

# Cultural Memory Studies



# Cultural Memory Studies:

## *An Introduction*

By

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Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Cover illustration by Katja Winter, "Holding a Monument"

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-3311-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3311-0

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## PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Theories of cultural memory are, perhaps to a greater extent than other theories, located within specific times and spaces: as memory theories, they deal with the question of the connection between the present and the past and, as cultural theories, they refer to the particular faculties of groups, collectives, or nations in the light of this connection.

If an introduction to memory theories is translated into a different language after a few years, then these historical and cultural points of reference shift in a certain and telling way. For it is only through such a transfer that it becomes clear to what extent our concepts of cultural and history depend on the contexts within which they are developed and discussed. A theory of memory—perhaps also as a neurobiological model but, in any case, as a concept of cultural memory—is, therefore, itself a cultural-historical phenomenon that cannot be separated from the background and issues of the time and place in which it was designed.

It is, therefore, probably no coincidence that the theory of cultural memory was developed in Germany at the very time when the country, through its re-unification, had overcome the first phase of its post-war history and had to redefine itself as the Berlin Republic. Such processes of self-definition, as the following pages will show in detail, are based on the selection of points of reference from the past that support, legitimize, and illustrate a collective's desired self-image. In a reunited Germany, this selection was particularly focused on the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship and the erection of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe in Berlin—in the very spot where the Berlin Wall had stood until 15 years earlier—is the most visible sign of this self-definition through a commitment to collective remembrance.

Academic theories of cultural memory were developed more or less simultaneously with this process of redefinition and building, which took place, roughly speaking, between 1990 and 2005. They were initially triggered by the observation that contemporary witnesses of the Third Reich became fewer every year and that the Federal Republic of Germany was therefore obliged to find other forms that preserve the memory of the

past. This means that one can say that the foundation of cultural memory studies during the 1990s has accompanied and reflected a current debate within German society and provided something like a theoretical *Ueberbau* for it. This debate was indeed a German one but, more specifically, it was a debate about Germany and the image of its own past.

What, then, are the consequences if one publishes or reads about this theory in the English-speaking world? It goes without saying that the fundamental connection between the cultural identity of a collective or a nation and its references to its common past are as valid there as it is everywhere in terms of the remembrance of wars and revolutions, of colonial history and its overcoming, and of incisive events such as peace treaties or terrorist attacks. The reader of this introduction will find, however, that most of the following historical examples (as well as a large number of the references to scholarship) are from Germany and even if parallel examples from Great Britain and Ireland, the USA and South Africa, or Australia and New Zealand may be clear, the extent to which the concept of cultural memory owes its existence to the problems of a particular culture will remain obvious in the English version, too.

This peculiarity applies not only to memory theory itself, but also to the scholarly discipline of cultural studies. In the Anglo-Saxon world, Cultural Studies has been well-established for almost half a century now and one might be tempted to translate what is called “*Kulturwissenschaften*” in German as “Cultural Studies”. In fact, however, these are two very different approaches, which is why the following will always refer to “the study of culture” when it comes to academic engagement with cultural phenomena such as memory. In contrast to the politically engaged analysis of everyday-, minority-, and counter-cultures in Cultural Studies, studies of culture in the German-speaking academic world are committed to a broader concept of culture that is not so much focused on sociological concepts. *Kulturwissenschaften* is considered more as a sub-discipline of historiography, which includes media, art, and literature studies. It is especially interested in the history of science and it was introduced (and criticized) in the 1990s as an alternative to the conventional history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*). In order to take this difference into account, the German “*kulturwissenschaftliche Gedächtnistheorien*” is referred to here as either the “theory of cultural memory” or as “cultural memory studies”.

In addition to these cultural and disciplinary differences, of which one must be aware when translating and reading about the theory of cultural memory, there is also a historical index that illustrates the differences



between various versions of this theory. In the case of cultural memory, this historical index is primarily a media-historical one. It is not by chance that the theory of cultural memory was formulated in Germany after reunification and, in retrospect, it seems equally significant that the book by Jan Assmann that coined the term “cultural memory” was published in 1992: i.e., shortly before the public dissemination of the Internet. The three guiding concepts in the subtitle to Assmann’s book were “Scripture, Memory, and Political Identity”, so that the theory of cultural memory sounds like a late articulation of the Gutenberg Galaxy.

Therefore, the media-historical dimension of cultural memory theory in the following will be mostly related to the culture of writing. However, theories are, as I said, historical and in the quarter of a century that has passed between the publication of Assmann’s book and the publication of the English translation of my introduction, the world of media has changed in a way that not only affects our everyday lives and scientific practice but also the manifestations of cultural memory: books no longer have to be located in libraries, but can be read as digital copies; historians no longer research their sources in dusty archives, but analyze them on the screen using full-text searches; significant events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries no longer have to be laboriously described or symbolized by works of art, but can be viewed on Youtube as documentaries; and, besides significant events, every day and private experiences are also filmed and uploaded.

