relinquish) until, in 1611, Rudolf's pet lion died. The humiliated Emperor took to his cabinet, refused medicine and food, and died in three days.

Matthias inherited the largest collection of curiosities in existence; but he and his successors did little to preserve its integrity. Rather, they divided it up: giving some objects away as gifts, carrying others off to the Hofburg in Vienna, and selling others. As they did so, inventory after inventory was made of the dwindling collection, the last one being an auction catalogue prepared on behalf of the enlightened Emperor Joseph II in 1782. Bidding was slow, and the things they could not sell, including the dodos, were thrown into the castle moat. All we are left with are the catalogues, and they do not enumerate anywhere, any philosopher's stone.

Rather, they, or the collectivity they represented, *was* the philosopher's stone, the source of the wonder of the *Wunderkammer*. 'Magic,' wrote the Renaissance magus Pico della Mirandola, 'does not create miracles, but, as a kind of adoring servant, it calls up the living forces of nature. It studies the connection in the universe which the Greeks call sympathy...the magician marries heaven and earth' ^{xiii}

And that of course, is just what the Emperor's cabinet achieved, for it was a space in which astrolabes and art, stuffed animals and antiquities, grails and horns were forced into strange sympathies and correspondences, achieved. No wonder Matthias and his successors were so keen to disperse the collection. As a collection it represented occult and impious power. Dispersed, it was a heap of objects. The *damnatio memoriae* of Rudolf II involved releasing his curiosities from their cabinet, and depriving them of the alchemical sympathy that had made them magical.

5.0 The Last Boudoir of Marie Antoinette

During her trial, the boudoir of Marie Antoinette exercised a horrible fascination over the people of France. It was the scene, the evidence presented at her trial argued, of her most egregious perversions: in its mirrors, they claimed, she watched herself do it with men, servants, women, and her own children.

*In a fine alcove artfully gilded,
Not too dark and not too light,
On a soft sofa, covered in velvet,
The August Beauty bestows her charms
[and] the Prince presents the Goddess his cock...* ^{xiv}

And just as the room itself was used to condemn its occupant to death, so it, too, was punished.

Firstly, its privacy was violated: the locks that kept it hidden from the public gaze were broken and removed, and the Petit Trianon, the house that contained it was thrown open to visitors.

Secondly its treasures were severed from the person for whom they had been made. Riesener, Marie Antoinette's favourite *ebeniste*, was sent to Versailles to remove the royal *fleur de lys* from all the pieces he had made for her: only he was skilful enough to remove the delicate veneers without

damage. Then these pieces, made to exclusive commission, were sold on the open market. Tax breaks were offered to foreign buyers to ensure they went abroad.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the mirrors in which the wicked queen had gazed upon her own reflection, the protagonist and the audience in her own filthy performance, were smashed.

Its ability to reflect its occupant broken, its contents divorced from the person for whom it had been made, its privacy violated, the last boudoir of Marie Antoinette became a room, just like any other. The *damnatio memoriae* designed for it was the opposite of that meted out to Nero's Golden House. While that palace suffered burial, the boudoir suffered the reverse: its enclosure violated, it was thrown open, and ceased, in that moment, to be an interior.

6.0 *Damnatio Memoriae* and the interior

The *damnatio memoriae* of buildings is simple: they are objects, and they can, must, be buried. The *damnatio memoriae* of interiors is less simple, for they are composites: the meeting places of many things; and the acts of *damnatio memoriae* described above involve the disruption of these meetings.

The trial of Charles I involved the rearrangement of the rules of the meeting by changes in spatial arrangement. The deposition of Rudolf II involved the dispersal of the meeting altogether. The *damnatio memoriae* of Marie Antoinette involved the dissolution of the personal connection between the interior and the occupant for which it had been made.

In each case, the punishment, having been made to fit the crime, reveals shared assumptions about what an interior is, and how it relates to the people who inhabit it. For both Charles I and the commissioners who placed him on trial there, Westminster Hall was the spatial manifestation of the state: a great arena in which everyone knew, or was meant to know, their place. For Rudolf II and his brother, the *Wunderkammer* was an occult collection, animated by the mind of its collector. Marie Antoinette said of her boudoir: 'When I am here, I'm not the queen. I'm a woman'^{xv} and the revolutionaries agreed with her, the room was the reflection of the flawed soul of the queen herself.

