Reenactment as a Memory Laboratory: The Experimental Dramaturgy of "Five Easy Pieces" by Milo Rau[1]

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Abstract: *This study reads Milo Rau's "Five Easy Pieces" (2016) as a memory laboratory in which reenactment tests the conditions of speakability and credibility around a social taboo. Using Jan Assmann's dual model of memory as a translational operation, I rephrase communicative (biographical) and cultural (foundational) memory as dramaturgical types: a dramaturgy of testimony (present-tense interview situations, children's reflections) and a dramaturgy of foundational framing (historical narration, media layering, and musical mnemotechnics). I argue that the performance does not merely juxtapose these systems but produces an oscillation between them, visible in two key moments: Victor Dutroux's monologue and the metatheatrical "production" of tears. Through the figure of the director as a visible regulator of participation and authenticity protocols, the piece exposes how minimal signs (voice, body, proximity, camera, tears) organize compassion and authority.*

Key words: *reenactment; memory dramaturgy; communicative memory; cultural memory; authenticity protocol.*

Milo Rau's *Five Easy Pieces* (2016) is a complex documentary-theatre arrangement: within a reenactment frame, it relies on interview situations, organizes modes of speech through techniques of mediation, and renders all of this perceptible through the bodies of child actors. Its point of departure is the Marc Dutroux case[2], which made the theme

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[2] Marc Dutroux, a Belgian man, abducted, held captive, raped and murdered several young girls in the mid-1990s in a secret basement cell. Two of his victims were found alive, while four others died. Two of them died from starvation while Dutroux was in prison. The case provoked massive public outrage in Belgium, particularly because of the failures of the police and the judiciary. There was widespread speculation that Dutroux had operated as part of a wider child-pornography network that enjoyed political protection, although this was never officially proven. In 2004, he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

of sexual violence against children and murder one of the most severe taboos in Belgian public life.

Rau does not describe reenactment as an "authentic reconstruction" (Rau 2021, 7), but as a procedure grounded in explicit common agreement: everyone knows it is play, image, reproduction, repetition. The force of reenactment, however, lies not in this "mere image" quality, but in the fact that, precisely through this shared knowledge, it can draw "reality itself into the frame – that is, it drags onto the stage the two long-standing antagonists of the philosophy of history: objective meaning and subjective suffering" (Rau 2021, 7). In other words, for Rau, reenactment is not the act of obscuring the constructed reality, but the maintenance of a tension between documentability and lived experience. This is the space in which memory begins to operate as a mnemonic procedure.

In this study, I examine how reenactment, as a layered form, can be described through the conceptual pair of Jan Assmann's dual model of memory: the distinction between communicative (biographical) and cultural (foundational) memory (Assmann, 2011, 36). I approach the present-tense situations of testimonial speech from the perspective of the biographical mode of remembering, specific to communicative memory, while I read historical framing and the medial–musical mnemotechnics from the perspective of the foundational mode of remembering, characteristic for cultural memory. My aim is to make the movement of the dramaturgy between biographical and foundational ways of remembering traceable through this duality.

My main claim is that *Five Easy Pieces* does not simply place these mnemonic operations side by side, but produces an oscillation between them: foundational framing runs through situations of testimony and then returns to the present with a modified emphasis. This movement becomes observable in detail through two key scenes: Victor Dutroux's monologue and the metatheatrical moment of the "production" of tears.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology: Reenactment and Memory Dramaturgy

Lily Climenhaga describes reenactment as a mnemonic procedure capable of dislodging trauma from its frozen state:

> Reenactment takes on the apparent frozen quality of trauma by imbuing it with the historical and witness perspective. It recreates the trauma as a flashback, breathing life into it again as an event happening once again in unedited real-time on the stage. Recollection looks back in the simple past tense, which begins a process of integrating and situating these moments into what Aleida and Jan Assmann call 'the communicative or everyday memory'.
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> Climenhaga 2021, 171

Rather than merely recalling the past, it reorders it through historical framing and a testimonial perspective, and then makes it eventful again in the stage's unbroken, "uncut" present tense. In parallel, Climenhaga draws on the Assmanns' concepts: for her, the past-tense narratability of recollection initiates a process of integration that returns fractured experience to the circulation of communicative, everyday memory – that is, it makes it accessible in terms of social shareability and interpretability.