Everything that is stored on the net has the potential to go viral and, in this way, to become part of collective memory in an almost auto-poetic and self-directed way because the traditional authorities of selection, control, and evaluation are no longer in charge of our image of the past anymore. Thus, our cultural memory is increasingly becoming a memory of the Internet and future theories of cultural memory will have to account for this fact in a much more intense way than this book does: What are the consequences of the digitization of historical “material”? Is it more easily accessible on the Internet, or is it completely abstracted from its historical origin as a sequence of binary codes? What does it mean that the past is accessible on the Internet? Is the net really free or do other procedures of censorship and manipulation, which may be difficult to control, take hold in a way that turns our cultural memory also into a filter bubble and an echo chamber?

Whichever way these questions will be answered, what a media change like the digital turn clearly demonstrates is that the theory and practice of

cultural memory is dependent on the media in which it is implemented and that, consequently, new media are accompanied by new concepts of remembering and forgetting. It is simply not the same concept of history that we construct when we consult a database of digital copies instead of a print archive and, accordingly, cultural memory is no longer the same when it goes from the analogue to a digital mode.

This transition will one day itself become the subject of a historical reconstruction of cultural memory practices and it remains to be seen what significance will then be attributed to the period between 1990 and 2020, as well as to the relationship between the studies of culture in the German and the English-speaking world. The fact that this transfer across media-historical divisions and academic cultures could succeed within the modest framework of this book is due to the merit of several people who inspired, accompanied, and supported the project: I would like to thank Adam Rummens for including the book in the Cambridge Scholars Publishing's program and for supervising the publication, as well as my German publisher Steffen Herrmann for generously licensing this translation. Katja Winter contributed the cover illustration, based on one of the most stunning transformations of recent cultural memory, the "Memento Park" in Budapest, where all monuments that used to be set up in the city during socialist times are collected. Thematically, all my thoughts on cultural memory are indebted to my long-standing collaboration with Jens Ruchatz with whom I published an interdisciplinary encyclopedia on the subject almost 20 years ago. And finally, but in truth first of all, I remember Cornelia Vismann, who had the idea for this book in the first place but is no longer present for its publication in English.

## INTRODUCTION

# WHAT, HOW, AND WHY DO CULTURES REMEMBER?

In 2006, a remarkable book was released by a Leipzig publisher: the historian Christine Fischer-Defoy edited the address book that the philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) kept during his forced exile, which started in 1933 in France, due to his Jewish heritage. The volume contains photographic reproductions as well as transcriptions of twenty-five handwritten pages and inserted leaflets, a commentary about the origin and transmission of the small book, and more or less detailed remarks about the persons listed by Benjamin and their frequently changing addresses.

To what extent is this publication of interest for an introduction to cultural memory studies? Theories of cultural memories differ from psychological or neurobiological descriptions of individual memory processes and instead take “cultural”—that is to say, social, historical, philosophical, artistic, etc.—aspects of the phenomenon of “memory” into consideration. A *vade mecum*, such as Walter Benjamin’s address book appears, at first glance, as an aid for the memory of an individual person and, beyond that, as one that may contain personal entries not intended for the public. As such an aid, however, an address book indicates that the ability of people to remember is incomplete and, especially in the case of a large amount of abstract and modifiable data, requires a medium that saves the desired information in a way that makes it permanently and reliably accessible. For several millennia, writing has served as this storage medium and as a cultural technique developed to support the shortcomings of individual memory.

By drawing upon this cultural technique to assist his personal memory, Benjamin’s address book is part of a specific context of cultural history. In the case of its publication, this context even dominates the appearance of the address book, insofar as its edition no longer serves as a memory aid for its owner, who died in 1940, but rather as a reminder *of* this owner and

the unique historical and political circumstances within which the small book was used.

The publication of Walter Benjamin's address book is, therefore, an exemplary case for the reversal or change of perspective that marks the beginning of all theories of cultural memory: the transition from personal memories, which are tied to the lifespan of an individual, to the formation of a memory, which is available to a group of people and across generations. It is no longer possible to speak of such a memory in the psychological or neurobiological sense, for the means, users, and processes of remembering cannot be described in the manner of "individual" and "internal", as the etymology of the German word for "memory" (*Er-inner-ung*) still implies. Instead, cultural memory studies speak of a memory that is based on external storage media on the one hand and on the collective access to these media, on the other. Thus, cultural memory studies are doubly associated with what we call "culture". First, in the sense that storage media, from writing to computers, are historically specific products of human communities and are, therefore, a part of their emancipation from "nature" (or part of a "second" nature); and second, insofar as the interaction with what is stored in this manner—from the oral presentation of classical epics to the administration of digital databanks—creates a connection between singular and individual references: a "tradition".

Apart from this transfer of individual memory matter into a storage medium and the reversal of an individual memory aid into a document of cultural memory, the edition of Walter Benjamin's *Addressbuch des Exils* allows for two more central aspects of cultural memory studies to be addressed: one aspect concerns the fact that this address book originates from the period of exile of a large number of leading intellectuals (as well as many others) from the Weimar Republic between 1933 and 1945, due to National Socialism in Germany. In 1933, Benjamin emigrated to Paris, where he lived under difficult personal and economic conditions, until 1940, after the persecution of Jews had reached the French capital, when he attempted to reach Spain via Marseille and in the face of the imminent failure of this plan, committed suicide in a Pyrenees village at the border. Under these circumstances, to keep an address book means more than merely anticipating one's own forgetfulness: in the seven years of exile, Benjamin changed addresses thirteen times and so did an large number of persons, whose tangled life journeys he attempted to track through his entries and amendments.

