

# **DAMNATIO MEMORIAE. A HISTORICAL AND MORAL REVENGE IN IMAGES**

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**Abstract:** The article suggestively called *Damnatio memoriae. Historical and moral revenge in images* is considering the analysis of a cultural, historical and artistic phenomenon practiced since ancient times in different cultures and civilizations, which literally consists in condemning the memory of certain remarkable personalities of the past, by deleting the names of the inscriptions, respectively by deteriorating, marking with distinctive signs (blackout, scribbling, etc.) or even completely destroying the images that represented them. As we will try to demonstrate, this kind of practice has a strong ethical connotation, offering, besides a series of genuine documents about historical events, a moralizing example based on a certain type of ideology specific to the space where they originated.

Our work proposes to exemplify such a case, originating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Moldavia, referring to the personality and visual representations of Prince Iliăș who appears in various artistic representations, such as the votive paintings of Humor, Baia, Moldovița and Probotă .

It is worth noting from the beginning that the act of condemning memory was most often done as a sign of an epoch-end (dictatorship) and the beginning of a new one in which the recollection of the tyrant (or of that particular personality) was destroyed, and the images that reminded of him were vandalized. As history shows, when such a phenomenon took place, hatred of the dictators of the periods of sad remembrance was reflected, most of the time, upon the works of art that they represented, or the documents that mentioned them, without taking into any account the importance, value, costs or efforts made to achieve them.

**Keywords:** *Damnatio memoriae, pitture infamanti, memento mori, Donor Portrait, Contemporary Art.*

## **Introduction**

As a preamble of our research, we will turn our attention to a famous Latin expression, whose meanings are able to summarize in only two words the importance and purpose of the life we live in: *memento mori!* (*Remember that you will die!*). The motivation to resort to this theory and practice

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specific to medieval Christianity, in the present case, lies in the fact that it is shown to be representative, at least in the spiritual sense, of the space, time, mentality and way of living of the religious belief in Moldavia in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and perhaps even much later. In fact, this kind of thinking proved to be representative for the entire temporal area of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, becoming a real impetus for the preparation for "The Afterlife", for which many of the remarkable personalities of the past, like kings and pharaohs in Antiquity, had a special concern in the time of earthly life. In this respect, although some rulers were known for their wars, for the bloody deeds and for the life that was not necessarily in the spirit of the Christian faith, however, they thought about how to balance the good deeds done during life, which is why, at their initiative, churches were built and painted, or various precious gifts were made, such as embroidery, miniature manuscripts, or hardware parts. These donations, however, should not be confused with the redemption of sins by giving indulgences to forgive sins for material benefits granted to the church. The artistic representations of the donors were more symbolically linked to the memorial service of the dead, symbolizing and invoking the prayers of the descendants, so that the sins of the one depicted in the picture be forgiven. It was also in this spirit that the presence of donor portraits or *votive paintings*, which had the purpose of redemption and salvation of the represented persons, through the prayers of the priests, monks and faithful who attended the service and who could mention them in their prayers. At least in the space of the Christian world, the preoccupation of the Christian sovereigns for the place where they were to be buried was a special one, in full consensus with the meaning of the scriptures about the meaning of death, the ephemeral character of all things, and the vanity of the magnificence and hierarchies of this passing world: "*I remembered the prophet yelling, I am earth and ashes; and again I looked into the graves and saw empty bones, and said, "Who is the emperor or the soldier, the rich or the poor, the good or the sinner?"*" (Excerpt from the songs of the funeral service in the Orthodox-Christian cult).

