

Memory, Forgetting and the Moving Image

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PREFACE

In the article ‘Between Memory and History: Les *Lieux de Mémoire*’, Pierre Nora laments ‘an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear’ (Nora 1989, p. 7). This slippage of events into an irretrievable past is according to Nora the product of a process that entails the *individualization* and *psychologization* of memory that started in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continues today. This has resulted in a loss of traditional collective forms of remembrance and a complete transformation of the significance and role of memory in contemporaneity. ‘The complete psychologization of contemporary memory’, as Nora puts it, ‘entails a completely new economy of the identity of the self, the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past’ (Nora 1989, p. 15). Rather than sharing Nora’s nostalgia, this book asks what the ‘complete psychologization of contemporary memory’ means and what is the significance of the new economy of self-identity that it has engendered? In short, what can we garner from an understanding of the mechanics of memory and what relevance has the past today?

Contemporary neuro-psychological research has mapped memory processes in the human brain and has developed original models to explain remembering. A growing field of investigation, memory research expands well-established conceptions of remembering and offers original insight into memory within the broader cultural and philosophical spectrum. Given the current epistemological centrality of science in general, and neuroscience in particular, what follows will bring to bear current research on memory on social and cultural practices of remembering and the politics

of memory that inform them. In this approach, we share Kurt Danziger's (2008) assumption that scientific theories of memory are located within historical frameworks that expose the cultural contexts from which they stem. Scientific theories can also provide a means for reflecting on what happens in culture. Accordingly, ways of remembering are affected by cultural assumptions on how memories are understood, brought together and used. At the same time what is remembered or forgotten at any given time participates to the discourses that historically define memory. Cultural and social practices can in fact help us to frame and reflect on psychological models, locating science within culture as a system of knowledge that is operative and therefore critical to contemporaneity. Such mutuality opens up rich fields of investigation that draw from and contribute to the current debate around memory, trauma and amnesia.

We have identified in the neuro-psychological concept of autobiographical memory the 'site' (to use Nora's phrase) of the contemporary psychologization and individualization of memory. First formulated in the 1980s, autobiographical memory provides multifaceted models for an understanding of memory processes and their functions. As the name infers, autobiographical memory regards one's experiential memories tightly relating the individual with remembering. Hence, within the psychological model, autobiographical remembering supports today's 'economy of the self' and the uses of the past that memory foregrounds. This implies that the narrativization of memories into a life story endorses ideas of the self and that the sharing of memories is an important means of socialization. In turn, what counts as a memory and the ways in which memories are narrativized follows social and cultural parameters suggesting reciprocity between the mind and culture.

Current psychological understanding of memory further suggests that remembering is about the present rather than the past. The capacity to form memories underpins the way in which one uses the past to make sense of the present and imagine the future. Within this context memory can be envisaged as a temporal and spatial environment we inhabit subjectively, but also socially and culturally. In addition, memory research also underlies the relevance of emotion and the affective complexity of subjective and inter-subjective remembering. Memories evoke the atmosphere and emotion of experience and expose the 'contingencies' of the past in the present through their emotional implications and resonances. To history and the disciplinary rigor of historiography memory thus adds the feeling and sensation of what happened.

Central to our analysis of contemporary memory is a consideration of forgetting and its significance in the understanding of memory processes and its implications for cultural and social memorialization. Amnesia and trauma characterize a reflection on the historical development of the concept of autobiographical memory that interweaves with the broader issues surrounding contemporary practices of remembrance. The psychological concept thus frames an extensive consideration of the problematic of forgetting and a questioning of the dynamics of remembering *vis à vis* what is unremembered. This regards the legacy of twentieth-century histories and its mobilization within today's global memory landscapes.

