

# Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory

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## 1. The Power of Fiction: Novels and Films as Media of Cultural Memory

Cultural memory is based on communication through media. Shared versions of the past are invariably generated by means of “medial externalization” (see A. Assmann, this volume), the most basic form of which is oral speech, and the most common setting arguably that of grandparents telling children about the “old days.” More sophisticated media technologies, such as writing, film, and the Internet, broaden the temporal and spatial range of remembrance. Cultural memory is constituted by a host of different media, operating within various symbolic systems: religious texts, historical painting, historiography, TV documentaries, monuments, and commemorative rituals, for example. Each of these media has its specific way of remembering and will leave its trace on the memory it creates. What kinds of cultural memory, then, are produced by literature and film?

Fictional media, such as novels and feature films, are characterized by their power to shape the collective imagination of the past in a way that is truly fascinating for the literary scholar (and somewhat alarming for the historian). Two of the best-known examples are Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929; *All Quiet on the Western Front*) and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Both were initially tremendously popular novels, with astronomic circulation figures, and both were turned into even more successful movies. The First World War and the American South—for many people even today these are “All Quiet on the Western Front” and “Gone with the Wind.” Fictions, both novelistic and filmic, possess the potential to generate and mold images of the past which will be retained by whole generations. Historical accuracy is not one of the concerns of such “memory-making” novels and movies; instead, they cater to the public with what is variously termed “authenticity” or “truthfulness.” They create images of the past which resonate with cultural memory. Usually, such fictions can neither be called “valuable literature,” nor do they enter the canon of artistic masterpieces (see A. Assmann; Grabes; both this volume). And often, too, they will disappear as quickly as they appeared on the scene.

With a view to cultural memory studies, these observations call for two methodological moves or shifts in attention: firstly, from high culture

to popular culture; and secondly, from the time-bound media of storage, which allow cultural memories to travel across centuries and even become themselves objects of remembrance (Shakespeare's historical plays would be an example), to the space-bound media of circulation, which can reach large audiences almost simultaneously, make cultural memories today and are forgotten tomorrow (cf. Innis).

The key question I am asking here is: What is it that turns *some* media (and not *others*) into powerful "media of cultural memory," meaning media which create and mold collective images of the past? Using examples mainly from war literature and war cinema, this article will provide three answers in three steps: I will look firstly at their *intra-medial* "rhetoric of collective memory"; secondly at their *inter-medial* dynamics, that is, the interplay with earlier and later representations; and thirdly at the *pluri-medial* contexts in which memory-making novels and films appear and exert their influence. In short, I am concerned here with phenomena *within*, *between*, and *around* those media which have the power to produce and shape cultural memory.

## 2. The Rhetoric of Collective Memory: How War Novels Create Modes of Remembering

Whenever the past is represented, the choice of media and forms has an effect on the kind of memory that is created: For example, a war which is orally represented, in an anecdote told by an old neighbor, seems to become part of lived, contemporary history; but as an object of a Wagnerian opera, the same war can be transformed into an apparently timeless, mythical event. In literature as in film, there are different modes of representation which may elicit different modes of cultural remembering in the audience.

With regard to novels of the First World War, I have distinguished four modes of a "rhetoric of collective memory": the experiential, the mythical, the antagonistic, and the reflexive mode (*Gedächtnisromane*). Experiential modes are constituted by literary forms which represent the past as a recent, lived-through experience. They are closely connected to what is called "communicative memory" (see J. Assmann, this volume). The specific qualities of communicative memory are often staged in literary texts by first-person narrative, thus indicating "life writing" (see Saunders, this volume). Siegfried Sassoon's and Robert Graves's fictions of the Great War make use of this strategy. Another typical form to represent war, used especially by modernist writers (such as Ford Madox Ford and Virginia Woolf), are stream-of-consciousness techniques, which convey

the specific inner experientiality of the trenches, combat, and trauma. And finally, a very detailed depiction of everyday life in the war and the representation of oral speech—especially sociolect, such as soldiers’ slang—may serve to create what may be termed (with a nod to Roland Barthes) authenticating *effets de mémoire*. This strategy can be studied in Frederic Manning’s war novel *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929).

