

# The fiftieth gate and the tank man essay



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The texts *The Fiftieth Gate* (1997) by Mark Baker, John Menszer's website "HolocaustSurvivors.org" (1999 to present) and documentary *The Tank Man* (2004) by Antony Thomas seek to develop the reader/viewer's understanding of a past event. This understanding is intended to encompass an appreciation of the events themselves as a means of preventing the atrocities of the past from repeating themselves, as well as a consideration of those past moments which inspire hope in the human psyche. To this end, in their representations of the Tiananmen Massacre and the Holocaust respectively the texts affirm the notion that 'History is how we understand the world and memory is how we understand ourselves'.

Baker's representation of himself as a symbol of history and his parents and family as symbols of memory reveal the nature of both and inevitably affirm the given idea about the connection between history, memory and understanding. His exploration of his relationship with his parents, in this sense, is an exploration of the relationship between history and memory, revealing what the two discourses have to offer one another in terms of understanding of past. The memoirs are framed as an "exchange of pasts" whereby Baker provides his parents with fact and they provide him with emotional detail: "'What kind of underwear?' he wants to know. 'What kind of face?' I want to know". This exchange of pasts is not without friction, as the discourses often undermine or contradict one another, such as when Baker's historical record of a letter to the Provincial Governor of Kielce negates Genia's romanticised memories of her hometown Bolszowce. These frictions are vital to Baker's purpose of showing how an exchange of

understandings between history and memory can refine our understanding of past events as to prevent their repetition – “ never again”.

In this particular case history has informed memory’s understand of the world from which it developed (Bolszowce in this instance). History is seen to be more stubborn in accepting other understandings of the past, such as those that elucidate our own nature, in “ I never believed her . . . I only recognise suffering in numbers and lists and not in the laments and pleas of a human being”. Baker is undoubtedly of the conviction that ‘ History is how we understand the world’ at the beginning of the memoirs, as in his preface the use of the gate metaphor reveals his belief that history is the path to a perfect understanding of the world: “ Whoever enters the fiftieth gate sees through God’s eyes from one end of the world”.

Through his exploration of his symbolic relationship with his parents however he discovers the fundamental limitation of history, that it does not provide insight into ourselves. At the end of the journey Baker, and by extension history, has come to realise the importance of memory to understanding ourselves in relation to the past, affirmed at the Buchenwald Ball: “ In spite of there, in defiance of then, in celebration of now, in memory of then”. The given notion is affirmed assuredly in Menszer’s website “ Holocaust-Survivors. org” whose purpose of “ present[ing] history with a human face” is explicit. Menszer attempts to inform the usual historical discourse of the past with personal experience and memory, crystallised in the visual on the homepage which depicts a Holocaust survivor’s tattooed arm held next to his name and number on a concentration camp’s archival list.

The image, when considered in the context of the website as a whole, subtly critiques the clinical objectivity of historical discourse. Baker offers a parallel criticism through his use of the onomatopoeic refrain “tak tak tak” which presents historical lists and archives as exceedingly objective – “No, it’s not numbers. It’s people”. Menszer does not dismiss the role of history all together, however he clearly makes the distinction that ‘History is how we understand the world and memory is how we understand ourselves’ in his “Historical Introduction to the Holocaust” page. The page presents a factual outline of the Holocaust, with photographs of survivors and their families protruding into the body of the text.

This depiction of history and memory portrays them as in competition with one another, showing that the understandings fostered by historical depictions of the world and depictions of individual experiences are mutually exclusive. This separation of history and memory, an exclusivity of understandings, manifests in the structure of the website itself, with the personal experience and memory of the “Survivor Spotlight” page kept at a distance from the “Historical Links” page. Ultimately, Menszer suggests that history and memory, whilst mutually exclusive, must work together to foster a complete understanding of the past. This suggestion emerges from the motif of barbed wire which runs vertically down the left-hand side of each page connecting those containing historical discourse to those containing personal experience.

