


Abstract This paper has two objectives: one is to explore the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, an issue traditionally neglected in psychological memory research; the other is to question the widespread dichotomy of individual and social memory. To do so, a cultural-historical perspective is outlined that allows us to conceive of individual memory as an inextricable part of an overarching cultural discourse, the discourse of cultural memory. In this discourse, narrative practices are of central importance because they combine various cultural symbol systems, integrating them within one symbolic space. In order to explain and illustrate this conception of narrative, a historical memorial and work of art is examined. Three narrative orders of this artwork are distinguished—the linguistic, semiotic and performative or discursive—and discussed as particular forms of meaning construction. Together, they constitute a mnemonic system, a symbolic space of remembering and forgetting in which the time orders of past and present are continuously recombined.

Key Words cultural memory, narrative, remembering, symbol system

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Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory

Reading the psychological literature on memory, there is little doubt who plays the leading roles on this stage. The radiant hero in the lime-light is Remembering, attracting all attention, support and sympathy. The shady villain is Forgetting, the trouble maker who is lurking behind the scenes, always ready to counter-act Remembering and thwart its achievement. There are various scenarios in which this plot is acted out. Typically, Remembering is forced to use all kinds of tricks to resist the villain's assaults and to guard the treasure—the accumulated wealth of past experience and knowledge. While Remembering strives to defend this precious treasure, maintaining it as untouched as possible, Forgetting never tires of trying to steal and destroy it (or at least to damage or, insidiously, to distort and falsify it). In this way, the conflict about the treasure of the past takes on still another dramatic dimension: it becomes a struggle for truth.

Considering the dominant tradition of psychological research on memory from the days of Helmholtz to present neurocognitive approaches, it would not be hard to flesh out this story. Furthermore, it is a story that is not limited to the genre of general psychology. From ancient times until modernity, memory and remembering were thought of as something positive, while forgetting, by contrast, had negative connotations. Forgetting, in most general terms, meant to lose or fail to retain something essential to human life; it meant an absence, emptiness or loss precisely where a memory, a positive content, should be. Gross (2000) points out that what made the very notion of remembering not only a cognitive and intellectual but also a moral and cultural ideal of all premodern ages was not just the ability to store and retrieve a large amount of information. Much more important was the kind of knowledge and experience recalled and the effect that this recollection had on one's behavior and character.

The true rememberers not only remembered better than others the events and experiences of their own lives but repeatedly called to mind the highest goals and values of the culture, not simply as a feat of skill, but in order to take them to heart and incorporate them into the fabrics of their lives. (Gross, 2000, p. 25)

For Plato, the philosophical founding father of much of Western history of thought, the notion of *anamnesis* (recollection) implied that memory is the golden path to the highest intellectual and spiritual truths a human being could know. True recall could lead one's soul back to its origin, to that divine state of knowledge and being one had experienced before birth. Those unable to recollect what they had known prior to drinking of the waters of Lethe (forgetfulness) were condemned to live out their lives in the shadowy world of the mundane without ever reaching any insight into their fundamentally spiritual and divine nature. As Gross emphasizes, Christianity also joined together memory with insight, spirituality and the deeper moral value of life. The traditions of enlightenment and scientific reasoning, while transforming the notion of memory from a basically stable world to the ever-changing outlook of modern life, have associated a similarly high value with memory and remembering. Most models in neuroscience, artificial intelligence and computer science depict memory as an 'entity' that is as good and desirable as it is powerful, and it is as powerful as it is capable of storing ('saving') information in an ultimately all-encompassing storeroom—Augustine called it the 'large and boundless chamber' of the mind—in which the treasures of

knowledge and experience are well protected from possible assaults of the, by now, well-known villain.

The memory researchers Elizabeth and Geoffrey Loftus (1980) asked psychologists to choose between two theories of remembering and forgetting. One theory claims that everything that happens is permanently stored in the mind; in consequence, all details of past experience can eventually be recovered with the right technique. The other theory (while sharing with the first one the same basic assumption of memory as a warehouse of the past) states that there are experiences that may be permanently and irrecoverably lost from this warehouse of memories. Eighty-four percent of psychologists opted for the first version. That is to say, they believed that the fight against the villain Forgetting eventually could be won if only the proper weapons, that is, memory techniques were used (see Schacter, 1996, Chap. 3, for a critical discussion). We can extend this picture by including psychoanalysis and the clinical literature with its focus on mental disorders and psychopathologies of memory and remembering, today perhaps most spectacularly highlighted in public discussions about dementia such as Alzheimer's. Again, the figure of the villain Forgetting also looms widely in the discourse of such a precarious medical construct as 'dementia'.

Cultural Geographies of Remembering and Forgetting

This opens up an even broader cultural discourse of memory that reaches far beyond academic and clinical worlds. We easily identify here the same characters performing a similar drama. In fact, today's public memory discourse is all about the celebration of the struggling hero Remembering. Countless symbolic and material practices of commemoration, remembrance and historical self-reflection have taken on the forms of societal rituals, carried out by specialized professions and institutions. Just consider the 'culture of anniversaries', the annual mnemonic circle celebrating the founding of states and establishment of institutions, births and deaths of rulers, declarations of peace and outbreaks of wars, uprisings and revolutions. The forms and modes of public commemoration include not only public gatherings, ceremonies and media events, but also artifacts like orders, prizes, books, films and exhibits. But more, a thick layer of this commemoration culture consists of monuments and other symbolic structures, not to forget the names of streets, squares, towns, lakes, islands and mountains. Is there a country, a region, a culture in which no temples of memory have been erected? Public life in the West

seems to have been covered with a dense texture of practices and artifacts of memorization, a mnemonic fabric from which nobody can escape.

Why do we remember? And why do we remember socially, together with others? In the wake of Halbwachs' (1925/1980) concept of *mémoire collective*, Assmann (1992, 1997) has argued that each culture develops a sense of coherence that is grounded in an underlying connective structure. This structure of cohesion connects and interweaves along two dimensions: social and temporal. David Middleton (2002) has reminded us that John Dewey made a similar case. Dewey (1938) saw individual and collective experiences as interconnected through the 'principle of continuity' and the 'principle of interaction', representing the longitudinal (or temporal) and the lateral (or interactional) dimension of human experience. Together, they create a shared horizon of experience, understanding and orientation—a common experiential ground for a sense of coherence and belonging.