This approach provides an important point of departure, yet it also sets a methodological task: how can the performance's mnemonic procedure/process be made visible in a way that does not merely repeat a theoretical model, but rests on a more fine-grained description of stage organization. In this study I use the dual model of memory as a scene-organizing principle: attention is directed to the shifts and transitions that appear in the structure of the play/piece/performance/script, and to how the present-tense speech situations of testimony are folded into historical-medial mnemotechnics. The analytical stake is to show what kind of dramaturgical tension these tipping points produce, and how they open a space for the performance's ethical problematizations.

Jan Assmann's theory of memory distinguishes between two dominant forms (Assmann 2011, 36). Communicative memory is grounded in the recent past, in the experiences of living witnesses and in everyday interaction; in Assmann's account, its mode of remembering is biographical memory. Its time horizon is roughly three to four generations (about eighty years), and it disappears along with its bearers. By contrast, cultural memory draws on the distant past, on origin stories, and on institutionalized forms of remembering; its mode of remembering is foundational remembering. Cultural memory is built on mnemotechnic systems: linguistic-narrative forms (myths, origin stories), rituals and performative events, material bearers, and spatial anchors.

In my reading of Milo Rau's *Five Easy Pieces*, I approach memory using Assmann's conceptual pair as a translational operation: rather than identifying communicative (biographical) and cultural (foundational) memory on stage, I translate their specific modes of remembering into the language of dramaturgical types. In this way, the logic of communicative memory can be grasped as a dramaturgy of testimony: in the form of present-tense utterances, interview situations, spontaneous questions, and children's reflections and value judgments. The logic of cultural memory appears as a dramaturgy of foundational framing: through historical narratives, musical quotations, and media layering as its mnemotechnic devices.

The Oscillation as an Analytical Model: Framing, Testimony, Mnemotechnics

The functioning of oscillation can be traced on two analytical planes. First, from the perspective of form: we can ask which speech situation currently organizes the scene – historical narration and framing, or an interview-like utterance and reflection, or a present-tense directorial question. Second, from the perspective of mnemotechnics: which bearers (music, projection, iconic images, ritual action) stabilize mnemonic meaning, and at which points this stabilization is disrupted by the child actors'

"here and now" reactions. I have selected the following two scenes so that the logic of these shifts can be followed first in a marked, turning-point-like arrangement, and then in a metatheatrical moment in which the performance makes visible the mechanism of the production of effect.

In the first scene under analysis, Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1* does not function as mere musical underscoring; rather, as a cultural determination it delineates the frame of reference within which reception is already situated: the Western European historical-cultural space. This is reinforced by the dramaturgy of projection. Patrice Lumumba's speech and the sequence of images associated with his death initially appear in a mediated, quasi-archival register; then the child actors gradually "write themselves onto" the image: they take up the rhythm and gestures of the speech, and make the visual logic of historical violence perceptible through their own bodies. The past thus does not function as a distant document, but becomes a present-tense experience.

The narration's Belgian colonial frame, with its emphasis on Lumumba's execution, organizes the material according to the logic of cultural memory's foundational remembering: it activates a collective narrative and places the Dutroux case within the broader context of an inherited history of violence.

The focal point of the scene is Victor Dutroux's (Marc's father) monologue. Formally, an interview situation is produced: the child actor speaks to a close-up camera, and bodily signals (such as coughing) evoke the threshold zone between documentary intimacy and "confession." Here the medium offers a dramaturgy of testimony: it promises the credibility of a "here-and-now" utterance.

