

Memory and Symbolism: Two Diverging Heritage Sites in Post-Dictatorship Brazil

In 1964, the military successfully controlled Brazilian power through a coup backed by the US Government in its fight against communism, ensuring over 20 years of questionable disappearances, surveillances and censorship. It remains today a period of emotional of political fear in the nation's collective memory. The legacy of that period is still present in contemporary debates and contested by many. Due to that contestation, it becomes an important question about memory and heritage. This essay examines two opposing forms of remembrance in the Brazilian Museum sector: political memory, which is institutional and therefore heavily regulated and monitored, and cultural memory, whose led by art, symbols and stories. Laurajane Smith (2006) discusses that heritage is not solely an act of preservation of historical goods, but a cultural practice that shapes identities and the enforcement of power. Other scholars such as Viejo-Rose and Seligmann-Silva argues that memory is a transmission of careful modes of emotions and mediated representation and not only factual testimony. Indeed, Lowenthal confirms the idea that heritage is everything history cannot be, with stories, testimonies and memoirs, fabricated but nonetheless essential to the study of heritage. Not everything is truth, but it can still have value to the discourse. With the analysis of two sites, the Memorial da Resistência in São Paulo and the fictional Paiva house in Rio de Janeiro, recently purchased by the prefecture to be home to the House of Brazilian Cinema (Carneiro, 2023), this essay will discuss that the culture of Brazilian memory has some underlining tensions between the historization of national trauma and the reframing of such trauma into a cultural narrative. I will draw on scholarship on trauma memory, post-memory reconstruction and heritage politics, I will explore how the two different sites use the legacy of the military regime amidst the silence, the symbols and the national identity of post-dictatorship Brazil. It is important to mention that while there are many accounts of memory and heritage, it lacks a more diverse Brazilian scholarship. The politics of silence and memory in the Brazilian context has a lot to do with the lack of memory research concerning the authoritarian regime.

The Memorial da Resistência, established in 2009, is in the former DOPS headquarters — a site of political repression during Brazil's military dictatorship. Restored prison cells, along with records and accounts, help people remember what happened in the place where it happened. As Smith (2006) reminds us, heritage is not only about preserving the past but shaping its meaning in the present. As Tavares Furtado (2020) discusses, this way of thinking about violence can make it less political by keeping it in the past. But in a country who is silent, the memorial remains important: it has created a space for stories and emotional connection. In opposition, the Paiva house is purely symbolic. Indeed, it is a narration, and shapes trauma through personal story. Not institutional, but still deeply attached to the dictatorship's legacy. The Paiva house has become symbolically tied to dictatorship memory through Marcelo Rubens Paiva's memoir of his father's disappearance and the resilience of her mother through their forever altered life. The fictionalised home holds emotional truth, a space shaped by narrative more than official historical facts. Its transformation into the

House of Brazilian Cinema is a way to change the perspective away from political memory toward cultural memory. To understand both these case studies, we must examine the context in which they live in.

In 1979, the Amnesty Law (*Lei da Anistia*) was passed, offering immunity not only to political prisoners and exiles but also to military and government officials responsible for crimes during the dictatorship (Brazil, 1979). While this seemed to be a wished return to democracy and the pardoning of all persecuted by the regime, the law institutionalized impunity and prevented prosecutions of perpetrators (Alves, 2014; Pereira, 2010). Brazilian process of justice was unlike in Argentina, which started prosecuting military officials as early as 1980 (Schneider, 2011, p.39). The National Truth Commission (*Comissão Nacional da Verdade*, 2012–2014) wished to document and expose the crimes of the regime. Many military files remain classified, and the full truth of Brazil's dictatorship-era violence continues to be hidden by political negation (Dias et al., 2014). While “difficult heritage” is often associated with countries like Germany, where public acknowledgment of past crimes is important to national identity (Macdonald, 2015), Brazil is an opposing case. The Amnesty Law and the limited impact of the Truth Commission have fostered a culture of political silence, where the past remains largely unspoken about. This fits with Smith's (2006) idea of Authorized Heritage Discourse, which emphasizes government stories and leaves out difficult ones. The transformation of the fictional Paiva house into a cultural museum rather than political reflects this shift from state violence to cultural celebration, and it is possible that it wants to avoid direct engagement with trauma, who is symbolic, and powerful. This speculation is not entirely unfounded. Viejo-Rose (2011, 2015) helps us understand this as a form of heritage manipulation, where memory is formed to serve the building of identity rather than critical analysis. The Paiva house, as mentioned above, is notable for the family's father figure, Rubens Paiva, a socialist politician who was taken from his home and never returned. His disappearance became a symbol throughout the dictatorship. His story has recently been adapted for the cinema with *I'm Still Here* by Walter Salles. The film is based on the memoir written by his son Marcelo Rubens Paiva, with its eponymous title (Paiva, 2015). The memoir traces the story of his mother and her resilience after the disappearance of her husband, herself being captive and questioned by the regime and raising her five children not knowing whether her husband was dead or alive. Paiva had originally touched the topic with his perspective with his memoir called *Happy Old Year* (Paiva, 1982). These memoirs are fundamental in the understanding of individual and political memory, as although they have been written by the same individual, they offer different perspectives on the authoritarian regime. Considering memoirs and testimonies, Seligmann-Silva is a prominent figure within the memory and political heritage of Brazil. For example, he tries to convey the difficulty of integration of testimony as a direct historical proof (Seligmann-Silva, 2008). It does not mean it does not hold an important value but that some things need to be taken into consideration, such as that many memories have been reconstructed a posteriori, for things such as truth commissions and tribunals. It's also important to think about trauma, because terrible events like genocides and repressive political regimes actively try to hide the truth and stop victims from telling their stories. For example, in *I'm Still Here*, the actress who plays Eunice Paiva hides to do an interview, after hiding her own children