Another way to put this is to say that both dimensions open up a symbolic space of meaning that binds individuals to each other. At the same time, this symbolic space allows for a continuous flow of actions, narratives, images and other texts from one generation to the next, in this way preserving and transmitting theoretical and practical knowledge and formative experiences from times past (Brockmeier, 2001). In the process, a prolonged sense of expectation and hope emerges, and ideas of long-term continuity take shape. That is, the symbolic space extends into both the simultaneous (the sphere of actions of events that occur at the same time) and the successive (actions and events that occur one after another), a successive that also includes anticipation and projection—in short, the future.

Geertz's (1983) idea of 'common sense as a cultural system', Bruner's (1990) notion of 'folk psychology', Foucault's (1966/1970) concept of 'episteme' and Bourdieu's (1980/1990) conception of 'habitus' suggest consonant visions. What binds individuals together into a cultural community is the centripetal force of a connective structure that organizes a considerate body of thought and knowledge, beliefs and concepts of self: that is, a worldview rooted in a set of social rules and values as well as in the shared memory of a commonly inhabited and similarly experienced past. The overarching function is to guarantee a cultural sense of belonging—in contrast, for instance, to a belonging based on kinship, race, material property or economic dependence. At issue, then, is a sense of belonging that binds the individual into a culture while binding the culture into the individual's mind.

The Memory Discourse of Modernity

However, although the thick layer of cultural memory in modern societies seems to have fused with the natural appearance of things, the omnipresence of practices, artifacts and institutions of commemoration is itself a historical phenomenon. In fact, both phenomena—the apparent naturalness of the commemoration layer and its cultural and historical character—overlap. Museums, for one, are a case in point. Museums do not only have histories that are closely connected to larger cultural histories (including particular concepts of history); they also represent attempts to conceal their own historical perspectivalism, that is, they ‘transform History into Nature’ (Sherman & Rogoff, 1994, p. x). We can apply what Geertz wrote about common sense as a thought system to the historical make-up of most museums and other institutions of memory, namely that it is one of their inherent characteristics precisely to deny this and ‘to affirm that its tenets are immediate deliverances of experience, not deliberate reflections upon it’ (Geertz, 1983, p. 75).¹

Yet even this attempt of naturalization is part of the Western public culture of memory, a culture that can be seen as an expression and symptom of modern societies in which permanent change is a fundamental principle of social and individual life. Continuous modernization, as sociologists tell us, has not been imposed on otherwise stable societies; it is, in contrast with traditional communities, the very essence of capitalist societies. Dissolving all traditions and experiencing the continuous breakdown of certainties is at the heart of modernity and, even more, of late or post-modernity. In synchrony with constantly devaluing traditional resources of sense and meaning, Western societies have developed a differentiated system of public remembering and commemoration—as if to compensate for the permanent loss of historical stability. The faster modern societies change and traditions of knowledge, religion, ethics and lifeworld lose influence, the more energy flows into public practices, institutions and the establishment of artifacts that conjure up ‘lasting’ cultural memories. While in the Middle Ages and early modern times the center of a European town was typically marked by the cathedral and the castle, the urbanistic centers of many modern Western cities are indicated by memorials and museums. There seems to be an odd dialectic at work, as if for every people, cultural and ethnic community obliterated by Western culture (be it premised as colonialism, imperialism or globalization), an ethnological museum, or at the very least an exhibition, has opened.

Various authors (e.g. Assmann, 1992; Gross, 2000; Terdiman, 1993) have pointed to a 'memory crisis' in modern Western cultures. Epistemologically speaking, this crisis is not only about the *process* of memory as it used to be understood (i.e. essentially, the idea of storage of knowledge in, and retrieval from, a warehouse), but also about the *content* of memory (what is remembered, and what not). That is to say, the crisis is about the very notion of memory. This notion turned out to be based on highly culture-specific practices of remembering. And as cultures change, so do their memory practices and their ideas of what is worth and desirable to be remembered. Beginning in the 19th century, this memory crisis has permeated not only the political and architectural structures of modernity but also the foundations of academic disciplines like psychology and psychiatry (with its shift from the 'soul' to 'memory' and the 'mind'), sociology (which was supposed to make sense of a world in permanent transition) and anthropology (which aimed to record the discovery of non-Western cultures as part of their 'Westernization').

Yet probably the most sophisticated expression of the modern memory crisis has been articulated in literature and the arts. From the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and the novels of Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Thomas Mann, to the emergence of photography, film and musical recording, the modernist effort to remember and the search for time lost arises in the throes of the sociocultural earthquake called modernity. The modernist desire for remembrance, as one of the first of its 'archeologists', Walter Benjamin (1983/1999), described it, originates between the ruins of traditions and the awareness of uncertainty as a basic condition of life in a capitalist world. For Benjamin, the existential need to remember is a by-product not so much of the effort to capture lost time (as in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*), as of time passing, the time of a reality that is in permanent flux. Lambek and Antze (1996) have discussed several recent suggestions by cultural theorists, historians and philosophers (such as Hacking, 1995) to historicize the very idea of memory. The upshot of their review is that the discourse about a crisis in memory is present, from science and philosophy to literature and the arts, throughout the 19th and, increasingly, the 20th century, to the degree that it simply is 'the flip side of rapid social change' (Lambek & Antze, 1996, p. xiv).

Considering again our starting point, we notice that the more we have moved into cultural and historical contexts, the more the plot about the hero Remembering and the villain Forgetting runs into difficulty. In light of the cultural experience since modernity, the idea that there is something like the distinct figure of the hero Remembering

becomes as precarious as the idea of the hostile villain Forgetting. Within the larger historical view, a dynamic comes to the fore that transcends this simple mechanics and, indeed, questions the entire assumption behind it. But what, then, would be a more appropriate way to view this obviously more complex interplay?

Whose Memory?