In parallel, the content of the monologue is not biographical memory on the child's part, but cultural memory's foundational remembering: it speaks in the register of colonial privilege, inherited shame, and historical responsibility. The point is not that the child speaks "as a witness," but that historical knowledge is forced into a testimonial form – and it is precisely this constraint that gives it ethical sharpness. A decisive moment is the director's question: "What would you do if your own child became a murderer?" The question belongs neither to historical narration nor to the logic of the role: it addresses the child directly and produces a live speech situation. The communication thus generated demands a position, that is, it activates the mode of remembering of communicative memory.

The child's answer ("a father can change his son's character") follows the logic of everyday morality. As a result, the Dutroux story is displaced from the position of a "closed line of reasoning": the colonial past returns not as a determinative explanation, but as a horizon of responsibility. The structure of the monologue thus clearly traces the movement of a rhetorical shift in the speaking position: historical framing is routed into a testimonial form, and then, through the present-tense question, it acquires an ethical orientation.

Victor Dutroux's monologue occupies a double position in the performance, and this doubleness illuminates Rau's procedure of memory dramaturgy. The scene's testimonial form (camera proximity, present-tense utterance, the vulnerability of the child's voice and body) mobilizes the appearance of biographical credibility and intimacy; yet what is spoken is not personal recollection but a stabilized historical narrative (inherited responsibility, the colonial past). The stake of the monologue lies precisely in forcing these two registers into tension: "historical legacy" becomes an ethical presence through the present tense of testimony. This solution aligns with Rau's insistence that reenactment should not "explain meanings," but re-create situations and affective states: in this sense, a single testimony or a single blurred recording can make an event more intensely "real" than an entire archive – not because it knows more, but because it makes the event present differently: "This is not about truth in a technical sense, but about truth in the Kierkegaardian sense of repetition… This is why a single testimony, a single blurred recording, may offer more help in reenacting a major historical event than an entire, authoritative archive of documents." (Rau 2021, 5–6).

Authenticity Protocol and Participation: Tears as a Mnemotechnic Sign

Whereas in the first analyzed block the oscillation was traced through the overlaying of foundational framing and testimonial form, the next scene puts the conditions of testimonial credibility to the test. Here authenticity depends on which signs can render the experience of grief and trauma visible and readable.

The storytelling about the discovery of the Dutroux victims' bodies (delivered by a child placed in the role of a parent, within a directorially guided interview situation supported by the camera) opens a horizon of reception in which the scene, as it were, asks for emotional evidence: the signs of pain and compassion become the points of reference through which the spectator reads the utterance as credible. The speech situation is therefore not neutral from the outset: the repertoire of signs associated with grief begins to operate already within the register of the narration.

In this context the director enters and asks the boy playing the parent whether he can cry. The child cannot, so he is given a prop: an ointment with which he rubs beneath his eyes; the sentence is then spoken again, and the camera shows the effect in close-up – a teardrop appears at the corner of his eye. The scene is at once simple and brutally precise: it produces that minimal sign of testimony that spectators often treat as evidence of sincerity.

The stake of this moment goes beyond the question of whether the effect is artificial: it reveals what testimony becomes here. In this arrangement, the tear is not the spontaneous expression of an inner state, but a bearer – a produced sign that connects to a collectively known emotional code. In other words, the testimonial form that could previously be read as the present-tense medium of communicative memory now takes on the logic of cultural memory: grief becomes an element of a reproducible repertoire of signs. In this sense, the tear functions as a mnemotechnic device: it stabi-

lizes and makes pain readable, while suspending the naive assumption that sign and experience automatically coincide.

The directorial intervention, however, exposes not only the stage's production mechanism but also the expectations of reception. The tear's mechanism of effect belongs to the cultural protocol through which spectators decide what is "real" and what is "played." It is no accident that the handing over of the tear-inducing ointment is accompanied by the audience's laughter: within the medium of painful storytelling, the performed effect is suddenly unmasked, and the spectator's visceral reaction erupts precisely against the expected norm of compassion. The scene shows how the illusion of credibility can be assembled from minimal signs, and how the child's body becomes a medium – and thus the bearer of these signs. The camera's close-up is particularly important: it isolates and offers, as evidence, a visual support for "authenticity."