Considering the diverse emotional and biographical uncertainties of emigrants, it becomes clear that, above all, exile also poses a threat to memory and remembrance. Driven out of one's homeland that had the goal of destroying an entire culture in Germany, the exiled underwent a profound experience of loss and disruption, which was not compatible with the effort of memory and remembrance to ensure the continuity of self-perception of individuals and communities. The quotation from one of Benjamin's letters, "how people are scattered everywhere," which serves as the subtitle of the publication of his address book, vividly illustrates how much methods of cultural memory react to experiences of crisis and threats to those continuities. And this holds true not only for Benjamin's life in exile, in which he had to try to preserve at least some of his former social contacts, but also for the present-day recollection or historical accounts of this exile, insofar as the address book provides more than seventy names and addresses of Benjamin's fellow expatriates: for his divorced wife Dora, with whom he finds shelter, as well as for Bertolt Brecht in Skovsbostrand, there are no less than five listed addresses. He holds on to the Moscow address of his great love, Asja Lacis, as well as to a number of unidentifiable female names. The names of French colleagues are also noted, including Pierre Klossowski and Georges Bataille, who will go on to hide a part of Benjamin's estate in the Bibliothèque Nationale and thus save it. Ultimately, there is an almost complete panorama of the intellectual life of the Weimar Republic, from Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, and Kurt Weill to Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Anna Seghers, and Hannah Arendt, whose meandering ways through exile are preserved by inserted postcards. In this manner, the publication of a personal memory aid contributes towards the preservation of the memory of a specific cultural era.

A final aspect that makes this publication appear suitable for illustrating the problems and questions of cultural memory studies simply concerns the owner of the address book, Walter Benjamin himself. For Benjamin is not only part of our remembrance of the period of National Socialism and the Second World War because of his exile and early death but he is, above all, also one of the central writers who authored first sketches of a theory of cultural memory at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among his diverse and scattered remarks about the cultural significance of memory, there are sketches of a theory that apply to the aforementioned observation that attempts to remember always react to crises of historical continuity within the process of tradition.

Thus, the small address book highlights all the relevant aspects that shape the objectives and the structure of this introduction. As an introduction to cultural memory studies, it will first of all develop what is to be understood as memory and remembrance with regard to a theory of culture in a general sense. To this end, it must be clarified what it means to apply the category of “memory” not to isolated individuals but to collectives. This question will be dealt with in the first part, “The History and Topics of Cultural Memory Studies”, which reconstructs the theoretical concepts that enable us to speak of a memory of collectives, societies, or cultures. Here, the most important theorists of cultural memory—from Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud to Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann—will be presented and their contribution towards the understanding of transmission processes and concepts of tradition will be outlined: in which manner does memory come into view when attempting to describe cultural contexts? And how is its function determined with regard to the understanding of society, politics, art, and so on?

If these aspects, however, cannot be described using psychological and neurobiological theories (although metaphors from these fields are so readily used), because cultures rely on social practices of communication and transmission and not on operations of an individual biological brain, then this question clearly applies not only to the altered subject area but also to the differing epistemological interests of studies of cultural history in the humanities as compared to the natural sciences. Psychological and neurobiological descriptions of memory structures and memory processes are understood as empirically validated theories about cognitive and biological contexts: in other words, they claim to explain the facts of the world as it is. Insofar as these theories and descriptions are debated and replaced in the course of the history of science, this claim is clearly also a historical and relativistic one. However, each current version of these theories will always claim to be able to characterize memory and remembrance in a general way that is valid for the entire history of mankind.

In contrast, theories of cultural memory, as they are understood and introduced here, fundamentally differ from this claim: studies of culture—which include the humanities’ disciplines of philosophy, ethnology and religious studies, history, classics, modern philology, art history, and media studies, as well as what is labeled “cultural studies” in the English speaking world—regard their subject matter from a fundamentally historical standpoint. For a theory of memory, this means that studies of culture do not ask what memory “is” but instead how it was understood,

described, and conceptualized within specific historical contexts at various times and in diverse ways. The second part of this introduction, “Techniques and Functions of Cultural Memory”, is therefore devoted to these aspects; particularly with regard to techniques and so the history of different storage media from writing to computer networks will be discussed, which allows for a totally different organization of cultural references to past times compared to the rituals and other forms of performative staging found in oral societies. Nevertheless, the tradition of classical rhetoric and its instructions for a spatial and pictorial organization of memory or the marking of concrete geographic spaces as sites of memory show that memory techniques were also created for forms of oral communication. This juxtaposition of oral tradition and the various external storage techniques, which have continually developed over roughly three millennia before evolving with immense acceleration in the last two centuries, indicate that from the perspective of a study of culture, we are not dealing with memory at all. Indeed, storage media are never only passive instruments that absorb fixed information but rather, in their changing technological formats, are always involved in the production of content and methods of retrieval. This is also why so many metaphors used for memory processes derive from media technologies. Above all, however, storage media provokes the decisive question of the relation between a merely passive safeguarding of data to the active use of this data, which necessarily requires strategies of selection. Due to the fact that this selection is mostly guided by specific interests, the relation of any culture to its past is proven to be politically relevant. However, the various enactments of a society’s relation to its past also include those areas that are often equated with the concept of culture in everyday language: representations and, also, reflections of memory in the arts, particularly in literature.