Apparently, what is at stake here is not two distinct entities or operations but one cultural fabric in which remembering and forgetting are to be reconfigured as two inextricably interrelated aspects. Since Bartlett, Vygotsky and Luria, psychological researchers of memory have brought forward a number of arguments that human memorizing and remembering cannot be properly understood without taking into account the social functions it fulfills and the cultural web in which it is integrated (more recently, e.g., Bruner, 1994; Fivush & Haden, in press; Hirst, in press; Middleton & Edwards, 1990). What I propose in this paper is that this perspective also allows us to overcome the traditional picture of Remembering vs Forgetting, and instead conceive of them as two sides of one process, a process in which we give shape to our experience, thought and imagination in terms of past, present and future.

But, again, the time modalities of past, present and future do not mark clear-cut distinctions; nor are they ontological categories representing real things 'out there' in the world such as *the past* or *the present*. Remembering my first visit to the sea when I was a little boy is both past and present, and it easily can become fused with the anticipation of my next trip to the sea. And this blurring of times is all the more true if the memory is about a 'momentous event' (Pillemer, 1998), such as, when I got caught by a current during my first swim in the sea and, in my terror, managed only with great effort to return to land. In order to understand such multi-temporal configuration of experience, as well as its emotional and evaluative matrix, it seems to be more productive to conceive of memory as a movement within a cultural discourse that continuously combines and fuses the now and then, and the here and there. In the process, this movement traverses various modes of knowledge, awareness and consciousness (including the continuum from the unconscious and pre-conscious to the conscious and self-conscious).

What does this mean for the individual mind? It means to see the mind as one element in this movement; which is to realize that a decontextualized mind, a mind taken out of its discursive and cultural

environment, is an abstraction that isolates just one moment in a continuous flow.

Of course, it is not an entirely new idea that remembering and forgetting relate like the two Janus faces pertaining to one constructive process in which knowledge and experience past, present and anticipated are organized. Even speaking in terms of traditional memory research, encoding and retrieving are today widely regarded as constructive processes whose outcome is highly dependent on the specific context in which they occur (e.g. Conway, Gathercole, & Cornoldi, 1997; Schacter, 1996). Significantly enough, surveying memory research in the 20th century, Schacter (1995) emphasizes a clear 'constructivist' tendency of recent findings. There is less agreement, however, about what follows from the constructivist view. Apparently, there are different implications, leading to different strategies of investigation. The one I want to highlight is to conceive of all memory constructions—including both retrieval and encoding—as being based on interpretive choice, that is, on selection. This mnemonic selection (which is not to be confused with what psychologists call 'selective perception') is organized according to criteria such as cognitive and emotional relevance, sensory openness and sensitivity, or any other category of meaning and personal significance. Although the criteria of selection are different in the public arena of social remembrance and commemoration, the principle of selection basically is the same.²

What are the consequences of the principle of mnemonic selection? Selecting information, be it for encoding or retrieving, means rejecting and excluding other information—information deemed to be obscured, repressed or forgotten. Furthermore, because remembering as selecting always creates gaps, distortions, contradictions and other incoherences, it also is reconfiguring: by closing or ignoring gaps and omissions, it arranges new orders and creates new coherences. That is, it is organizing and reorganizing the selected fragments of memory into meaningful schemata, to use Bartlett's term. Again, what is not integrated into schemata (and that is subsumed under certain ideas of meaningfulness) is left out, suffering the fate of most of our experiences: to drift from a short life in consciousness into oblivion.

Frames of Memory

Autobiographical remembering is a much researched case in point. Essentially, it is about forgetting: forgetting about most of what happened in one's life-time. Just consider the temporal dimension of a complete autobiographical memory, a memory without gaps and

omissions, without any forgotten detail. To be sure, completely recalling one's life would take at least as long as one's life itself. It would be like drawing a map of the world in the ratio of one to one.

Yet there also is a tradition of efforts to understand the dialectics of remembering and forgetting that reaches far beyond academic psychology, ranging from the ancient philosopher Simonides, who added to the *art memoriae*, the art of memory, an *art oblivionis*, an art of forgetting (without which, for Simonides, no intentional remembering would be possible at all), to the seminal work of Halbwachs (1925/1980) at the beginning of the 20th century. Halbwachs' work, like that of Vygotsky and Bartlett, has been rediscovered over the last two or three decades, especially among scholars of social and cultural memory. But it also resonates in the work of contemporary psychological memory researchers like Fivush (1994; Fivush & Haden, in press), Hirst and Marnier (1996), and Nelson (1996). For Halbwachs, the question is not 'Why do we remember and forget socially?', as I put it earlier, but rather, 'Why do we remember and forget individually?' In his view, it is not the individual mind that primarily organizes memory but shared cognitive structures or 'frames' of memory that inhere in any social groupings. Like his mentor Durkheim, Halbwachs held that the organization of remembering and commemoration is a fundamental concern of every human society. And because human individuals are always social beings, they remember and forget according to the memory frames and practices of the groups of which they are members.

Using a concept suggested by Markus, Mullally and Kitayama (1997), we could call these memory frames and practices 'contexts of cultural participation'. As we are members of a variety of such contexts of cultural participation—families, classes, professional organizations, political parties, and the like—we remember according to several social frames that emphasize different aspects of our experienced reality. Those aspects that do not fit the collective frame of memory, and, thus, are not passed on from one generation to another, will be forgotten.

As we typically grow into a social community, we acquire its frames and memory practices spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, as we learn to communicate and to organize our individual memories in the process of everyday routines. But why, then, do we not all have the same memories? How does Halbwachs account for individual differences in remembering? Obviously, we are not all members of the same groupings, even if we share some of our social identities—for example, being French, or Parisians, or academics in the 1920s—with larger collectives. While most Parisian academics in

the 1920s, as Halbwachs found, had indeed more or less the same 'mental configuration' as all French people in their view of the historical importance of France and French culture, they could simultaneously differ from them in their religious and political world-views or in their self-esteem as professors of a prestigious Parisian *Grand École*. Ultimately, therefore, almost every individual develops a different combination of social frames of memory and, accordingly, remembers and forgets differently.