Mythicizing modes are constituted by literary forms that resemble representations of the past within the framework of Jan Assmann’s “cultural memory,” that is, the remembrance of foundational events which are situated in a faraway, mythical past. Typical of this tendency is Ernst Jünger’s novel *In Stahlgewittern* (1920; *The Storm of Steel*), in which German soldiers are transformed into figures of Germanic mythology. But also Francis Ford Coppola’s highly acclaimed Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979) mythicizes the historical events by means of intertextual references and the creation of a primordial atmosphere, using an array of visual and sound effects.

Literary forms that help to maintain one version of the past and reject another constitute an antagonistic mode. Negative stereotyping (such as calling the Germans “the Hun” or “beasts” in early English poetry of the Great War) is the most obvious technique of establishing an antagonistic mode. More elaborate is the resort to biased perspective structures: Only the memories of a certain group are presented as true, while the versions articulated by members of conflicting memory cultures are deconstructed as false. Authors of the “lost generation,” Ernest Hemingway and Richard Aldington for example, make ample use of these strategies. Resorting to we-narration may underscore the antagonistic potential of a novel. This is actually one of the most striking narrative features in Remarque’s requiem on the lost generation, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Here, we-narration creates a collective identity for a generation of young front-line soldiers, who are set apart from the old, war-mongering generation at home.

Literature usually allows its readers both a first- and a second-order observation: It gives us the illusion of glimpsing the past (in an experiential, mythical, or antagonistic way) and is—often at the same time—a major medium of critical reflection upon these very processes of representation. Literature is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory. Prominent reflexive modes are constituted by forms which draw attention to processes and problems of remembering. One of these forms is the explicit narratorial comment on the workings of memory, found, for example, in Marcel Proust’s famous novel of memory, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27). Other strategies include the montage of different versions of the past, which can be studied in Edlef Koeppen’s *Heeresbericht* (1930), the best German novel to have come out of the First World War.

Even more experimental forms appear in the literature of the Second World War, such as Kurt Vonnegut's inversion of chronology in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) as a way to represent the bombardment of Dresden.

These different modes of representing the past—here zooming in to everyday experience, there zooming out to timeless myth; here taking part in contestation, there staying aloof and adopting a reflexive stance—are not restricted to war novels, or even to historical fiction. A rhetoric of collective memory can be found in all literary genres which represent the past, from romance to gothic novels and to crime thrillers, and of course also in other media such as feature films. Conversely, modes of remembering need not necessarily be established by verbal, literary, and narrative forms. Non-fictional media such as historiography and journalism (see Zelizer, this volume) and visual media such as painting and photography (see Ruchatz, this volume) have developed their own “rhetorics of collective memory.”

### 3. Premediation and Remediation: The Inter-Medial Dynamics of Memory

Not only *intra-medial* strategies, such as the rhetoric of collective memory, but also *inter-medial* relations are involved in the process that turns fictions into media of cultural memory. The inter-medial dynamics of cultural memory is usually characterized by a double movement, by the interaction of what can be called “premediation” and “remediation” (cf. Bolter and Grusin; Hoskins; Erll, *Prämediation*; Rigney, this volume). With the term “remediation” I refer to the fact that memorable events are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media: in newspaper articles, photography, diaries, historiography, novels, films, etc. What is known about a war, a revolution, or any other event which has been turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the “actual events,” but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in a media culture. Remembered events are transmedial phenomena, that is, their representation is not tied to one specific medium. Therefore, they can be represented across the spectrum of available media. And this is precisely what creates a powerful site of memory (cf. Rigney).

The term “premediation” draws attention to the fact that existent media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for future experience and its representation. In this way, the representations of colonial wars premediated the First World War, and the First World War, in turn,

was used as a model for the Second World War. But not only depictions of earlier, yet somehow comparable events shape our understanding of later events. Media which belong to even more remote cultural spheres, such as art, mythology, religion, or law, can exert great power as premediators, too. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), with its "Valley of the Shadow and Death" episode, premediated many journals and letters written during the First World War, as Paul Fussell has shown. (At the same time it was itself a remediation of Biblical accounts.) The American understanding and representation of 9/11 was clearly premediated by disaster movies, the crusader narrative, and Biblical stories. Premediation therefore refers to cultural practices of looking, naming, and narrating. It is the effect of *and* the starting point for mediatized memories.