The study of culture, which in this narrow sense has been part of academic discussion for about 150 years, attempts to describe and interpret these various forms, techniques, and practices of memory. By doing so, cultural memory studies contributes to the ongoing tradition of these forms, techniques, and practices and is, for this reason, itself a part of what I describe: the theory of cultural memory, in that it concerns itself with the varieties of cultural transmission, shapes what the historical narrative of culture reveals about itself and is, therefore, itself an object of cultural tradition. To put it another way, by describing how cultures remember, cultural theories of memory also remind us of historical forms of culture and are thus interdependent with their object of study. This correlation can be demonstrated in the history of studies of culture to the extent that the

central contributions to theories of cultural memory, as introduced in the first section of this book, always reflect on the modes and relevance of cultural analysis and on the very culture to which these theories belong. One might even go as far as to say that in so far as culture is, by definition, the continuous tradition within a community then any study of culture from the outset is, at least implicitly, based on a theory of cultural memory (cf. A. Assmann 2002; Matussek 2003).

If the introduction at hand understands theories of cultural memory as historically specific drafts of a society's cultural self-image, then it clearly distances itself from empirical or phenomenological studies of memory and also from a mere historical reconstruction of memory theory. Instead, each of the theories of cultural memory introduced here will be questioned about their own historical and discursive context of origin and interpreted as a reaction to these contexts: Which function is attributed to a society's connection to the past within specific socio-historical contexts? Which scientific models of explanation are used or developed to explain this function? And to which historical, social, or political crises or needs did the respective theories react? Put another way, this introduction also presents a cultural history of cultural memory studies.

The publication of a memory aid from the 1930s at the beginning of the twenty-first century, like Walter Benjamin's address book, also defines the systematic and historical framework for this project: the phase of National Socialism and, even before then, the First World War. The political, technical, and aesthetic upheavals of the 1920s were experienced by contemporaries as a massive break with history that had previously been perceived as comparatively continuous. In this context and in the face of the destructive and disruptive energies of modern weapons, traffic, and media technologies, Benjamin himself spoke of the end of traditional human experience. Theorists of culture such as Oswald Spengler predicted *The Decline of the West*; Sigmund Freud questioned the autonomy of the consciousness to be "the master in its own home"; and fascism revealed the thin divide between European civilization and barbarism. All these aspects converge in the observation of a break with traditional ways of thinking, forms of perception, and historical continuities which, at the same time, resulted in the notion of a threat to the continuity of individual as well as collective memory. Most significantly for my approach here, however, it can be stated that today's studies of culture (and with them, in the form of the described interrelationship, cultural memory studies) emerged precisely at the moment when the great chain of continuous tradition that had allowed the Western world to regard itself as a stable



history of ideas appeared to be in disarray. Within a few decades, philosophers such as Henri Bergson; psychologists such as Sigmund Freud; literati such as Marcel Proust; and sociologists such as Maurice Halbwachs established a theoretical discourse about the cultural function of memory and remembrance, which, in retrospect, can be read as compensation for the simultaneous experiences of breach and crisis.

This interdependence between a breach of memory contexts and the bolstered attempts to reconstitute them, which I have already alluded to with respect to the exile from 1933 to 1945, thus allows for the hypothesis that the first boom of cultural memory studies took place at the onset of the modern era at the turn of the twentieth century and the manifold disruptions that went along with it. Yet, the publication date of Benjamin's address book edition that transformed the small volume from an individual memory aid into an object of cultural memory is no less significant: in the same way that the first wave of cultural memory studies appeared under the sign of modernity, while a second one broke in light of "post-modernism", marking the renewed notion of a collapse of the continuum of tradition in the final decades of the twentieth century. The upheaval around 1900 implied the loss of continuities in the traditional context of cultural communication. However, the common framework of interpretation that arranged elements of tradition into a cohesive whole (Jean-François Lyotard speaks of the "meta-narratives" that form the ideological superstructure in the philosophy of history) disappeared at the turn of the twenty-first century (Lyotard 1979/1984; Niethammer 1989/1993). Just like the first experience of discontinuity, the second also leads to a massive compensating movement in different fields of the study of culture, which was initiated in France by Pierre Nora's work about *lieux de mémoire* and in Germany by Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory.

The present introduction wishes to contribute to the explanation, contextualization, and interrelation of both of these waves of cultural memory studies. In so doing, it moves through a widely developed and well-documented area of research (Pethes/Ruchatz 2001, Oesterle 2005, Erll/Nünning 2008, Boyer/Wertsch 2009, Gudehus/Eichenberg/Welzer 2010). Yet in addition, it also suggests drawing systematic consequences from the theoretical and historical observation that cultural memory studies are in great demand particularly in periods of social and media-historical crisis and upheaval. This is in addition to the compensatory function of such a boom of theories that reacts to the threatened continuity of a context of transmission with notions such as "identity" and "permanence". The same theories are shaped by the experience of these

discontinuities and ruptures, to which they owe their articulation in the first place. For this reason, one has to scrutinize whether theories of cultural memory must necessarily be understood as models for the successful stabilization of culture's relation to its past or, to a greater degree, whether the weight of change and variation, as well as difference and otherness within the varying medial and cultural processes of memory, should also be taken into consideration (Zierold 2006, Borsò 2008). To put it in other words: collective memories do not merely serve to stabilize and homogenize concepts of identity, such as a national heritage, but rather they must also accommodate for the fact that contemporary societies are hybrid and asynchronous to a high degree (Bhabha 1994, Creet 2011). They are, at the same time, globalized and regionally differentiated entities (Levy/Sznaider 2001/2006, Dewes/Duhm 2008) in which a large number of competing versions of different histories seek for attention and media presence (Bhabha 1994). Due to the competition of versions and concepts, cultural memory studies are always on the verge of a theory of cultural amnesia (Huyssen 1995).