Halbwachs did not dispute that there are forms of individual remembering based on 'cerebral processes', but for him these were subjective 'mental operations' that contribute to shaping and transmitting the memories of the group or society that is the actual preserver and conveyor of memory. Thus, even when we are individually remembering, we are recalling the memories of a social community. Halbwachs' *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925/1980) argued—a few years before Bartlett (1932; see Shotter, 1990; and Tschuggnall and Weltzer, 2002) made a similar point—that human remembering and forgetting take place along the paths laid out by certain cognitive structures or frames of memory. And because these frames are defined by a culture, we always carry the memories of this culture, even if they appear to be most private and intimate. In fact, the very idea of unique memories rooted in the autobiographical past of an individual self may itself be the result of particular Western narrative practices and conventions (see Wang and Brockmeier, 2002).

But what exactly does it mean that a culture 'defines' such frames or schemata of memory? How does culture shape the practices and the notion of memory?

Memory Texts

Again, there are various suggestions as to how to tackle this question. The sociohistorical and sociocultural tradition developed in the wake of Vygotsky and Luria has proved to be particularly productive, especially, I suspect, because of the strong emphasis on cultural 'tools' such as language and other semiotic systems that mediate the relationship between the individual and what Halbwachs conceived of as social communities (Cole, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Valsiner, 1998; Wertsch, 1998). Not surprisingly, there also are comparable approaches in philosophy and other disciplines that focus on language, texts and forms of semiotic (i.e. sign-mediated) discourse that can shed new light on how culture defines frames or schemata of remembering and forgetting.

Deconstructionist theory of text and literature, for example, suggests

remembering and forgetting as a writing that, like a palimpsest, is written over a previous writing, which in this way is absent and present at the same time. Derrida (1967/1974) and other poststructuralist thinkers loom widely into this vision, as well as Bakhtin's (1975/1981) idea that language is the living archive of numerous layers of meanings, present and past, that are connected, via a myriad of dialogical events, to words, utterances and entire speech genres. And as for both Derrida and Bakhtin the mind is a deeply textual construction (Brockmeier, in press), it is the case for memory, the temporal organization of the mind. Drawing on these approaches, literary theorists such as Lachmann (1997) have argued that the entire textual universe of literature and poetry can be seen as a continuous interplay of cultural meanings that, in the act of reading, opens up to a multivoiced conversation of texts. In this endlessly meandering dialogical weave, our consciousness (and subconsciousness) is related to all possible and impossible experiences, creating in this way limitless frames (i.e. texts and contexts) of individual remembering and forgetting within an all-encompassing cultural memory. Such an (inter-)textual conception of cultural memory comes close to Lotman's (1990) conception of cultural memory as a 'semiotic universe' that is constituted by all sign and symbol systems of a culture, interacting among each other, at a given point in history.

An important insight to be gained from this literature is that it does not suffice to depict cultural memory as a social process in which remembering appears to be the other side of forgetting. Rather, it is essential to see that this process itself is culturally mediated within a symbolic space laid out by a variety of semiotic vehicles and devices. These cultural artifacts comprise sign and symbol systems, most notably oral and written language, and other systems of communication and notation (Brockmeier, 2000a). Moreover, they also include special memory devices and institutions (from notebooks and encyclopedias to libraries, archives and computers), memorials and other architectures and geographies in which memory is embodied and objectified.

Even in this view, the individual memory, for example, about one's life appears only at first sight really 'individual'. Upon closer scrutiny, we find it 'distributed' in the same way one's knowledge and one's self is distributed 'beyond one's head' (Bruner 2001). We might conceive of this larger layout of memory as an array of texts, documents and other artifacts that have become intermingled with the texture of one's autobiographical memory. Indeed, we are immersed in lifeworlds of memory, made out of texts: there are

identification and membership cards, birth certificates and documents from schools, universities and other institutions we attended; there are diary entries, CVs, copies of job applications, files with court proceedings and medical documents like case histories; there are private letters, tapes, videos and boxes with photographs from all periods of our lives, shot at a variety of places and showing not only ourselves, relatives and friends but also a number of persons who, at some point in the past, crossed our paths; there are the books and papers with notes in their margins, maps, notepads and address books with phone numbers of relatives and friends to whom we might talk when we think there is something in our past that we might have forgotten; and there are, I suppose in the lives of most of us, computers whose hard disks are saturated not only with documents of one's work and thought, as well as those of colleagues, friends and enemies, but also with a few hundred internet bookmarks: pathways to the unlimited Borgeian libraries and archives to which we are connected electronically, 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. Without doubt, we not only have but live in objectified archives of autobiographical memory. And these, to be sure, are perfectly normal, culturally canonical lifeworlds.

Patently, all these memory texts escape the traditional dichotomy of individual and social memory. They demonstrate that there is a continuum between selves and communities, individual and social memories. If we, after all, still want to use these categories, we should be aware that we are talking about fleeting textual and discursive realities. These realities are simultaneously social and individual, embedding the individual mind into the corpus of a culture. Without this meandering connective structure of memory, without this symbolic space populated by countless memory texts, we are unable to remember what our 'individual' lives have been all about.

Narrative: The Memory of Time

We should keep in mind, however, that this symbolic space is not only about artifacts. All of these memory texts enable, and rely on, specific human activities that we might call memory practices. I believe that narrative is crucial among these practices of memory. And this is all the more true whenever it comes to more complex constructions of meaning in our lives. If I do not only want to count the photographs from my past collected in that box and not only name the persons they show, but also want to point out why they mean anything to me at all, then narrative becomes the hub of my account.

It then becomes clear that these memory practices, to a large degree, are narrative practices or, at least, intermingled with and surrounded by them.

Why does narrative play such a central role for cultural memory? I suspect that the multifunctional nature of narrative discourse is pivotal here, the fact that narrative is capable of playing a number of different (cognitive, social and emotive) roles at the same time. In doing so, it combines several forms of life. Consider that cultural memory comprises not only knowledge and practical experience but also moral and aesthetic values. It is shot through with moral evaluations, as they are situated within concrete contexts of discourse, and with the narrator's perspectival self-positionings as well as the positioning of others (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

From a historical point of view, Assmann (1992) suggested distinguishing two aspects of the transition through which cultural memory passes on a moral order, one being normative, the other being narrative. The normative is expressed and enforced by law, political, economic and, in part, religious power. The narrative is articulated and dispersed through a culture's countless discursive registers: from myth and fairy tales to literature, film, advertisement and everyday conversation. This is, of course, neither to say that the normative cannot use or include narrative forms—just consider the crucial role of narrative in law (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000)—nor to say that narratives cannot give form to normative principles—for example, in the plot forms and genres of canonical 'master narratives' and in 'moral stories' often used in a seemingly peripheral fashion in everyday conversation (see Plummer, 1996).