In the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Moldavia, such a mentality found direct correspondence in the spiritual experience of a profoundly religious nation, whose ontological concerns had a significant transcendental component related to the later experience of the afterlife. This explains why, in the case of certain prominent personalities of this space, which is of course a simple example, rulers such as Stephen the Great and his son Petru Rareș have paid special attention to this, building from the beginning of their reign, monuments to serve as a necropolis after their death (Putna Monastery and Probota Monastery). Given the high status of these personalities, we may be justified to believe that the size and importance of monuments built for the purpose of serving as a necropolis may be in direct dependence to the dignity and stateliness they have acquired during their lives, which seems to us

justified to a certain extent. Making a direct reference to the art of ancient Egypt, to emphasize by comparison a certain parallelism between two distinct formulas of conception of the notion of necropolis, let us recall here the sublime, gigantic character of the pyramid of the Pharaoh Kheops, who wanted from the beginning to be the expression of grandeur synonymous with the divinity of the Egyptian dignitary, both during and after his life. Returning to the autochthonous space, however, regarding the Moldavian necropole, we believe that the mentality was in fact a different one, in full accord with the respect for the cult of the dead, and with the belief that through the prayers of the descendants, the sins of the donors or those who have built these monuments could be easier overlooked. Also, in many of the medieval church buildings, taking on a much earlier model that probably originates at the dawn of Christianity, the tombs were dug along the access paths in the church or near their walls, where the passers-by or the faithful come to worship would have trampled with the soles of the tombs of the deceased buried there. This practice, we believe, is primarily of pious significance, the trampling of the grave standing this time not as an act of vandalism or condemnation of memory, but as genuine humility, as a self-imposed punishment for the sins committed in the space of this fleeting world, for their forgiveness in eternity. This was also supported by the belief that the worst punishment experienced in this ephemeral world can not be even compared to the smallest infernal suffering. Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand why it was preferable such an act of humbleness, supported for centuries and by the prayers of the descendants, which would have been elevated as long as the necropolis monument remained. In a certain way, we believe that this hope was also related to another creed that has been circulating since Antiquity, probably, that a person lives or exists, even after one's death, as long as one's name is not yet forgotten, being read, pronounced or remembered by future generations.

### ***Damnatio memoriae* - origins, practices and symbolic and historical meanings**

Turning now to the central theme of our research, we must remember that the process of *Damnatio memoriae* symbolizes, as the denomination describes, a condemnation of memory, the person being subjected to the moral punishment of irretrievable forgetting and staining of his social, historical or political image. As we mentioned from the beginning, this kind of dishonor was practiced in various civilizations, the Romans being among those who sanctioned the traitors in this way, by "erasing" the name of a personality from history, as if this one would even not have existed<sup>1</sup>.

Condemnation of memory could refer to historical documents or visual representations, which were often doubled by inscriptions.

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<sup>1</sup><http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/damnatio+memoriae>

The idea of preserving the memory of an illustrious person played a particularly important role in Antiquity, due to the belief that a dead person had life after death by perpetuating memory, being remembered by works of art testifying after one's death<sup>2</sup>. The ancient authors associated the term *memoriae* with different sounds, such as *damnare*, *condannare*, *accusare*, *abolere* or *eradere*, which used to refer to the destruction of a person's reputation and postum memory<sup>3</sup>.

In ancient cultures and civilizations (Akkadian, Egyptian or Roman), the process of damaging memory has seen a variety of typologies, including the destruction of the works of a particular person, the deletion of the name, and even the prohibition of attending funerals<sup>4</sup>. At that time, *damnatio memoriae* has become a kind of post-mortem sanction for condemned individuals, and is also considered a drastic political warning for offsprings<sup>5</sup>.

This condemnation of memory found in polytheist Antiquity was continued, to a certain extent, during the Christian Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, perpetuating up to contemporary times in donor portraits or portraits of dictators. The deterioration or destruction of effigies portrayed by personalities from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a practice similar to that of Antiquity, recalling various types of *damnatio memoriae* and *pittura infamanti*. *Pittura infamanti* were artistic representations usually commissioned by authorities, having a didactic and political role. Their public exposure was meant to serve as an instrument of justice to dishonor the criminals and to scare those who wanted to commit bad things<sup>6</sup>. These moralizing paintings were considered a highly effective punishment and humiliation method, the artists who painted such scenes were sometimes as humiliated as the characters represented by the obligation to create these images<sup>7</sup>.

