

MEMORY AND CULTURE: A SEMIOTIC MODEL (PART 2)

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Abstract: Cultural Memory as a Semiotic model explores the metaphorical reference to cultural memory distinguishing Collective and Collected memory, the three dimensions of cultural memory, systems of cultural Memory and relationship of memory to identity and Experience.

Key words: Cultural Memory, metaphor, metonymy, material, social, mental, autobiographical, semantic, procedural etc.

Metaphors are essential in understanding memory; in fact, throughout history, the concept of “memory” has inspired countless metaphors in its own right. As a result, in the first stage, the potentials, constraints, and risks of the metaphorical allusion to cultural memory will be thoroughly considered. Additionally, two key distinctions between the terms “collective memory” and “collected memory” will be made. The next stage provides concepts of cultural semiotics and makes a distinction between the three aspects of memory culture—material, social, and mental—that make up memory culture. In order to place acts of remembering within a framework of multiple systems of cultural memory, notions from cognitive psychology are thirdly applied at the cultural level. Fourth, the connection between memory and the words “identity” and “experience” that are close by is taken into account.

1. Metaphorical Reference to Cultural Memory:

Metaphors are useful as (hypothetical) cognitive models, especially when they appear in the consistency of semantic domains. Since Plato and Aristotle, metaphors have been used to describe memory, remembering, and forgetting. Examples include wax tablet, seal, aviary, storehouse, theatre, photography, and the computer. Douwe Draaisma claims that this causes “ever-changing images,” “a succession of metaphors and metamorphoses, a true omnia in omnibus,” to be projected onto our theories of memory. The traditional metaphors of memory have always made reference to the individual level. In other words, when we discuss the concept of memory, we are using a phrase that is already associated with a number of metaphors. It can be very suggestive to further metaphorize this phrase, but doing so runs the risk of generating endlessly meandering catachresis, chains of mixed metaphors, by using the previous tenor (or: target domain) of “individual memory” as a source domain for comprehending social phenomena like canonization processes or public commemorations. To be precise, we hardly ever discuss

metaphors as such when we discuss “cultural memory,” as opposed to tropes, which are figurative expressions. Not all theories of cultural memory, though, exhibit the same degree of tropology. Essentially, “cultural memory” as metaphor and “cultural memory” as metonymy are two distinct uses of tropes that should be separated in cultural memory studies.

a) Metonymy: When we speak of “memory as a phenomenon of culture,” we are using the term “memory” in a literal sense and the adjective “cultural” in a metonymic sense (which refers to sociocultural contexts and their impact on individual memory). Cultural remembering is conceived of as an individual act, however, and the focus is on the shaping force that sociocultural surroundings exert on organic memory, we are using the phrase “memory as a phenomenon of culture”.

b) Metaphor: When we talk about the “memory of culture,” “a society remembering,” or “the memory of literature,” however, we are using the word “memory” metaphorically. These are linguistic metaphors for the systematic preservation of records, the designation of official remembrance days, or the creative process of intertextuality, or, to put it another way, for “culture as a phenomenon of memory.” Even the word “memory” becomes a metaphor. Therefore, Halbwachs' work on *mémoire collective* contains both of these fundamentally different conceptions of the interaction between culture and memory. They are not, however, handled individually or made explicitly distinct from one another there. The American sociologist Jeffrey Olick is the one who has distinguished between a “collected” memory and a “collective” memory with the essential precision. He talks about the “two cultures” of memory study, contrasting the “patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society” with the “culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds.” We can consequently make a distinction based on Olick between:

- i. ‘Collected Memory’ as an individual's socially and culturally shaped memory. We act in accordance with widely held beliefs and standards; we recall using culturally appropriate schemata; and we incorporate second-hand experiences into our rich personal experience. These situations would be classified as *cadres sociaux de la mémoire* by Halbwachs. Olick employs the metaphor of ‘collecting’: The individual mind appropriates numerous components of the sociocultural milieu. The study of collected memory in cultural studies frequently engages in discussion with social psychology and even benefits from the discoveries of the neurosciences.
- ii. ‘Collective Memory’ (in the narrower sense), which alludes to the signs, forms of expression, social structures, and customs that are employed to create, preserve, and portray many interpretations of a common past. This second level of *mémoire collective* has traditionally been covered by history, sociology, literary, and media studies (including the influential perspectives of Nora and the Assmann).

‘Cultural memory’ is, in fact, a broad umbrella term that can include a variety of cultural, social, cognitive, and biological phenomena, including tradition, archive, canon, monuments, commemorative rituals, family communication, life experience, and neuronal networks. Critics point out that this blurs the precise distinctions between all of these events, making conceptions of

collective or cultural memory problematic. These objections ignore their ability to integrate, though. It is precisely this encompassing nature of the term “cultural memory” that enables us to make connections between phenomena that were previously thought of as being unrelated—connections between tradition and canon, monuments and historical consciousness, family communication, and neuronal circuits, for example—and helps us see the (occasionally functional, occasionally analogous, occasionally metaphorical) relationships between them.