Yet there is still another and, perhaps, more fundamental potential of narrative at work that I would like to highlight here because, I suspect, it leads to the very essence of cultural memory. This is narrative's distinctive capacity to give shape to the temporal dimension of human experience. Put differently, narrative endows the inherent historicity of human existence with cultural meanings. On a similar note, Freeman (1993) has claimed that it is only narrative that enables us to think about our lives and ourselves historically. And for Carrithers (1991), 'it is narrativity which allows humans to grasp a longer past and a more intricately conceived future, as well as a more variegated social environment' (p. 306). In another work, Carrithers (1992) went on to argue that narrative consists not merely of telling stories, but also of understanding complex nets of actions and events. In this view, the human capacity for planning and anticipating events is at base not different from narrative thought:

Human beings perceive any current action within a large temporal envelope, and within that envelope they perceive any given action, not as a response to the immediate circumstances or current mental state of an interlocutor, but as part of an unfolding story. (Carrithers, 1992, p. 82)

Drawing on Carrithers, Nelson (1996) has pointed out the cognitive implications of narrative discourse. These are revealed not only in the ontogenetic emergence of 'memory talk' and the construction of an individual autobiography, but also in humans' efforts to cope with the complexity of social relationships in any society. This includes capturing events and developments that take place over long periods, or, as Carrithers put it, viewing things within a large temporal envelope. Nelson emphasizes that this distinctively human quality originates at a developmentally early stage. Akin to authors such as Carrithers (1992), Donald (1991) and Bruner (2002), who argue that narrative precedes theoretical thinking and categorial abstraction, Nelson (1996) suggests that there is a discursively enacted narrative imagination that even precedes the onset of children's language development. In a nutshell, our ability to localize ourselves in time and history—and this may be one of the basic functions of memory—seems to be grounded, both sociogenetically and ontogenetically, in narrative discourse.

Moreover, from a historical vantage point, narrative is not just one, even if basic, communicative and cognitive register among others. Insofar as the emergence of cultural memory, that is, historical consciousness, is concerned, narrative is essential in connecting other forms of discourse and symbolic mediation, and integrating them into the symbolic space of a culture. To explain this argument in more detail, let us look at an example, namely a memorial designed to express precisely what is our issue here: the historical dialectic of cultural remembering and forgetting.

Remembering Forgetting: The Berlin Memorial to the 1933 Bookburning

Bebelplatz is a square in the historical center of Berlin, surrounded by the 18th-century buildings of the National Opera, Hedwigs Cathedral and the former Royal Library. Towards the open side of the square, the view stretches to the front façade of the main building of Humboldt University (Figure 1). In the middle of Bebelplatz, the Israeli artist Micha Ullmann has installed a memorial to the Nazi bookburning that occurred at exactly that site in 1933. In a spectacular demonstration of their recently acquired power, and of how they intended to use it, members of Nazi organizations burnt about twenty thousand books

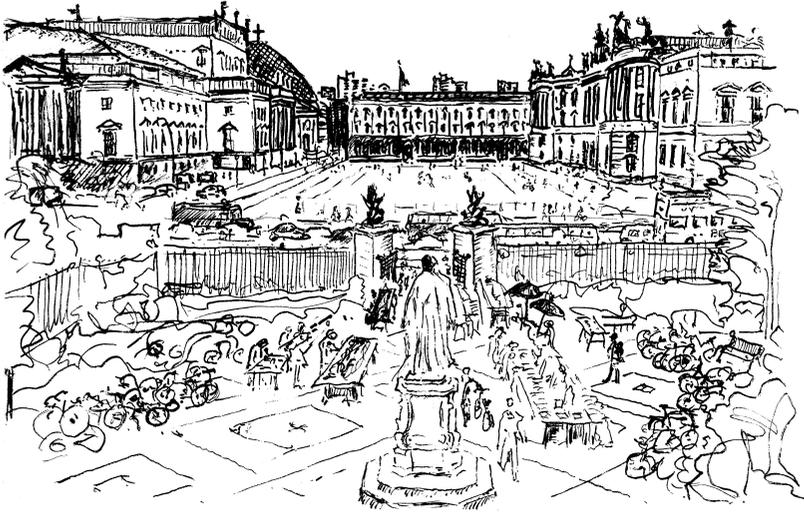


Figure 1. Berlin Bebelplatz today: view from Humboldt University

from the adjacent Royal Library by democratic, socialist and Jewish authors (Figure 2). The films and photographs capturing the events on the square have often been presented, first, in the official Nazi news and, after the end of the Third Reich, in many publications and documentaries shown on television and in schools. They have, indeed, become intermingled with many other 'memory texts', individual and social.

The 1933 bookburning has become an emblematic scene that slipped into the collective picture memory of generations, not only of Germans. When, in 1999, Günter Grass received the Nobel Prize for literature, he presented himself upon his arrival in Stockholm as 'a writer from the country of bookburning'.

The memorial is constructed as a 'negative monument' which, if one does not know its exact location in the middle of the square, can easily be overlooked: it is an underground installation, a submerged, hermetically sealed chamber with a small transparent ceiling, like a window, flush with the level of the square (Figure 3). The square is covered with its original plaster from the early 1930s. Yet even if we walk across the square and over the ceiling, trying to look into the illuminated chamber under the plaster, we do not see very much. With some effort we recognize white bookshelves, like vague remains of a



Figure 2. Bookburning on Bebelplatz, Berlin, May 10, 1933 (© Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (bpk), 2001, Berlin)

library recently discovered in an archeological dig. But the shelves, sufficient for twenty thousand books, are empty. The books are plundered. We view what is absent, what is missing.