The defamatory paintings were present in the Florentine Renaissance, with important personalities commanding artists to portray the hanged criminals, usually with their feet upward, voiced by their suffering. The description of a hanged man was considered a supreme insult, and if the

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<sup>2</sup>Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup>Charles W. Hedrick Jr., *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000, p. XII.

<sup>5</sup>Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation...*, p.2.

<sup>6</sup>Helene Wieruszowski, *Politics and Culture in Medieval Spain and Italy*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 1971, p.486. [https://books.google.ro/books?id=0fq1fPD-itIC&pg=PT995&dq=Pittura+infamanti&hl=ro&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic\\_eaIrf6zXAhWBzqQKHRwnD\\_0Q6AEINTAB#v=onepage&q=Pittura%20infamanti&f=false](https://books.google.ro/books?id=0fq1fPD-itIC&pg=PT995&dq=Pittura+infamanti&hl=ro&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic_eaIrf6zXAhWBzqQKHRwnD_0Q6AEINTAB#v=onepage&q=Pittura%20infamanti&f=false)

<sup>7</sup>George R. Bent, *Public Painting and Visual Culture in Early Republican Florence*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2016, p.108.

figure was represented head down, it could be considered a double insult<sup>8</sup>. Such a painting was ordered by Lorenzo de Medici to punish the traitors who had killed Giuliano de Medici, the Pazzi family being held responsible for this incident, left in the history of Florence under the name of the Pazzi Conspiracy.

In the painting of Moldova, a unique portrait representation, in which the idea of *damnatio memoriae* is found, is the *votive painting* from Probotă, where the figure of the heir to the throne, Iliăș, was blackened and his name was deleted. This process of "shading" the memory of Iliăș (born in 1531 as the son of Petru Rareș) was the result of his actions, leaving the throne of Moldavia and changing his faith from that inherited and defended by his ancestors - Christianity - to the faith of the enemies of the country he was leading, that of Islam<sup>9</sup>. A similar representation can be found at Humor Monastery and the church from Baia, where Iliăș's face is, at this time, at the age of childhood, with no visible traces of blackout, but as a sign of damnation of memory, his name is irretrievably erased from the place where he it should have appeared. A particular case of the representations of this character is, however, that of the Moldovița votive painting (1532), where it is also rendered as a child but without obvious traces of artificial alteration besides the specific mark of the passage of time, the image of the one fallen into apostasy, appearing in this unaltered way. From our point of view, it is interesting to find out the reasons why not all of the images depicting Iliăș fell prey to this moral condemnation by renegating the image. A possible explanation of this could be given by a typical Christian mentality, synonymous with compassion towards those at the age of innocence in full agreement with the Savior's words: "Let the children come to Me and do not stop them, for some that these are the kingdom of God "(Mark 10,14). This argument is also supported by the possible dating of the painting of the Moldavian votive painting in 1537, when Iliăș was only six years old, a long time before his apostasy.

On this practice of destroying the image and the inscriptions that could have kept the respectable memory of Iliăș, referred to the only manuscript written in Bistrița, "Diptych" , from which his name was also deleted<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>Helene E. Roberts (Editor), *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*, vol 1&2, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, Chicago-London, 1998, [https://books.google.ro/books?id=0fq1fPD-itIC&pg=PT995&dq=Pitture+infamanti&hl=ro&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic\\_eaIr6zXAhWBzqQKHRwnD\\_0Q6AEINTAB#v=onepage&q=Pitture%20infamanti&f=false](https://books.google.ro/books?id=0fq1fPD-itIC&pg=PT995&dq=Pitture+infamanti&hl=ro&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic_eaIr6zXAhWBzqQKHRwnD_0Q6AEINTAB#v=onepage&q=Pitture%20infamanti&f=false)

<sup>9</sup>Tereza Sinigalia, *Mănăstirea Probotă*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup>Emil Turdeanu, *Oameni și cărți de altădată*, ediție îngrijită de Ștefan S. Gorovei și Maria Magdalena Székely, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1997, pp. 281-282.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4

This particular case draws our attention on an already traditional iconographic situation, linked to the pictorial representation of the

Ecumenical Councils, in which regular characters, such as Arie of Alexandria or Macedonie, appeared regularly for the purpose of ultimately damaging the memory, have become known in the history of Christianity through the heresies they have launched, and which bear their names to this day - Arianism and Macedonianism, but on which we will not insist on this study.