## **PART I**

# **HISTORY AND TOPICS OF CULTURAL MEMORY STUDIES**



# 1. NATURE OR TECHNIQUE? FROM ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY TO MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

Cultural memory studies offer to describe historical media-supported forms of communication and contexts of tradition by using the semantics of remembering and forgetting. The general notion of “memory”, which alludes to the reference of an individual conscience to an event of the past that is newly perceived, reconstructed, contextualized, and interpreted through this reference, offers an wide array of consecutive concepts suitable to describe processes within cultural contexts. Possibly, “cultural contexts” consists of nothing other than memory-like operations. For instance, so-called Western culture is said to derive from Greek antiquity with respect to contemporary concepts of politics, philosophy, and aesthetics when one thinks about democratic structures, ontological theories of perception, or classical concepts of art, respectively. Furthermore, when one takes a look at the literature that has been passed down to the present day based on such references to the model of antiquity, one notes that it has been shaped by an immense awareness of the cultural significance of memory from its very beginning: Hesiod’s poem about the creation of the world, the *Theogony*, refers to the myth where the muses, who promote man’s various technical and artistic accomplishments, are the common daughters of a goddess named *Mnemosyne*, or memory. When the two classic epics of Greek antiquity that have been attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, both raise a call to the Muses in the beginning they, therefore, refer epic poetry to the faculty of memory. Plato suggests that this memory is something different when a traveling singer presents the epic’s verses from memory as opposed to when they are copied and preserved in writing. In his dialogue *Phaidros*, he tells the myth according to which the Egyptian king, who was presented with the invention of writing by the god Theut, regarded this invention as a weakening of human memory.

Thereby Plato differentiates between a “natural” memory, which is characterized by having its contents available and not only reproducing but also understanding and explaining them, and a “technical”: memory, which saves contents beyond an individual consciousness, but does not

ensure that they are reproduced appropriately. This differentiation is important because Plato's philosophy mainly relies on the former concept—the concept of internalized memory—by separating the world into that of ideas and that of appearances. It also regards man as not only equipped with a body (which belongs to the sphere of appearances), but also with a soul (which belongs to the world of ideas). Man has the possibility of finding access to the world of ideas when his soul—which, because it is immortal, belonged to this world before its incarnation—remembers that which it had previously seen and then forgotten in the course of its incarnation. To Plato, the recognition of truth is, therefore, a process of recollection (*anámnesis*) that in no way requires any external tool.

This notion of an “internal” recollection decisively influenced the Christian tradition of Western culture: in his personal account, *Confessiones* (from around 400 A.D.), the church father Augustine transferred the concept of an immortal soul capable of recollection to the Christian doctrine of salvation, which during the Middle Ages remained a crucial reference in the process of passing down the teachings of the Bible and establishing Christian feast days for the saints. Jean-Jacques Rousseau took up the genre of autobiographical recollection during the secularizing tendencies of the European Enlightenment and his *Confessions*, first published in 1782, lays the foundation for the self-image of the modern subject as a unique individual.

Thus, the concept of “internal” memory also shapes the Western culture of writing and the era of book printing, despite Plato's contrast of recollection and writing. That internal memory cannot function “on its own” but, instead, relies on highly specific techniques that foster its efficacy was also already known in antiquity. Textbooks on rhetoric—particularly those written in Rome—all contain a chapter which, after providing instructions about locating themes and structuring as well as stylistically shaping a speech, suggest a method for memorizing a speech. This is because in antiquity, in court or at the marketplace, speeches were recited by heart (as the familiar metaphor for “internal memory” reads).

This method is called mnemonics and in Latin *ars memoriae*; it is derived from the Greek term for memory (*mnéme*) (see chapter II.3). This art or “technique” of recall—in the original sense of the words *téchne* and *ars*—entailed that one imagined places (*tópoi*, *loci*) for the individual parts of a speech within a structured building, where one could position the individual arguments as images (*eikónes*, *imagines*). Then, during the

speech, move through these imagined rooms in such a way that one could again locate each image at its place (and therefore all of the arguments and examples in their original sequence).