However, nothingness and emptiness are usually not the stuff that we remember. Semiotically speaking, the semiosis of remembrance and recall is based on present signs, not on absent signs. In fact, in the history of memory practices, as Umberto Eco (1987) has argued, there is no such thing as an *ars oblivionalis* corresponding to the *ars memorativa*. But what about creating signs that aim to represent precisely such emptiness, an absence based on the loss of something? Apparently this is what the memorial suggests: signs of absence, of something missing; ciphers of a void that cannot even be filled by memory; traces of an attempt of forgetting through extinction.

Peeking through the transparent ceiling of the underground chamber, we nevertheless can decipher several things. Faced with the remains of destruction and 'cultural cleansing', we become aware that the installation materializes the memory—one memory—of this place. And this includes recovering a sense of that type of violent forgetting that probably will forever be associated with this particular place.

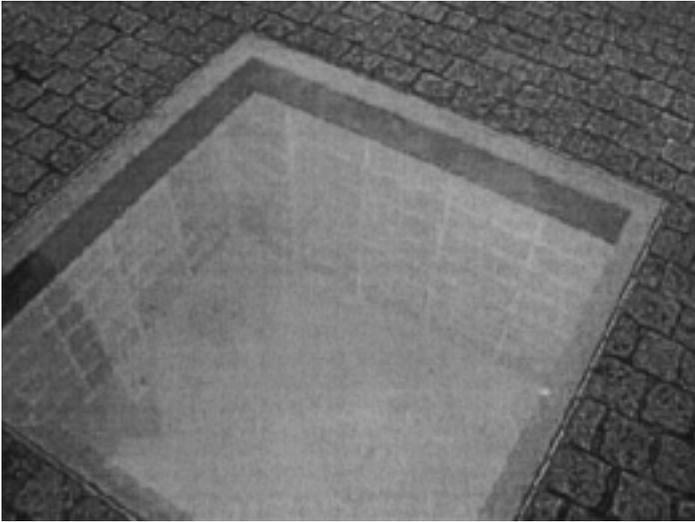


Figure 3. Micha Ullmann: 'Library' memorial/sculpture, 1995

Assmann (1995) has made the point that even if Eco is right and there is no art of oblivion corresponding to the art of remembering, there are, however, forms of collective forgetting that correspond to forms of collective remembering. One is what ethnologists call 'structural amnesia'. This form, Assmann explains, consists in forgetting those elements of the past that are no longer in meaningful relations to the present. This form is typical of oral societies. Its counterpart in literate societies is 'the willful destruction of commemorative symbols (documents and monuments), including the burning of books, the destruction of inscriptions (*damnatio memoriae*), and the rewriting of history as described, for example, by Orwell in *1984*' (p. 366). Assmann observes that there seems to be no comprehensive term to denote these acts of intentional and violent cultural oblivion. On an individual level, they can be compared to repression, whereas structural amnesia corresponds to forgetting. In describing the various forms of 'annihilating cultural memory', Assmann himself speaks of 'cultural repression' (p. 366).

In this sense, Ullmann's memorial configures a memento of the annihilation of cultural memory that the artist makes 'visible' as underlying the plaster of this square. We are confronted with a void 'embodying' the irretrievable loss caused by this act of cultural repression, a void that continues to be part of German history and culture.

And there is a further level. The installation also represents the viciously forgetful and, simultaneously, obsessively documenting and commemorating bias of our epoch mentioned at the beginning of this essay. After all, this is a memorial that, in artistically alluding to a library or an archive, aims to highlight not only the dialectic of remembering and forgetting but also the struggle about our commemorative registers of things past and present—so far, the story of the memorial on Berlin's Bebelplatz.

But what exactly is meant, in this context, by 'story'? Is the material construction of this installation really a narrative? How are we to conceive of stones, wood, glass and light as 'telling' a story?

For today's post-structuralist narrative theory, a narrative is every text that tells a story, while a text is every meaningfully organized sign system, be it an opera score, an advertisement or a wedding ceremony. Applied to Ullmann's installation, this perspective brings into view a narrative text that is strangely recursive. It wants us to recall an act of intentional forgetting, an operation of exclusion from what was supposed to be an official cultural memory. In so doing, it unfolds another story, a story about the success and failure of this act. The theme is the dynamic of cultural memory. As already remarked, remembering and forgetting do not depend simply on an official historical act, nor on an individual decision. They are negotiated in the interplay between social and individual organization of memory. This interplay, as brought to the fore by the Bebelplatz memorial, also sets free (although is not identical with) an interplay between official memories and counter-memories. In fact, the memorial is not least an exploration into the dialectic of memory and counter-memory and, that is, of power and counter-power. Could this secretive chamber, underground and hidden as it is, perhaps also have been a meeting place for all kinds of subversive actions—not only in 1933? And is it only an interest in the arts and historical reflection that led, in 1995, to this installation in the center of what used to be East Berlin, a few years after the Wall came down? Finally, how long will it be there? Will it survive as long as the representative architecture that it challenges? This architecture, to be sure, has survived centuries of eventful history because it could be integrated into diverse symbol systems of power and representation. But will the same be true for a memorial that is meant to make us think about such continuities?

Patently, the dialectic of memory and counter-memory, of power and counter-power, of official discourse and its subversion, is part and parcel of cultural memory; it keeps it contradictory, open and in flux.

Three Orders of Narrative

The monument, then, is also about the process in which the past becomes the subject of present reflection and reconstruction. It foregrounds not just the past, but how the past is built into the present. It is a metaphor or, perhaps more precisely, an allegory of what Middleton (2002) calls the 'in-builtness' of the past in the present. Viewed through the prism of this installation, things considered past and gone, as in this historical square, prove to be an element of a present 'mnemonic system' of which we, today's observers, users and interpreters, are also a part. I have described this mnemonic system as a symbolic space of remembering and forgetting in which the now and then, and the here and there, are continuously recombined. It is this symbolic space of culture—rather than any Newtonian system of absolute time—that defines our shifting coordinates for determining what is past, present and future.

Against this backdrop, I have suggested that narrative is a major integrating force within this symbolic space. Now, to take a closer look at how this integration works, I distinguish three orders of narrative (which correspond to three forms of narrative integration). I shall outline narrative, first, as a linguistic order, second, as a semiotic order, and, third, as a discursive or performative order.