The cultural referent of our analysis is the moving image. Modernity, as we shall examine in the first chapter—an historical overview that sets the parameters of our discussion—established reciprocity between mind and screen and drew on the optic procedures of the moving image to posit a new understanding of memory. On the one hand, film was part of the laboratory apparatus for the study of memory processes and its dysfunctions, offering an additional context for the theoretical elaboration of the ways in which memories arise and the mental processes of remembering. On the other hand, the scientific embracing of the moving image was rooted in the medium's propensity—as argued by cultural commentators, filmmakers and psychologists alike—to capture the affect and emotional charge of reality. Not only a record of experience, the moving image revealed through its 'optic unconscious', to borrow Walter Benjamin's phrase, the hidden forms of the real and the emotional residue of experience no matter how disturbing. Hence, the moving image lent psychology a correspondent for what a memory is and an elaboration of the dynamics of remembering and forgetting. The reciprocity established by modernity is still salient and the moving image, as we shall argue, continues to be a cultural referent for today's conceptualization of memory.

In what follows, we consider the moving image in the dual components of image and sound through the work of contemporary artists and filmmakers whose practice deals with memory through film (or video) and sound installation. Contemporary art offers engaging ways to examine both the psychological and cultural components of remembering and to interrogate its multifaceted manifestations. In particular, artists working with the moving image and sound variously investigate the complexities that underlie their sensory qualities, exploiting the intangible yet visceral power of both to deeply affecting effect. This in turn is conducive to a critical reflection on the issues surrounding individual, social and cultural

practices of remembering, in terms of their emotional and affective implications as well as their context and politics.

The book is organized in five chapters. Each chapter deals with specific aspects pertaining to memory and the moving image as they emerge from the artworks examined. Hence, the chapters stand independently as well as building an overarching discussion on contemporary memory and in particular what a foregrounding of forgetting entails to an understanding of the dynamics of remembering within today's global arenas. The first chapter starts with Nora's assumption about the individualization and psychologization of memory in modernity and outlines the key features of the reconceptualization that memory underwent in modernity when it became the subject of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Critical to the modern reconceptualization of memory is the rooting of the self in remembering and the theorization of forgetting when for the first time it was normalized in relation to remembering. Such theorization sets the basis for the modern understanding of memory and the elaboration of the concepts of repression, dissociation and trauma. It also establishes the paradigm for the elaboration of the contemporary concept of autobiographical memory. Our analysis of the psychology of memory in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries focuses on the role that the moving image played in such reconceptualization. Throughout we shall refer to the historical framework put forward in the chapter to contextualize the analysis of the contemporary panorama of memory in its increasingly global manifestations.

The second chapter examines the psychological concept of autobiographical memory and questions its three components: life story, self and memory. Drawing on literary and film theory, the chapter addresses the issues of self-narrative, identity and memory in autobiographical representation. In particular, we focus on the tension between remembering and narrating that historically underpins individual life stories. Central to the discussion is the role of forgetting both in the theorization of autobiographical memory and in its cultural articulations—what we refer to as (auto)biographical memory. From a psychological point of view, autobiographical memory consists of the transitory, though stable, mental representation of experience that constitutes the narrative configuration of the self and of one's knowledge. The chapter considers the frisson between memories and life stories by examining four artworks by US artist Kerry Tribe. In her work, Tribe explores the tension between the psychological and cultural articulation of memories and the circumstantial and unstable

narratives of the self that unfold at the boundaries of remembering and forgetting. Tribe's film installation *H.M.* (2009) enables us to briefly outline the development of the concept of autobiographical memory from the late 1950s to the present. The work is based on the notorious case study of the amnesiac, Henry Gustav Molaison, known as patient H.M. Following drastic brain surgery, Molaison suffered major memory loss and became incapable of forming new memories. The study of his amnesia coincided with the development of memory research in the second half of the twentieth century. Tribe's work aptly conveys the life story of an individual locked in time. In three other works Tribe further investigates the elusiveness of both individual and collective life stories: *Parnassius mnemosyne* (2010), inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's memoir, questions the nature of a memory; *The Last Soviet* (2010), based on the account of the last Russian cosmonaut who was 'forgotten' in space and on his return encountered the major changes brought about by Gorbachev's government, posits the tension between individual and social remembering; and *Milton Torres Sees a Ghost* (2010), an installation based on the personal account of a pilot who was bound to secrecy following his supposed encounter with an unidentified flying object during a mission, brings into question the trustworthiness of memory by exposing the erasure of forgetting. In this last work, Tribe uses sound recording rather than film, a feature that is further discussed in other chapters.