A particular observation about the difference between *damnatio memoriae* and *pittura infamanti* shows that it is linked, at least in certain situations, to the function that the illustrious person occupies in society. In the case of the first practice, the damnation of memory (*damnatio memoriae*) and the deletion of the name was, in general, a remarkable personality of history, referring even to emperors, kings, princes or other ranks. In the second practice, in the case of defamatory paintings (*pittura infamanti*), they could be either ordinary people or people coming from wealthy families. These works were ordered by the authorities to serve as a negative example for the other inhabitants of the city, being made after the death of the individual, who was portrayed at the time of the violent killing. In both cases (*damnatio memoriae* and *pittura infamanti*), the resulting works of art were intended to publicly dishonor the memory of the person.

In *damnatio memoriae*, the works were made during the individual's life, perhaps even ordered by him, being damaged, altered or even destroyed later as a sign of condemnation by deleting the person's image from collective memory both scriptically and imagistically. Some acts of violence on the images - destruction, mutilation or even decapitation - suggested a symbolic transfer of power<sup>11</sup> and of the aggressive act to the person in the work.

### ***Damnatio memoriae* and its recurrence in contemporary times**

As it can already be easily deduced, the condemnation of memory was present under different methods or appearances, in distinct periods and cultures, an eloquent example being that provided by political dictators of all times. In this respect, the ancient practice of damaging memory by destroying images was perpetuated successively century after century to the times which are the closest to our period and even to the present day when some of the most controversial personalities of history, such as Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Hitler, or Saddam Hussein fell prey to this process. Their images immortalized in gigantic paintings or sculptures were dismantled, destroyed, and even violently attacked by ordinary people, who through this symbolic act attempted to repress their suffering caused by the oppressive actions of these dictators.

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<sup>11</sup>Allie Terry-Fritsch, *Execution by Image: Visual Spectacularism and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, in *Death, Torture and the Broken Body in European Art, 1300-1650*, edited by John R. Decker and Mitzi Kirkland-Ives, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015, p. 198.

As we bring to discussion a subject whose manifestation finds equivalence in visual arts as well as in everyday life, we believe that this act of moral punishment has an extremely fragile boundary, as it can pass with extraordinary speed from the space of suggestive, symbolic, artistic or strictly cultural actions, in general, to the one of deliberate revenge, charged with violence and vandalism. In both cases, it is a symbolic revenge act, which often takes the signs of physical expressiveness, synonymous with the destruction and annihilation of the personality whose image is subjected to this "surgical" process of ethical redemption without considering in any way the artistic or material value of the works in question.



Fig. 5



Fig.6



Fig.7

In contemporary art, we can also find numerous examples of such revanchist attitudes, but this time we will focus our attention only on some of them, that is the creations of the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan. In one of his works, the artist creates a contradictory context that brings together a set of discrepant elements meant to draw the viewer's attention on the central idea behind the creation of his own work. Made of wax and resin, the famous work, suggestively named *Him* (2001), hits the image originally viewed from the back of a boy dressed in a specific costume, which seems to be a school uniform from the '30s of the last century with carefully sewn hair and standing boots, which reveals in the second phase the disturbing image of the portrayed character: Adolf Hitler. Looking at the sky, kneeling, and hands clasped together as if for prayer, such an image of the Nazi dictator can't be easily accepted by the viewer. It raises controversy, it seems hard to believe, it is difficult to digest. He became, due to the horrors committed during his dictatorship, a true embodiment of universal evil, such an appearance of Adolf Hitler as a penitent appears to the public as a utopia of a fact that historical reality has never known. But, is not this an example of *damnatio memoriae* of our time? Is not this a genuine moral process supported by artistic means by the artist in the name of the victims of Nazism? The answers, we believe, appear on their own, and Maurizio Cattelan himself states the following in the explanation of his creation: "Hitler is everywhere," the artist continues, "haunting the spectra of history; and yet he is unmentionable, irreproducible, wrapped in a blanket of silence. I'm not trying to offend anyone. I do not want to raise a new conflict or create some publicity; I would just like that image to become a territory for negotiation or a test for our psychoses."<sup>12</sup>