In all cases, an interior is imagined as a set of relationships: between people, décor, objects, furniture and architecture; and as such it is always contingent. Marie Antoinette regularly redecorated her boudoirs, Rudolf II was always adding to his collection, or giving treasures away, and the point of the furniture in Westminster Hall was that, unlike the architecture, it could be moved to cater for different occasions. Interiors are, at root, temporary arrangements.

7.0 *Damnatio Memoriae* and memory

It is ironic, then, that these acts of deliberate forgetting ensured that the interiors explored here are remembered with far greater vividness than all the other halls, and cabinets and boudoirs, that like most of the rooms we live in, are lost through attrition and default.

The sale of Marie Antoinette's furniture, and the opening of her boudoir to the public gaze turned her, and her hidden interiors into one of most compelling tourist attractions in French history. The Empress Eugenie turned the Trianon into a museum made in her memory. At the Wallace collection in London, the fine pieces of furniture that once populated the room are accompanied by an even rarer treasure: a copy of the bill poster advertising their sale.

The dispersal of the treasures of Rudolf II's *Wunderkammer* was always accompanied by an inventory, and we only know about the contents of the collection in the detail we do because of the inventories and catalogues that were drawn up for its sale, theft, or destruction.

The shocking effect of the seating plan at the trial of Charles I could only be felt by those who already understood the codes that it inverted. After it was finished, and the table was broken it was buried, rather than thrown into the river, or disposed of altogether.

And the burial of Nero's Domus Aurea was, despite itself, an act of preservation. The colours of these *Grotteschi* that Raphael and Giovanni da Udine found in Nero's golden house were still just as bright in 1560 as they were when Amulius had painted them, for, as Vasari later wrote, they 'had not been open or exposed to the air, which is wont in time, through the changes of the seasons, to consume all things'^{xvi}. The Emperors who buried the 'hall of the hated king' under their public works guaranteed its survival.

8.0 Conclusion

All interiors are in a state of perpetual motion. The changes in the palatial interiors described here are driven by political shocks and jolts. The changes they undergo are deliberate, public, and very well documented. But the same process is happening all the time to every interior. Rooms are redecorated, the furniture moved around, and the junk cleared away. Such processes remind us that the interior is not just becoming. It is also in a perpetual state of entropy. Change is always an act of violence, of revolution, of violation upon what exists.

But forgetting and memory are integral to one another. Interiors, even as they disappear, are more tenacious than they might at first appear. Even the machines of their destruction are traces that describe the thing they were created to destroy.

Raphael and da Udine called the paintings they saw grotesques because they found them in rooms that had been turned into caves; but, even at the distance of a millennium and a half, they knew why they had been buried: they were grotesque in the manner in which we understand the word today. The creatures that dance over the walls of the Domus Aurea, miscegenation of man and goat, vase and bird, woman and plant, are unnatural metamorphoses. Like the Laocoon that once lurked in the darkness among them, like the Emperor at whose command they were made, like his Golden House, they are monsters, abominations, and crimes against nature, deserving of nothing less than the curse of *damnatio memoriae*.

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ⁱⁱ Griffin 1984 p138

ⁱⁱⁱ Suetonius 2007 *Nero* p38

^{iv} Pliny Chap xxxvii, p.6272

^v Suetonius 2007 *Nero* p31

^{vi} Grant 1970 p.170

^{vii} Suetonius 2007 *Nero* p31

^{viii} Tacitus 16.18

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^{ix} Muddiman 1928 p.81

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^{xi} Muddiman 1928 p.77

^{xii} Marshall 2006 p.74

^{xiii} Marshall 2006 p.98

^{xiv} *The Love Life of Charlie and Toinette, 1779*, quoted in Thomas 2001 p186

^{xv} Beaussant 1996 212

^{xvi} Vasari *Life of Giovanni da Udine*