The third chapter focuses on trauma, amnesia and latency. Drawing on the debate surrounding the representability of trauma, we consider the film paradigm in the laboratory study of intrusive traumatic memories and the role that the moving image played and still plays in their definition and theorization. In particular, we examine the significance of the film that was used in postwar experiments on traumatic memories and question why this particular film now goes unnoticed despite the acknowledgement of the studies that it supported. Since the film deals with an Aboriginal rite of passage, it situates the debate on the representability of trauma within the current context of global memories and the criticality of amnesia within it. Central to our discussion are three video installations that loosely constitute a trilogy by filmmaker and sound artist Shona Illingworth. The three works were developed in collaboration with neuro-psychologist Martin Conway who is a leading figure in the study of autobiographical memory. In these works Illingworth interrogates individual and cultural dynamics of memory, particularly in relation to traumatic memories and contested sites of remembrance, and creates immersive visual and acoustic environ-

ments that are viscerally affecting. In *The Watch Man* (2007) Illingworth tackles individual trauma through the portrait of an elderly man who was one of the British soldiers who liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp at the end of World War II. Rather than the flashback, the work engages with the affective and emotional disturbance of traumatic memories and renders it through the immersive intensity of images and sounds. Trauma and latency are also the subject of the video and sound installation *Balnakiel* (2009). The focus shifts from individual to social constructions of trauma and the politics of memory that denote them. In this work, Illingworth creates an immersive and disturbing space that acts as a memory-scape where the local and the global converge in the latent presence of contested histories. In *Lesions in the Landscape* (2015), a three-screen video and sound installation, Illingworth intersects the experience of Claire, a woman who suffers from amnesia, with the island of St Kilda whose inhabitants were evacuated in 1930. The work brings to bear individual amnesia on the stereotyped representation of a place whose complex historical past and present geopolitical relevance are silenced. The work's fragmentary voice-over introduces direct references to mental processes of remembering and its functions through Conway's commentary. Contingency as a result of memory processes posits the emphasis on the present and on the fixity that amnesia generates for both individual and cultural narratives of memory. The work raises the question of the immanence of what is liminal to remembering as a silenced or amnesiac trace.

In the fourth chapter, neuro-psychological theories about the dynamics of remembering and the persistence of mnemonic traces of what has been supposedly 'forgotten' are considered in relation to cultural and transcultural models of memory. The focus is on sound through the artistic practice of sound artist Bill Fontana. By variously translocating and broadcasting environmental atmospherics to different places including historical buildings and monuments, Fontana's sound-sculptures destabilize traditional sites of memory introducing alterity and the affect of haunting pasts. The memory-scapes that these works engender introduce a critique of Nora's *lieu de mémoire* and a reflection on the dynamics of remembering in terms of cultural and transcultural networks. Through Fontana's work we also discuss the memory trace as a mediated trace and the connotations that defines it in relation to the globalized arena of digital technologies, thus foregrounding some of the issues about today's 'uses of the past'.

The fifth chapter expands the analysis of the memory trace and considers it through the specificity of the film archival trace. The chapter looks

at the archive as a site of consignment that—as Jacques Derrida argues—sits at the interface of technologies of inscription and the psychology of memory, and questions the potential of remembrance afforded by the moving image. In particular, we reflect on a number of works respectively by artists and filmmakers Lutz Becker, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Harun Farocki, and Eyal Sivan. All the works considered use archival film footage that the artists variously montage and remediate. Rather than a documentary use of the archival footage as illustration, remediation affords a critical engagement with the filmic trace and its affective and emotional resonance. Early twentieth century histories of fascism and colonialism, the two world wars and the Holocaust are represented through the images that documented them. The remediation of the archival film footage reveals the atmosphere, expression and feeling of these events and solicits a reflection on their enduring consequences in the present at the boundaries of memorialization and history. It is by representing us with the feelings, aspirations and sensorium of the first decades of the twentieth century that the moving image reveals ways in which the tragic events of this period still impinge on contemporary constructions of global memories. By variously manipulating and montaging the historical footage, the artists considered reflect on the archival significance of the moving image as a trace that emerges at the interstices of remembering and oblivion. The results are enquiries into the emotional residues of memories and the affect of histories through the specificity of archival film footage.

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