to protect them from horrors and keeping them out of things that the regime has banned. The symbolism of such scenes are equally as important than 'real memories' from the time of the Brazilian dictatorship because they are being revived in the mind of the viewer. As far as heritage is concerned, fiction is still a valuable tool within the idea of memory and national identity. So even with the idea of constructed memory as being 'fictional', it is still necessary for heritage. This idea is further developed in *Fabricating Heritage* (Lowenthal, 1998), arguing that the fabrication of heritage should be perceived as a virtue rather than a vice. The idea is that unlike history, heritage thrives on exaggeration, reconstructions and lies. The building of national identities are based on myths and facts that are over-embellished and often made graver and more heroic than they are, as it is more significant and memorable than the truth. In that instance, the Paiva house, is a significant site of political memory, despite having in fact, no direct correlation to the family or the legacy of the military regime and thus giving an interesting contrast with the Memorial da Resistência.

The Memorial da Resistência and the Paiva house offer two distinctly different yet revealing approaches to remembering Brazil's military dictatorship. Each engages with memory in its own way, one through physical confrontation with history, the other through cultural transformation, and together they demonstrate how heritage is shaped by intentional decisions about what to preserve, what to symbolise, and what to reframe. The Memorial da Resistência is attached within the site of past violence, with its preserved prison cells and its location in the former DOPS. The memorial's state-museum status gives it authority and visibility. But as Tavares Furtado (2020) points out, there is a paradox in this framing: the site talks about its political opposition, but it does so in a way that is told by the government. It further highlights the language used, 'neo-liberalism' holding back the full potential of the museum in order to curate to its audience. By contrast, the Paiva house, featured in the film adaptation of *I'm Still Here*, is a site of symbolism rather than historical fact. It is not the real home of Rubens Paiva, but its fictional role in the film and has given it emotional and cultural weight. Its shift into the House of Brazilian Cinema marks a shift away from direct political remembrance and toward a celebration of creativity and national identity. This contrast reflects different heritage strategies: the Memorial da Resistência roots memory in place and testimony, aiming to historicize trauma through education and preservation. On the other hand, the Paiva house lets memory be filtered through stories and narration. This is still very powerful on an emotional level, but it is less political. It aligns more with Lowenthal's (1998) idea that heritage thrives on storytelling and symbolic meaning, rather than factual accuracy. While one preserves the physical reality of the authoritarian regime, the other engages with the emotional truth of memory through film. Both sites depict how intentions operate in heritage. Neither is neutral. The memorial is curated to highlight resistance and to create border between dictatorship and democracy. The Paiva house, has been stripped from its political potential. As Smith (2006) argues through her concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse, heritage often privileges certain voices and narratives over others. Together, these two examples show that heritage in Brazil is not only about remembering the past, but about how it is remembered.

This essay highlighted how two heritage “sites, the Memorial da Resistência and the Paiva house, reflect with Brazil’s authoritarian past through their different paths. While both function within the wider idea of post-dictatorship memory, the way they are presented could not be on more opposite ideas. The Memorial da Resistência grounds political memory and the history of Brazil’s state-violence, engaging with its trauma. On the other hand, the Paiva house’s transformation into the House of Cinema reflects a cultural reshaping of symbolic memory. The comparison shows different dynamics in the heritage practice. With Smith’s (2006) concept of Authorised heritage discourse, we know that some ideas are highlighted while others lay unnoticed. Viejo-Rose’s work speaks of the curation of memory and specifically within post-authoritarian societies, and while their example speaks of Spain, it is also applicable in Brazil, as far as memory manipulation is concerned. Reflecting on these sites, the essay engages both Brazilian and international scholarship on memory and trauma. While the differing fates of these two sites show that heritage in Brazil is not only about remembering, but about shaping what kind of nation is remembered, and what is consciously left in the margins of its past.

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