With regard to the "Indian Mutiny" of 1857 (an uprising in colonial India against British rule) I have shown how witnesses' letters, newspaper articles, and drawings made on the spot were remediated in historiography, novels, and painting, thus endowing these later media with the atmosphere of experientiality and authenticity usually associated with contemporary media. At the same time, these representations were heavily premediated by earlier colonial accounts of violent encounters with rebellious subjects, by pictorial conventions derived from Renaissance painting, and by a long tradition of religious and literary writing (Erl, *Prämeditation*).

Paradoxically, even despite antagonistic and reflexive forms of representation, remediation tends to solidify cultural memory, creating and stabilizing certain narratives and icons of the past. Such stabilizing effects of remediation can be observed in the emergence of "9/11" as an American, and indeed transnational, *lieu de mémoire* (see Hebel, this volume). The burning twin towers quickly crystallized into the one iconic image of the event, and this icon has been remediated ever since: in television news, photography, movies, comic strips, etc. But such iconization is not restricted to visual media. Another example connected with 9/11 is the icon of the "falling man," which remembers those people who were trapped by the fire on the upper floors of the World Trade Center and decided to jump rather than die in the flames. The "falling man" was first represented by a photograph taken by Richard Drew. In September 2003, this photograph was remediated in a story written by Tom Junod and published in *Esquire* magazine. In March 2006, Henry Singer and Richard Numeroff turned the "falling man" into a documentary (*9/11: The Falling Man*). And in 2007, Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* appeared on the literary market. These are only a few examples of its remediation, which feature text and image as well as very different stories and meanings, but at the same time all contribute to the stabilization of the "falling man" as an icon of "9/11."

Remediation is not restricted to icons and narratives, but can even choose actual media products and media technologies as its objects. It is especially in the cinema of cultural memory that we find such manifest forms of remediation. Actual, historical documentary material is incorporated in new movies, and this integration of photographic and filmic media serves to create an *effet de réel*. The fictional story seems indexically linked to the historical events it depicts (see also Ruchatz, this volume). However, the boundaries between documentary material and fictional reenactment (cf. Sturken) are often blurred in the course of remediation. One example is the famous Iwo Jima photograph, which was taken by Joe Rosenthal on February 23, 1945. It shows a group of U.S. marines raising the American flag on a Japanese island south of Tokyo. When it appeared in the *New York Times* shortly thereafter, it brought hope to the war-tired Americans. Still today, this photograph stands in U.S. memory for American heroism and the victory that is about to be won. Since its publication, the press photograph has been remediated countless times: by a memorial, several statues, books, songs, rituals, postal stamps, and other photographs. And it has been integrated (sometimes by filming the photograph itself, sometimes by reenactment) into a great number of popular war movies, among them *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949, with John Wayne). The most recent variation of its cinematic remediation is Clint Eastwood's movie *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), in which Hollywood movie stars reenact the raising of the flag. A film still of this reenactment which resembles precisely the original photograph (except that it is in color) appears as the cinema poster. It is probably only a question of time until the still of Eastwood's reenactment will appear somewhere as authentic "source material" and be itself remediated, in order to make another representation appear authentic.

*Flags of Our Fathers* is also an example of how specific media technologies can be remediated: The intentionally bleached-out colors remind the audience of the monochrome news coverage during the Second World War and of course also of Rosenthal's original black-and-white photograph. What is often integrated via remediation into film versions of the past is therefore not merely actual documentary material, but also its specific "look" (which usually derives from the media technology of the time, but also from historical aesthetics). Parts of the Vietnam War movie *Platoon* (1986), for example, imitate the shaky camera movement characteristic of war journalism at the front and thus the look of news coverage in the 1960s and 1970s. Another example is *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a movie about the Second World War, for which key episodes were shot in the grainy style of 16mm color film, thus emulating the cinematography of 1940s documentaries (cf. Westwell 78, 92).

It is the double dynamics of the premediation of remediation, of the medial preformation and re-shaping of events, which links each representation of the past with the history of media memories. First and foremost, these processes make the past intelligible; at the same time, they endow medial representations with the aura of authenticity; and, finally, they play a decisive role in stabilizing the memory of historical events into *lieux de mémoire*.