2. Material, Social and Mental Dimensions of Memory Culture:

When analyzing memory culture, it helps to make a distinction between various dimensions (material, mental, and social), just as with culture as a whole. Possessing this three-dimensionality of memory culture is particularly beneficial in light of the diversity of the area of memory studies, where representatives of different disciplines frequently concentrate on one of these three dimensions and express it in terms of absolutes. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that social scientists have created concepts that emphasize the social aspect of memory culture ever since Maurice Halbwachs. On the other hand, art and literature scholars like Renate Lachmann and Mieke Bal emphasize the significance of the material dimension (paintings, literary texts) for acts of cultural memory. Last but not least, psychologists and neuroscientists who study the history of mind as well as those interested in biology and psychology have emphasized the mental component of memory culture. These branches have all given cultural memory studies significant impetus. Nevertheless, the complexity of cultural processes runs the risk of being obscured by a one-sided focus on a “social memory,” a “material memory,” or a “mental memory.” Cultural memory is only created through the continuous, procedural, and dynamic interplay of all three dimensions:

- “The material dimension of memory culture is constituted by mnemonic artefacts, media, and technologies of memory, ranging from symbols and landscapes to architecture and books to film and photography”. (Erll 103)
- “To the social dimension of memory culture belong mnemonic practices and the carriers of memory: commemorative rituals; forms of production, storage, and recall of cultural knowledge; and the persons and social institutions involved in these processes”. (Erll 103)
- “The mental dimension of memory culture, finally, includes all the shared schemata, concepts, and codes which enable and shape collective remembering through symbolic mediation, as well as all the effects that the activity of remembering has on the mental dispositions predominant in a community – such as ideas about time and history, values and norms, self-perceptions and the perception of others”. (Erll 103)

3. Systems of Cultural Memory (Autobiographical, Semantic and Procedural):

Psychologists make distinctions between several memory systems: Differentiated from implicit systems (procedural memory and priming) are explicit systems (semantic, episodic, and autobiographical memory). This taxonomy has been usefully modified by social psychologists to explain “collected memory.”

- Collective-autobiographical information (‘our past’) is represented in the individual memory as strongly affective contents of the semantic memory. However, more recent events—those that the

rememberer has personally witnessed—can also be represented as episodic memories, such as “how I experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall” or “how my family and I learned about the September 11 attacks.”

- Collective-semantic information, on the other hand, encompasses the relatively neutrally experienced contents of the semantic memory (for example, historical facts about the Roman Empire as they are taught in school).
- Collective-procedural phenomena, finally, can potentially be conscious knowledge in some individuals (for example, those who reflect critically on national stereotypes or everyday rituals of their society). But collective-procedural memory emerges and exists on the basis of its contents generally belonging to the non-conscious repertoire of individuals’ knowledge and abilities. It rests in our culture-specific schemata and scripts. (Erll 107-108)

4. Relationship of Memory to Identity and Experience:

The realization that identities are substantially plural must be recognized. According to Amartya Sen, who identifies as an Asian, Indian citizen, Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, American or British resident, “a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights,” plurality in this context means that each person is a member of a variety of (mnemonic) collectives. The person becomes an intersection of (or, to use Halbwachs's term, a “viewpoint on”) distinct communal identities through such numerous memberships. Thus, collective identity is simply the “collective aspects of subjectivity that emerge from the individual's belonging to certain groups, which may define themselves through gender, culture, ethnicity, or nation” at the level of the individual.

Different theories of identity can be distinguished based on the types of explanations they provide for the manifestations and causes of collective identity. According to Jan Assmann, for instance, a common symbolic world of meaning is not only something that people live in (the “basic structure”), but also something that they become conscious of (the “reflexive structure”): A collective identity is a sense of reflexive societal membership. Thus, cultural identity is defined as “the commitment to or reflexive participation in a culture”. Through his idea of “imagined communities,” Benedict Anderson also highlights the conscious facets of group identity. “In the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” as Anderson, puts it, “every member has a mental picture of his or her community.” As opposed to this, Jürgen Straub contends that we need not assume that such agreement is only and, in every case, “reflexive” in the sense of “aware” or even “rationally accessible.” Instead, it should be regarded of as frequently latent, everyday tacit knowledge that regularly organizes and directs the members of the collective's thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions. This interpretation is consistent with Anthony Easthope's definitions of nation as a “specific discursive formation” and national identity as a “unconscious structure”. The fact that distinct memory systems are engaged in the formation of communal identities accounts for the variety of accentuations in the study landscape.

Collective identity is a phenomena that arises from both the explicit and the implicit systems of cultural memory. It can be intentionally codified but can also occasionally be conveyed

intuitively, for instance through discursive formations, mentalities, and patterns of thinking and conduct. The existing, mainly descriptive theories of communal identity are therefore not antagonistic but rather complementing.

Studies of memory, which address the potential and constraints of “bearing witness” in a time of war, genocide, and horror, are closely related to research on cultural experience. The violent history of the twentieth century has brought trauma and the “crises of witnessing” to the forefront, which raises the question of how severe experience can (or cannot) be told and presented. In this context, Ernst van Alphen has persuasively argued that experience “depends of factors that are fundamentally discursive” rather of being direct and unmediated:

“Experience and memory are enabled, shaped and structured according to the parameters of available discourses ... Experiences are not only collectively shared because they are grounded on cultural discourses; this shared background also makes experience and memory ‘sharable.’ The discourse that made them possible is also the discourse in which we can convey them to other humans. Our experiences and memories are therefore not isolating us from others; they enable interrelatedness – culture” (Erll 112).

The mental, physical, and social mechanisms that enable experience to be embedded, built, understood, and transmitted are provided by cultural memory in the paradigm put forth here. Memory is a type of switchboard that arranges experience both in the present and in the past: The source of schemata that already pre-form experience, or that determine what will even enter the person's consciousness and how this information will be further processed, is the cultural memory. Thus, the prerequisite for learning is the memory as a tool for selection and schematization. However, we only create experience as an interpretation of events that directs future action retroactively, through cultural memory.

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