Narrative as a *linguistic order* comes into play when I tell someone the story of the memorial on Bebelplatz, be it in oral form or, as in this case, in written form. In my narrative account I started with a description of the *scene* (the square and its architecture) and its (historical and political) background. I then presented the *agent* of the narrative (the artist), his *action* (the installation of a memorial), his *intentions* and *goals* (to create, exactly at this site, a public forum of remembrance of the bookburning in 1933). I also indicated another element of what narrative theorists regard to be a classical narrative framework: some *trouble* or a *predicament* (Can a void be remembered at all?), to which the story offers, in one or another way, a *solution* (e.g. the idea that the artist possibly wanted not to fill a void but rather to create an awareness of its presence as an irreversible historical fact).

The combination of these elements (scene, agent, action, intentionality, predicament, solution), often being described as the constituents of a narrative proper, encapsulates a complex plot. Just consider how many diverse levels of historical and narrative time are integrated: the 18th century, the year 1933, the period from 1933 to 1945, the time after the end of the 'Third Reich', the time of the memorial's construction, and 'today'—referring to, first, 'in these years', second, a hypothetical

today when we cross the square, and, third, the present in which we reflect on all this. Finally, there are the different time levels of the 'we', including the time in which I am writing this text, the time in which possible readers may read it, and so on. Is there any other form of human thought and imagination, beside narrative, capable of capturing such a scenario of multiple times in a short and concise synthesis? Narrativity allows humans to grasp a longer past, as Carrithers (1991, 1992) held. But perhaps more importantly, it also allows us to grasp more complex temporal trajectories, such as the multi-layered scenarios of time that are evoked in our remembrance. Narrative, I have argued elsewhere (Brockmeier, 1995, 2000b), is not only the most adequate form for our most intricate constructions of temporality (such as simultaneous scenarios of diverse time structures), it is the only form in which they can be communicated and integrated in our social life.

But it is not only I who have told the story of the monument in Bebelplatz. I have referred to the idea that the material installation itself can be seen, or read, as a narrative text. What comes into view, in this way, is narrative as a particular sign system, a *semiotic order*. As already mentioned, from a semiotic viewpoint all meaningful organizations of signs can constitute narrative texts. In contrast with non-narrative texts (such as instruction manuals or maps), narrative texts are laid out along storylines. To a certain degree, the story is independent from the media in or through which it is told. In fact, stories often undergo 'intersemiotic translations', as semioticians have dubbed them, which is to say that the same plot (or some of its elements) can be articulated in different media—even if there is, of course, no translation without interpretation. Many Greek myths, for example, originated in oral discourse, became successively recited as artful poems, performed on stage, depicted in reliefs, sculptures, painting, dance and films, and composed as operas. A detailed semiotic investigation of the narrative fabric of the Bebelplatz monument would imply a meaning analysis of its material structure, its medium, as well as its relationship with the surrounding material and symbolic space. It thus would take into account not only the built narrative structure of the installation but also the dialogue with its architectural and urban surrounding, and with the history of this surrounding. That is, it would follow the two dimensions of the connective structure of cultural memory—spatial and temporal—outlined earlier. In this way, we would become aware of the fact that the materialized narrative of the monument ultimately can only be understood if it is seen as a counter-narrative. Responding to its material and symbolic environment, it is

a commentary on a given mnemonic system, a commentary that by its sheer existence in this place has already changed this very system.

This leads to the third dimension of narrativity that I would like to address, narrative as a *performative* or *discursive order*. Several authors have emphasized that narrative, as a form of communication and symbolic mediation, is not only a product, a story, but also a process, a telling; it is not only an account of an action but an action itself, not only a structure of meaning but also a performance of meaning (e.g., Bamberg, 1997; Brockmeier & Harré, 2001; Edwards, 1997). Viewed in this way, a narrative is a functional action that unfolds an objective; it realizes a goal; it aims to do something. Arguably, the material structure designed and realized by Micha Ullmann *does* something or, at least, is intended to achieve something. It is an artistic and political statement that, as just mentioned, intervenes in a mnemonic system and, indeed, alters it—at least to a certain degree. And it does so not primarily because of the specific content, or because of the all but new or particularly sophisticated *fabula* being told, but because of the specific way in which it is told. Differently put, it is not the *narrated event* but the *narrative event* that makes a plot. It is not the historical ‘facts’ as such but the discursive practices of their presentation that symbolically activate this installation and turn it into an agent in a cultural system.

To grasp the power of narrative as ‘activity’, ‘performance’ or ‘discourse’, we thus must identify the way it is situated in a local cultural context, a point emphasized by Bauman (1986) and other contextualist theoreticians of narrative. This can be the context of a particular social or political situation, or of a formalized institutional framework: for example, when one wants to present one’s ideas on cultural memory to the audience of a scholarly journal that expects its authors to follow a set of well-defined rules. But this can also be a particular place or location that charges up an otherwise banal narrative. The stories of the Western Apaches are a striking example here because their deeper meanings, as Basso (1996) pointed out, are intimately connected to particular landscapes and natural environments. Similarly in our case, where the architectural and historical background of Berlin’s Bebelplatz is, as it were, the only stage on which Ullmann’s memorial can be performed.

To view narrative as performance (or, more specifically, as performativity) is to foreground the narrative event as a site where the social is articulated and its contradictory implications are struggled over (Langellier, 1999; Parker & Sedgewick, 1994). The notion of narrative performance thus refers to a process of co-narration, a social process

of telling and enacting in which teller and listener are not stable and permanent positions but moments of an interplay whose outcome remains open.

Narrative, then, can be organized in linguistic, semiotic and discursive or performative orders. In each context, it integrates several elements into a particular structure of meaning, forming a new whole out of different parts. In this formation, the single elements acquire their peculiar meanings only because they are integrated into a narrative pattern or plot. Following Ricoeur (1984/1985), we can call this 'emplotment'. What are these elements, the raw material of emplotment? From a linguistic point of view, they comprise plot constituents like the agent, his or her intention and the action. From a semiotic point of view, we are talking about sign structures like the empty shelves in the underground chamber, the 18th-century buildings surrounding the square, and the pictures and films of the bookburning that are symbolically activated by the installation. And from a discursive point of view, these elements constitute the installation as performative act; which implies that they also draw us, the visitors and viewers, into the performance insofar as they suggest taking a certain perspective and thereby 'position' us.