Despite this interdependence Menszer’s position is clear: history, as a window into the world, is limited. Memory and personal experience are necessary to provide a window into ourselves and our own nature – “the

past is not just about events it is about human lives”. This principle is exercised in the “ Audio Gallery” page in which Menszer juxtaposes recordings of survivors singing songs about their experiences. The songs, when juxtaposed, reveal a truth about the human psyche; different people can respond to the same events and experiences in contradictory ways.

The optimistic lyrics “ the morning sun will shine on us one day” are juxtaposed to the dark and nihilistic “ a storm raged throughout the world . . . without pity or justice a world was destroyed” to show that one event can generate contrasting human responses.

Therefore both through his presentation and employment of history and memory Menszer affirms the given notion. Antony Thomas’ documentary on the Tiananmen Massacre and examination of how it is remembered, and how censorship has hindered history’s efforts in immortalising it affirms the statement that ‘ History is how we understand the world and memory is how we understand ourselves’. In his depiction of the event of the Tiananmen Massacre, and the tank man’s famous resistance of the might of the Chinese army Thomas alternates between historical footage and voiceovers of personal memory in such a manner that the purpose of both discourses becomes clear. His use of historical footage accompanied by factual narration “ By 5: 30am on June the 4th, 1989, the army’s mission has been accomplished” provides the factual understanding of the world of the event, while the memories of witnesses such as T.

Allman provide an understanding of ourselves, of how we reacted to the event, and how it made us feel: “ gradually the dawn came up. . misty . . . smoggy.

This wasn't a sunrise this was like a greyness, gradually acquiring some sort of light”. This figurative depiction of the morning following the massacre features simile in its creation of a pathetic fallacy which reflects the emotional atmosphere at the time. Memory is depicted as the window into how we understand ourselves through Thomas' depiction of the romanticised memories of the tank man's brave stand – “ the moment which has intrigued and moved and fascinated the world” – and the hope it inspired in the human psyche. Thomas uses a montage of memories to achieve this effect, “ He became an inspiration to millions and changed lives forever”, “ It's not only me who never forgot, the world never forgot him”. Furthermore, in his depiction of how witnesses recount their memories of the event Thomas shows how an event can transcend time in a very real sense through its lasting influence and the enduring hope it can inspire.

This is seen in witness Jan Wong whose alternations between past and present tense show her inability to escape the ‘ present-ness’ of her memories: “ The young man jumped in front of the tank . . and the tank turns the other way and the young man jumps on the other side”. Memories ability to transcend time is seen in a similar fashion in The Fiftieth Gate whereby Joe uses present continuous tense in his memories when at the Wierzbnik cemetery: “ Buba Laya serving icecream . .

. Rachmil bartering for stockings”. In this way both Baker and Thomas use the way we experience memories to reveal truths about ourselves such as our ability to reincarnate the past through the process of remembering. One of the overarching methods by which Thomas depicts history as the way we understand the world and memory as the way we understand ourselves is through his study of how censorship can lead to a lack of understanding of both the world and ourselves.

The Chinese authorities seek to control knowledge and stop the public from knowing about the tank man, so that the hope of achieving freedom dies with the memory of the event. To this end the government is afraid of history, and its primary weapon today, the camera: “ The authorities are afraid of cameras – they know their power”. Censorship also warps the understanding of our response to past events that might have been developed by memory. This is seen in the interview of a Chinese worker who is not free to speak openly about the past like the Western witnesses are: “ Were those her real feelings? Impossible to know with all interviews monitored by government minders”.

Ultimately Thomas shows that due to censorship we cannot develop an understanding of how the Chinese people responded to the Tiananmen Massacre and the Chinese people cannot develop an understanding of the world in which they live and the events which formed it. Thomas resolves his exploration with the optimistic suggestion that the mystery surrounding the tank man, partially as a result of censorship, has contributed to its lasting influence in our collective memory. He uses a soundtrack of majestic ascending strings to create a grandiose tone with respect to this revelation: “

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It is the mystery that gives the tank man his enduring power". All three texts affirm the notion that ' History is how we understand the world and memory is how we understand ourselves' through different means, however one thing remains universal. All retrospective explorations of an event converge in their mutual goal of building a valid and complete understanding of the past as to prevent the recurrence of atrocities, and to maintain enduring hope inspired by triumphs past.