This scene makes visible another face of oscillation: testimony is also a sign system that, in certain cases, can be technically produced and culturally coded. The intimacy associated with communicative memory here turns into the mnemotechnics of cultural memory, and it is precisely this turn that makes perceptible the conditions of credibility and compassion. Within this structure, the child's body becomes at once the bearer of vulnerability and the surface on which effects are produced.

Assmann's concept of a participatory structure (Assmann 2011, 38) describes memory not merely as content, but as an order of access: communicative memory is horizontal, without specialists, a form of knowledge that can be acquired with equal chances in everyday speech, whereas cultural memory is vertically organized, tied to authorized bearers and institutionalized forms. *Five Easy Pieces* renders this difference perceptible as a dramaturgical distribution: the question is who has access to the speaking position, and on the basis of which signs an utterance becomes credible.

In this reading, participation can be divided into two interrelated dimensions. One is the right to speak: who may speak as a witness, who may ask questions, who may interrupt the process, and who may propose a restart or a new frame. The other is the authenticity protocol: which minimal signs (voice, body, tears, proximity, camera) make pain and compassion readable, and – more fundamentally – who is authorized to grant access to these signs or to have them produced.

At this point, the figure of the "director" operating within the performance becomes prominent, appearing as the visible regulator of the participatory order. His function is not mere moderation: through questions and interruptions he allocates speech situations, and he organizes access to performative signs as a protocol. Because this "director" is a metatheatrical role, authority is revealed as a produced position. The model of cultural memory tied to the specialist is no longer an abstract social image, but a distributive form that can be seen at work on stage.

However, the shift of scale between role and reality cannot be bypassed: what, within the space of play, governs the rights to speak and the signs of credibility as a director,

is tied, in the reality of the production, to an authorial–institutional position. Rau does not consciously apply Assmann's concepts, yet he designs and makes public a mnemonic structure that produces cultural memory: it designates a topic, legitimizes modes of speech, and renders the positions of compassion (who may speak, who may ask, who may judge) experientially accessible to the spectator.

Funeral, Play, and the Return of the Children's Voices

A final turn of the oscillation can be observed in the funeral sequence and in the reflective frame that follows it. The funeral is organized as a collective ritual: the victims are no longer approached only through the singular violence of the crime, but are placed within a shared public form of mourning. In this sense, the scene clearly belongs to the logic of cultural memory. It transforms loss into a communal act, inscribing the dead children into a shared framework of remembrance. Yet this stabilization is immediately disturbed by the return of the children's own voices.

After the funeral, the performance shifts back into a conversational, almost everyday register: the children are asked how they felt, whether they liked the performance, and whether they would continue acting. The heaviness of the previous scenes gives way to spontaneous speech, hesitation, playfulness, and ordinary self-reflection. The discussion then turns toward death itself: the children imagine their own funerals, possible ways of dying, and even the songs they would like to hear. The emergence of a Rihanna song within this context does not cancel the gravity of the topic; rather, it relocates death into a childlike, popular, and grotesquely intimate register.

This final movement is important because it prevents the performance from closing solely as ritualized mourning. The cultural frame of the funeral is reopened by communicative memory: by talk, preference, fantasy, and everyday imagination. The children are no longer only bearers of signs, roles, or historical trauma, but speaking subjects who re-enter the stage through their own present-tense voices.

This is what gives the performance its "memory laboratory" character. It does not communicate memories; rather, it puts the conditions of speakability and credibility to the test: through which signs, which protocols, and which bodies does trauma become speakable and readable. The political stake thus lies in the way rights to speak and criteria of credibility are organized around a taboo. Rau's theatre tears open, dismantles, and then reassembles, so that what remains in the spectator is not a story but weighty questions that no longer let them rest. And perhaps this is also the laboratory's most precise self-description: "I believe art is necessary because it can create something like artistic truth, since there is no documentary truth – at least not in real life" (Rau 2021, 4).

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