A similar situation is also found in the works of the Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie, which in a similar way looks at the idea of *damnatio memoriae* through an act of moral revenge assumed on artistic grounds against the atrocities of the political dictatorships of the past, in turn bringing to the primordial plan personalities such as Hitler, Stalin or the Ceausescu spouses that he transforms, disfigures and last but not least, ironies them<sup>13</sup>. The painting in which the portraits of the Ceaușescus appear is a dramatic one, the human side of the dictator being suggested by the simplicity, impotence and tragedy with which he receives the sentence to death. The image is doubled by a certain amount of ridicule, which the artist speculates, transfiguring the elements of historical reality, by replacing certain details specific to the frame and the moment itself. Ghenie, for example, joins

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.christies.com/features/Maurizio-Cattelan-on-the-nature-of-evil-7306-3.aspx>

<sup>13</sup>I.A. Stoleriu; A. Stoleriu, *Tradition and Universality in Romanian Modern and Contemporary Portraiture*, in *Logos Universality Mentaly Education Novelty, Section :Philosophy and Humanistic Sciences*, 2016, vol. IV, Issue 1, June, p. 90.

sensations and contradictory feelings, the tension of the moment of the sentence being ridiculed by replacing the coat actually worn by Elena Ceaușescu with a luxurious fur coat, in full contrast to the austerity of the atmosphere that dominates the room in which the trial is carried out, and also the poor lifestyle of the majority of the Romanian population in 1989.

Along with this process that tends to humanize (or dehumanize?) the condemned personalities of history, Adrian Ghenie conceals certain details inside the room and the faces of the characters, creating the idea of censorship that we can observe also in the case of inadequate images presented in the written press or generally in audiovisual media (Television, Internet etc). As in the previous examples, we consider this careful mechanism of blurring the portraits as a true act of *damnatio memoriae*, helping or imposing in this way on future generations the installation of forgetting faces, facts and historical realities as a palliative tool.

## Conclusion

If, in ancient times, the *donor portrait* aimed the salvation and making of the personality visually represented in a work of art become eternal, *damnatio memoriae* works followed the opposite of this idea by condemning and destroying the images in which the personalities subjected to the society's public awkwardness were represented. On the basis of the few examples presented in the pages of this study, we could see how the representations of certain characters that were part of works such as the *portrait of the donor* (the votive painting) went into a completely different register, meant this time to defame their personality.

What really seems remarkable to us is the way in which the typology of these images is changed, the shift from a register of respect and commemoration to one of historical and moral condemnation being motivated, at the same time, by a fundamental change of mentality of the viewer, respectively of mental-collective perception of the represented subject. Such images become documentary milestones of events, reflecting different beliefs and ideologies about the rise and fall of certain historical characters.

Finally, drawing clear conclusions on the topic discussed in this study is a difficult task as it is a continuing phenomenon whose current tendency is to raise a series of questions that future generations should find an answer to. So, which practice is more brutal, the total erasure or destruction of an image for the purpose of definitively forgetting the memory and annihilating by oblivion a historical character, or intentional artistic degradation, with a moralizing punitive role, giving posterity a negative example, sanctioned from a historical, moral and visual point of view through artistic means?

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Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c1/SaddamStatue.jpg>

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Source:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voroshilov,\\_Molotov,\\_Stalin,\\_with\\_Nikolai\\_Yezhov.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voroshilov,_Molotov,_Stalin,_with_Nikolai_Yezhov.jpg)

**Fig. 7** Retouched photo, from with Nikolay Yezhov was deleted as a sign of *damnatio memoriae*

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Commissar\\_Vanishes\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Commissar_Vanishes_2.jpg)

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