Such a formula seems cumbersome and pretentious and, yet, its significance for the history of culture can hardly be overestimated. Up until the Middle Ages and into the early modern era, mnemonics were regarded as the central organizational form for the communication of knowledge (Berns/Neuber 1993) and so religious, cosmological, and mathematical tracts were adorned with graphics that arranged the objects of knowledge pictorially and spatially (Yates 1966). The end of this millennia-long rhetorical memorization technique boom is connected to an event that can be understood analogously to the invention of writing in the works of Plato: the implementation of the letterpress in Europe from the fifteenth century which laid the groundwork for the modern mass-produced book market in the eighteenth century. As a permanent memory, the medium of the book reduced the necessity of memorizing handed-down knowledge and learning it by heart in a structured way. Therefore, in the seventeenth century, rhetoric was only understood as a set of stylistic rules that especially shaped the literature of the Baroque era, whereas the teachings of *memoria* and *actio* directed at oral presentation were “forgotten”. At the same time, the mnemonic principle of connecting places and images also influenced a further aspect of rhetoric that directly belonged to this stylistics doctrine which preserved the tradition of *ars memoriae*. In order to create a speech’s argumentative structure and exemplary evidence, ancient rhetoricians developed the system of topics—i.e., schematized patterns of reasoning or metaphorical fields that were equally familiar to both the producer and the recipient—and, in this way, supported the plausibility of an argument. Beginning with Aristotle, a *topos* is understood as a basic element of logical argumentation, such as the relationship between cause and effect. Cicero expands this logical system to complex images that one associates with particular contents or examples within a speech, calling them *loci communes* or commonplaces. These *topoi* are significant for the study of cultural memory because they have shaped almost all of Western literature from antiquity to at least the eighteenth century. The most famous of these *topoi*, the *locus amoenus* (a pleasant place of encounter between lovers) is, for example, equipped with an unchanging inventory of sunshine, a babbling brook, and twittering birds and, as such, is recognizable up until the present day. Therefore, the rhetorical system of topics is one of the central constants of cultural tradition (Curtius 1948/1973).

In this way, it can be said that rhetoric, both as a technical instruction and an archive for conventional pictorial images, has itself been the “memory storage” of Western culture. As a topical memory, it functioned mostly in a conservative way by nature. Rhetoric is, even when it shaped the culture of writing in the West, an oral cultural technique and oral cultures tend to pass down their inventory of tradition as unaltered as possible, for deviations would present an additional burden on memory. Plato’s argument that the invention of writing weakens memory is, therefore, confirmed by media history, as cultures of writing, based upon the nearly unlimited storage capacity of the medium, can allow for variation and innovation to an extent that can no longer be grasped by the learning capacity of individual memory. Accordingly, starting in the eighteenth century, rhetorical instructions for the structural and stylistic design of texts fell into disrepute and the autonomous and random creations of a genius were set against their normativity. However, this transformation could only take place because of changing media environments as it was the modern book market that allowed for the development of the principle of artistic innovation. As long as cultural tradition relied on individual memory, it could only include a certain amount of data and had to be structured in a manageable way. Although, when storage media that did not require such a limitation was developed, the need for reduction and structure was eliminated.

Writing and printing not only reduce the necessity of memorizing texts, but also open up the possibility for creating new textual forms, as well as providing the freedom of interpreting and construing existing texts in new ways. Concurrent with the anti-rhetorical aesthetic of genius, modern hermeneutics also came into being in the eighteenth century, thereby establishing a completely new mode of cultural communication that can be formulated as follows: “meaning” instead of “memoria” (Fohrmann 1994, 25).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the idea that models of antiquity sufficed to adequately handle the challenges of the present came to an end. The formula that gives expression to this idea, “*historia magistra vitae*” (history is the teacher of life), is a *topos* in and of itself. This means that we can say that the topical organization of Western cultural history comes to its end when the *topos* of this organizational form, according to which one could specifically learn from tradition, loses prestige (Koselleck 1979/2004). Cultural history then no longer means understanding the present as a mere repetition of given models from antiquity but rather as accounting for the newly recognized versatility and dynamics of historical



processes. The end of rhetoric as an orientation for cultural forms of articulation inevitably goes hand in hand with a new conception of history by breaking with the continuity and repeating the continuation of these forms of articulation. Within this context, the first drafts for a history of culture by Vico, Herder, and Hegel, who are often regarded as the ancestors of present-day studies of culture, also react to the altered function of memory (Kittler 2000). Since the *Sattelzeit* (“saddle period”), as the historian Reinhart Koselleck called the period from about 1750 to 1850, within which the modern realm experience emerged, the society of the modern era has been oriented towards the future. Here, politics, science, and culture are no longer conceived of as preserving repetition, but rather as progressive new designs of a future that must still be shaped, and the function of memory is therefore no longer able to preserve what cannot be altered but, instead, constructs and legitimizes transformation, change, and innovation.