Conclusion

All three orders of narrative, then, evoke complex constructions of meanings that would not exist independently of the narrative synthesis. If we installed Ullmann's memorial in, say, Rome's Piazza Navona or Beijing's Tiananmen Square, we would lose both the plot and the meanings of its elements. However, to be precise, the claim that led me to unpack the different narrative orders of the monument was different. The argument that I originally put forward (let me call it A1) was that narrative is an important integrating force in the mnemonic system of a culture; this, I have suggested, is the pivotal function of narrative for cultural memory. But this is different from the argument that narrative is a particular synthesis of distinct elements (let me call this A2). Now, to relate these two arguments, A1 and A2, I shall briefly recapitulate.

My point of departure was the quest for a new and productive way to explore the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, an issue traditionally neglected in psychological memory research. My theoretical perspective was oriented by the effort to eschew the widespread dichotomy of individual and social memory and instead take a cultural-historical vantage point that allowed me to

conceive of 'individual' memory as an inextricable part of an overarching cultural discourse. It is only within this discourse—to use a Wittgensteinian (1953) argument that has been elaborated in various sociocultural, historical and linguistic contexts (see, e.g., Geertz, 1983; Hacking, 1995; Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990)—that the semantic distinctions between individual and social, private and public, self and other, take shape. 'The range of what people include as under the influence of their own activity', as Bruner (1990) writes, 'will, as we know from studies of "locus of control," vary from person to person and, as we also know, vary with one's felt position in a culture' (p. 119). To describe the cultural discourse within which people position themselves as remembering individuals, I used the concepts of 'memory text' and 'memory practice'. Among the manifold memory practices used by humans, narrative practices are of crucial importance all the more because of their potential to construe complex temporal scenarios. In order to flesh out the conception of narrative underlying this argument, I then examined the memorial to the 1933 bookburning in Berlin's Bebelplatz. The upshot of this examination was that all things in this historical square considered past and gone turned out to be part of a present mnemonic system, a system of past experience (that we usually call memory) and present experience (that includes the process of remembering that past experience).

The idea that I want to offer about this mnemonic system is that of one symbolic space of remembering and forgetting, a space in which the various time orders of past and present are continuously recombined. I have suggested—in contrast with any absolute, Newtonian concept of time—that it is within this symbolic space of culture that our shifting coordinates for determining what is past, present and future are defined.

I am aware that this idea may seem elusive—particularly, as we are used to defining phenomena of memory, experience and time within conceptual domains determined by specialized academic disciplines (e.g. psychology *or* history), habitualized semiotic sign orders (e.g. writing *or* architecture), and other cultural symbol systems traditionally seen as mutually exclusive (e.g. academic discourse *or* literature and the arts). However, confronted with the complex realities of cultural memory, these divisions of labor (all of them rooted in models of academe that emerged towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century), miss from the start the phenomena at stake. What is needed are novel and more appropriate conceptual tools and intellectual models that take into account that the process under

investigation is mediated by a number of cultural symbol systems that are simultaneously organized by a variety of semiotic vehicles and devices. These cultural artifacts comprise linguistic forms (oral and written language, as well as other systems of communication and notation), special memory devices and institutions (such as notebooks, archives, computers), memorials and other architectures and geographies in which memory is embodied and objectified. Whatever new concepts and models have been suggested in recent discussions on cultural memory (and I have mentioned a few in this paper), they will have to live up to the complexity of this symbolic space.

Now, to conclude, I propose that narrative is such a powerful integrating force within this symbolic space precisely because of the synthesis function just outlined. Narrative not only 'emplots', on all three levels, diverse elements into a whole (A1); it also interweaves, at the same time, these three orders, fusing quite diverse forms of discourse and symbolic mediation (A2). Narrative, in fact, integrates an amazing diversity of forms of life that range from spoken and written language to architecture and the arts.

In other words, what we have been dealing with here is a semiotic hybrid. The bookburning memorial is located in the midst of an architectural space and, at the same time, it also is embedded in a space of narrative, an open space that embraces the 'universe of discourse' of many different memory texts. These texts range from a little explanatory note about the monument, written on an iron plaque inserted into the surrounding cobblestones, and a line by Heinrich Heine, the 19th-century German poet, that also is engraved on this plaque—'This is a prelude only; where they burn books, in the end, they too burn men'—to the continuous flow of comments and conversations of the visitors and bystanders that blends with the texts in city guides, architecture and art magazines, history textbooks and journals on memory, culture and psychology.

Language games, to refer once more to Wittgenstein (1953), are not isolated linguistic entities but all kinds of human practices shot through with the uses of words. People communicate by a number of means, including the verbal. Typically, narrative and other forms of verbal communication occur contemporaneously with and not independently of other material and symbolic activities, and it is in this sense that we call linguistic production (as result as well as process) *discourse*. Viewed in this light, narrative discourse is the hub in the process of trans-generational and historical meaning construction, a process that I have described in this paper as that of cultural memory.

Notes

1. Rowe, Wertsch and Kosyaeva (this issue) examine this effect in their study of narrative accounts by visitors to the Missouri History Museum.
2. Although, as I argue, selection is central to both what is traditionally referred to as the individual and the social framework of remembering, its psychological and sociological-anthropological aspects have been investigated in quite independent (academic, linguistic and national) traditions. While there has been a strong French tradition (Durkheim, Mauss, Lévy-Bruhl, Halbwachs, Moscovici) in sociological, social-psychological and anthropological research, Anglo-Saxon and German traditions (experimental memory research and Freudian psychoanalysis) have had a strong individual-psychological focus. Mary Douglas, the British anthropologist, argued that in Britain for a long time only Evans-Pritchard and Bartlett had

confidence that the selective principles [of remembering] were to be found in social institutions, and that fieldwork was the way to find them. . . . The failure of British psychologists to develop a sociological dimension to their experimental thinking and the failure of the French to benefit from the British methodological advances, are themselves problems for the sociology of knowledge that are not explained by their not knowing each other's work. They read but they misunderstood. (Douglas, 1980, pp. 27–28, quoted from Farr, 1998, p. 289)

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Biography

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