#### 4. Film and Cultural Memory: Pluri-Medial Networks

Asking once again what it is that turns some novels and movies into powerful memory-making fictions, a preliminary answer can now be given: Certain intra- and inter-medial strategies (as considered in sections 2 and 3 of this article) are responsible for marking them out as media of cultural memory. However, such strategies endow fictions only with a *potential* for memory-making. This potential has to be *realized* in the process of reception: Novels and movies must be read and viewed by a community *as* media of cultural memory. Films that are not watched or books that are not read may provide the most intriguing images of the past, yet they will not have any effect in memory cultures. The specific form of reception which turns fictions into memory-making fictions is not an individual, but a collective phenomenon. What is needed is a certain kind of *context*, in which novels and films are prepared and received as memory-shaping media.

Taking as an example contemporary filmmaking, such contexts have been reconstructed in detail by an interdisciplinary group of researchers at the University of Giessen (cf. Erll and Wodianka). We took a close look at some popular German history movies, such as *Der Untergang* (2004, *The Downfall*), a film about the last days of Adolf Hitler, and *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006, *The Lives of Others*), a film about life in the German Democratic Republic. There is actually a current boom of history films, a filmic memory conjuncture, which can be observed especially in—but is certainly not restricted to—Germany. Movies, TV serials, fictional, documentary, and semi-documentary formats have, in the course of the past fifteen years, virtually become obsessed with the representation of contemporary history: Films about the “Third Reich,” the Holocaust, the Second World War and its aftermath abound. Judging from its prevalence and impact, “film” seems to have become the leading medium of popular cultural memory.

Scrutinizing the cultural practices surrounding history movies we determined that it is not in the first place the medial and inter-medial strate-

gies that turn a “film about history” into a “memory-making film,” but instead what has been established around them: A tight network of other medial representations (and medially represented actions) prepare the ground for the movies, lead reception along certain paths, open up and channel public discussion, and thus endow films with their memorial meaning. With regard to the two examples mentioned above, we followed reviews in national and international newspapers and movie magazines, special features on TV, carefully targeted marketing strategies, merchandise, the DVD versions (including the “making of” segments, interviews with producers and actors, historical background information, etc.), awards (*The Lives of Others* received an Academy Award in 2007), political speeches, academic controversies (especially among historians with regard to *The Downfall*, on the question of the ethics of representing Hitler as a movie protagonist and thus humanizing him), the publication of a book about or a book based on the film (and its censorship, as in the case of *The Lives of Others*), and finally all those didactic formats which have turned both movies into teaching units in German classrooms.

All those advertisements, comments, discussions, and controversies constitute the collective contexts which channel a movie’s reception and potentially turn it into a medium of cultural memory. Moreover, all these expressions are circulated by means of media. Therefore we call these contexts “*pluri-medial networks*.” To sum up: While the potential of fictions to be turned into media of cultural memory is developed by certain strategies on intra-medial and inter-medial levels, those potentialities can only be turned into actualities within pluri-medial contexts. The “memory-making film” as well as the “memory-making novel” are made *in* and *by* the media networks surrounding them.

## 5. Conclusion

Literature and film can have effects on both levels of cultural memory: the individual *and* the collective (see for this distinction the introduction of this volume). On a collective level, fictional texts and movies can become powerful media, whose versions of the past circulate in large parts of society, and even internationally. These media of cultural memory, however, are rarely uncontroversial. Their memory-making effect lies not in the unity, coherence, and ideological unambiguousness of the images they convey, but instead in the fact that they serve as cues for the discussion of those images, thus centering a memory culture on certain medial representations and sets of questions connected with them. With a view to these complex collective processes an intensified dialogue between repre-

sentatives from literary and media studies and historians and sociologists promises to provide further insights into how the circulation of media, their reception, critical discussion, institutionalization, and canonization works.

On an individual level, media representations provide those schemata and scripts which allow us to create in our minds certain images of the past and which may even shape our own experience and autobiographical memories (see the articles by Markowitsch and Welzer, this volume). The “cultural mind” is in many ways a “medial mind”: It is the patterns derived from the media cultures we live in, especially (albeit often unintentionally) from fictions, that shape our idea of reality and our memories. This insight calls for interdisciplinary collaboration between what may seem to be disciplines situated farthest apart on the spectrum of memory studies: literary and media studies on the one hand and psychology and the neurosciences on the other.

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