However, there is a second movement, which ultimately breaks with the prevalence of rhetoric memory: the new sciences of man. Beginning with the investigation of physiology since the mid-nineteenth century, this subject dealt even more intensively with mental faculties (Hagner 1997). This subject also contains memory, which became an object of various research projects and theories at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, within the framework of experimental psychology in Germany, Hermann Ebbinghaus studied human memory retention by having his experimental subjects reproduce chains of syllables while he observed how long they could be retained. From these observations, Ebbinghaus deduced a statistical *Vergessenskurve* (“forgetting curve”). To this end, Ebbinghaus (1885) chose asemantic sequences of syllables in order to prevent any semantic auxiliary constructions and to be able to truly illustrate memory retentivity as an abstract quantity. This links his approach to the empiricists and positivistic methods of the time and the experiments on perception and association by Ebbinghaus’ teacher, Wilhelm Wundt, who was the founding father of experimental psychology in Leipzig in the 1870s. At the same time, theories that based memory on physiological and neurobiological processes were developed. These include the theory of the “mnemes” by Ewald Hering (1870/1895) and Richard Semon (1904/1921) as well as Sigmund Freud’s (1895/2001) early theory of psychic pathways (“Bahnung”). Semon and Hering assumed that the neuronal state of excitation associated with the perception of an organism is stored as an “engram”, which can be recognized or spontaneously reproduced (“ecphory”) when re-stimulated. Freud assumed that the link between nerves was caused by a perception

which is repeated with a lower expenditure of energy than the establishment of a new one would require and will, therefore, be preferred and re-elected: i.e., remembered (cf. Baddeley 1976).

In all cases, experimental, physiological, and neurobiological memory research refers to language as the object of investigation as well as to writing as an image-forming metaphor for memory processes. This indicates that the empirical research on memory is also embedded within cultural contexts. Moreover, Freud, along with many others, replaced physiological and neurobiological theories of memory in his later work and explained his concept of the unconscious through biographical and socio-cultural aspects. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1896/1994) had already turned against the statistical measurability and quantifiability of memory processes at the end of the nineteenth century. He attributed memory to systemic habits but, at the same time, he emphasized the subjectivity of memories beyond mathematical time structures. In the 1930s, it was F. C. Bartlett (1932) who opposed empirical memory research as it did not take into consideration the contexts of social action and meaning in which memories are constructed. Again, psychological theories of memory referred to the cultural background of perception and retention. Only a few years later, Maurice Halbwachs would label this cultural background of mental faculties as a “collective memory” in his theory of the social framework of memory (see Chapter I.4).

It becomes apparent that the question of whether memory is part of the biological nature of man or a cultural technique that can be acquired and improved cannot be determined once and for all. Rather, the two options point at the two extreme poles of memory theory. Today, medicine has more or less exact descriptions of the neuronal processes leading to memory phenomena (Squire/Kandel 1999) and the various memory functions in psychology are categorized by an established terminology (Tulving/Donaldson 1972). Nevertheless, the social structure of memory is still widely researched (Welzer 2002, Middleton 2009) and also integrated into the scientific discussion: e.g., by radical constructivism (Schmidt 1991, Berek 2009) or narrative psychology (Hirsch 1997, Straub 1998). In particular, medial forms of collective memory have recently been discussed intensely in interdisciplinary studies (Esposito 2002, Erll/Nünning 2004, Zierold 2006, Borsò 2008, Steinberg/Meißner/Trepsdorf 2009, Erll/Rigney 2009, Neiger 2011). Memory, then, is a human faculty based on both nature and culture, which indicates that one can only do justice to the diverse types and expressions of memory from an interdisciplinary perspective (Petes/Ruchatz 2001).

## 2. PAST OR PRESENT? THE CULTURAL FUNCTION OF RECOLLECTION IN THE WORKS OF NIETZSCHE

Somewhat schematically and hyperbolically, one can sum up the preceding as follows: until the eighteenth century, recollection as the inner ability of an individual was differentiated from memory as a cultural technique, through which all written forms of cultural articulation and transmission were equally structured. As a result, this process of transmission was seen as a repetition and confirmation of traditional assets in the nineteenth century, which was when this rhetorical theory of memory made way for the necessity of innovation. However, when the “old” is no longer the self-evident model for the present, which is simply to be repeated, and, in addition, when memory becomes an object of brain physiology and, later, of psychology, there seems no place for a cultural notion of memory anymore. And yet, the opposite is the case as, in fact, the fall of rhetoric and the rise of empirical science rather facilitates the emergence of theories of cultural memory at the end of the nineteenth century and thus underlines the initial hypothesis of this introduction: that theories of memory react to crises of concepts and practices of transmission and continuity. Indeed, within the period in question, this crisis does not involve the fact that with the end of topical knowledge systems, cultural memory would effectively not have taken place. Again, the opposite is true as the nineteenth century is the era of historicism: i.e., large-scale projects to collect and archive any remnants whatsoever from the past (Rüsen 1993). Such projects—the largest and most famous one in Germany was the *Monumenta Historiae Germanica*—are also only conceivable on the basis of the aforementioned media revolution of print and the extension of archival storage space. In addition to positivistic historiography, theories on the genealogy of culture, as initiated by Vico and Herder, were further developed by authors such as Hegel.

Therefore, the crisis of memory does not refer to a sheer lack of memory in the nineteenth century, but rather to its changing practices of repetition and construction. This raises the question of the function of memory for the history of cultures as well as for present society. Indeed, the first of the

theories of cultural memory introduced here was accordingly, in most parts, a criticism of the practice of memory.

This first theory is Friedrich Nietzsche's second of his four *Untimely Meditations*, which was published in 1874 under the title *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*. Its author was well-acquainted with all of the aspects discussed up to now: Nietzsche held a chair for rhetoric in Basel; he was well acquainted with the physiological and psychological research of his time; and, in his later work, he published a thesis on the history of culture, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), which reflected on the origin (and, in consequence, the relativity) of Christian values.

This impulse also shapes Nietzsche's criticism of historical scholarship and the culture of memory of his time. The preface to his treatise on history begins with a quotation by Goethe: "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity" (Nietzsche 1874/1997, 59). This clearly stems from the time period that began to oppose topical rhetoric. Nietzsche opens the first section of his "meditation" with a powerful image: "Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored" (Ibid., 60).

However, this obliviousness must vex the person who, following Nietzsche's prompt, "considers" this image of a way of being completely unclouded by any historical awareness whatsoever. This is because on the one hand he is aware of, not least of all by of his ability to remember, his superiority to the animal. Yet, on the other hand, he also knows all too well that melancholy and weariness from which the herd is spared. Is memory perhaps not a blessing at all, but instead the curse of man? "But he also wonders at himself, that he cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past: however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him" (Ibid., 61). Thus, Nietzsche inverts the Platonic notion that life in its entirety is a recollection of the vision of ideas:

it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting. Or, to express my theme even more simply: *there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture* (Ibid., 62).

With that said, Nietzsche emphatically transfers the process of remembering and forgetting from the individual memory to the way collectives associate with their past. His invective that referring to this past is harmful to life is based upon a specific concept of “life” that Nietzsche defines as “plastic power”. He uses this term precisely because life—in a biological, but also in a biographical and social sense—is one of the future-oriented processes of creating, developing, and procreating. It must also renounce a merely backward-looking perspective in order to cultivate its potential to form something new, and not endanger it by the treacherous promise of historical “education”: “The study of history is something salutary and fruitful for the future only as the attendant of a mighty new current of life, of an evolving culture for example, that is to say only when it is dominated and directed by a higher force and does not itself dominate and direct” (Ibid., 67).

Nietzsche differentiates between the criticism and the capacity of cultural memory by describing different forms of history: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. All three are forms which, as Nietzsche concedes, man as a social being cannot completely do without as long as they are in the service of life. Yet, all three embrace the danger of assuming an independent reality from the primacy of life. Indeed, as a monumental understanding of history we can, using our main example so far, envision the era before the end of rhetoric, in which the achievements of the past were considered as timeless models for the present. As a result, not only is tradition solidified—a process which Nietzsche unmasks as the formation of a canon in the field of art—but the present is also deprived of any possible appreciation, for everything that is worthy of veneration draws its authority from the past.

In contrast, the antiquarian understanding of history describes the positivist tendency of historicism, which views the preservation of the past as an end in itself, which Nietzsche calls “the repulsive spectacle of a blind rage for collecting, a restless raking together of everything that has ever existed” (Ibid., 75). Here, Nietzsche not only criticizes the authority the past claims over the present, but also the immediate loss of life’s self-propagating force when it remains focused on what has been. Therefore, as a third mode, a critical perspective on history which opposes the hostile tendencies to worship and preserve with questioning and condemning the past is necessary. The blissful state of oblivion is not achieved here either, but at least, we are able to “confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge” (Ibid., 270) by critically reflecting on our own memories.

One of the paths of this reflection, which directed Nietzsche's thrust of his critique of memory for the study of culture, concerns the question of creating culturally valid moral standards. When one dismisses from the Platonic model the notion of the good, which the soul must painstakingly remember over the course of its earthly journey, then the moral will no longer be regarded as an ahistorical and immutable standard. Instead, we are able to scrutinize its origin. According to Nietzsche, this genesis, or as the 1887 writing refers to it, this *Genealogy of Morality*, consists in precisely the process whose result depicts the decline of history in the nineteenth century. This is insofar as every moral judgment is based upon the observation of man as a responsible agent of his actions, thereby indicating morality presupposes the establishment of a memory that guarantees this accountability. According to Nietzsche this establishment is surprising because life, as it progresses, unfolds its highest potential through an "active forgetfulness" (Nietzsche, 1887/1996, 39), which prevents it from being restricted by returning to the past. For this reason, Nietzsche considers the introduction of memory as a monitor of one's actions—or to put it differently, of a conscience—as a strategy by members of a society who would otherwise succumb in the struggle for survival. From this perspective, memory is nothing more than an instrument of power that is able to compensate for weakness, as it introduces a corrective in the form of a bad conscience that makes it possible to monitor members of a society. With regard to the corresponding techniques of control, Nietzsche writes:

Things never proceeded without blood, torture, and victims, when man thought it necessary to forge a memory for himself. The most horrifying sacrifices and offerings (including sacrifice of the first-born), the most repulsive mutilations (castrations, for example), the cruelest rituals of all religious cults (and all religions are at their deepest foundations systems of cruelty) – all these things originate from that instinct which guessed that the most powerful aid to memory was pain (Ibid., 42f.).

Hence, Nietzsche implicitly describes one of the basic convictions of cultural memory studies: memory is not only a minor component of culture among others but is rather its decisive and fundamental element. A culture obtains its uniqueness from nothing other than the common memory of its members, which is not only manifested in customs and rituals, but is constituted by these customs and rituals in the first place. At the same time, Nietzsche turns this basic belief into a cultural criticism in that he identifies the relationship to the past as not only hostile to life but as an outright unnatural act: memory does not belong to the nature of man, but is instead a cultural artifact created to discipline it.