Canon and Archive

ALEIDA ASSMANN

1. The Dynamics of Cultural Memory between Remembering and Forgetting

Over the last decade, the conviction has grown that culture is intrinsically related to memory. Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij have defined culture as "the memory of a society that is not genetically transmitted" (3) but, we may add, by external symbols. Through culture, humans create a temporal framework that transcends the individual life span relating past, present, and future. Cultures create a contract between the living, the dead, and the not yet living. In recalling, iterating, reading, commenting, criticizing, discussing what was deposited in the remote or recent past, humans participate in extended horizons of meaning-production. They do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of giants whose knowledge they can reuse and reinterpret. As the Internet creates a framework for communication across wide distances in space, cultural memory creates a framework for communication across the abyss of time.

When thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting. The dynamics of individual memory consists in a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting (see also Esposito, this volume). In order to remember some things, other things must be forgotten. Our memory is highly selective. Memory capacity is limited by neural and cultural constraints such as focus and bias. It is also limited by psychological pressures, with the effect that painful or incongruent memories are hidden, displaced, overwritten, and possibly effaced. On the level of cultural memory, there is a similar dynamic at work. The continuous process of forgetting is part of social normality. As in the head of the individual, also in the communication of society much must be continuously forgotten to make place for new information, new challenges, and new ideas to face the present and future. Not only individual memories are irretrievably lost with the death of their owners, also a large part of material possessions and remains are lost after the death of a person when households are dissolved and personal belongings dispersed in flea markets, trashed, or recycled.

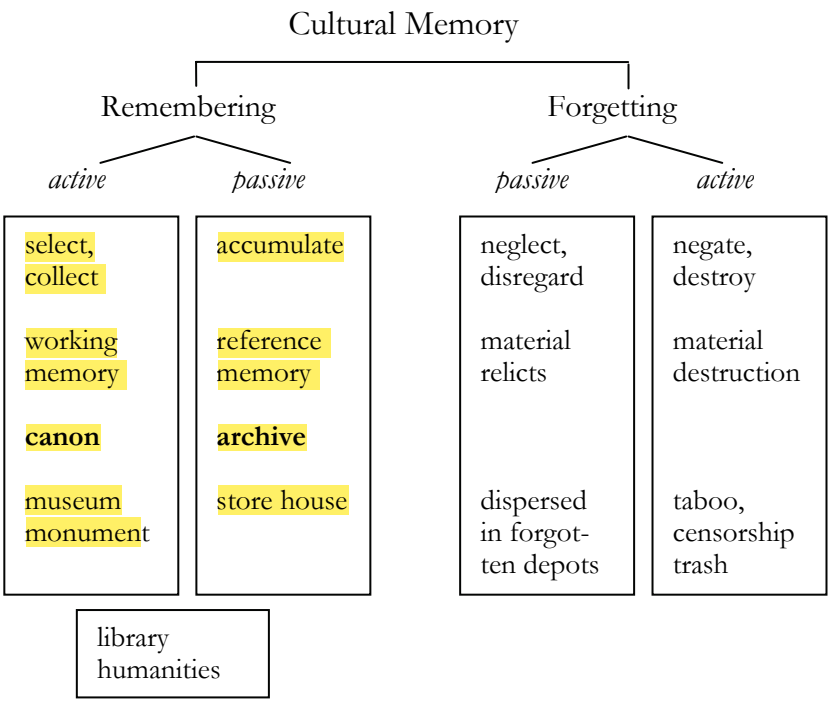
When looking more closely at these cultural practices, we can distinguish between two forms of forgetting, a more active and a more passive one. *Active* forgetting is implied in intentional acts such as trashing and

destroying. Acts of forgetting are a necessary and constructive part of internal social transformations; they are, however, violently destructive when directed at an alien culture or a persecuted minority. Censorship has been a forceful if not always successful instrument for destroying material and mental cultural products. The *passive* form of cultural forgetting is related to non-intentional acts such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning, or leaving something behind. In these cases the objects are not materially destroyed; they fall out of the frames of attention, valuation, and use. What is lost but not materially destroyed may be discovered by accident at a later time in attics and other obscure depots, or eventually be dug up again by more systematic archaeological search. Sir Thomas Browne, a physician of the seventeenth century with a philosophical mind, was convinced that the unremarkable traces of the past have a better chance of being preserved than the ostentatious monuments of emperors. With respect to some antique urns which were unearthed in his Norfolk neighborhood, he commented: "Time which antiquates Antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these *minor* Monuments" (279). The German writer F. G. Jünger has defined this type of reversible or "halfway" forgetting as "preservative forgetting" (*Verwahrensvergessen*). Archaeology is an institution of cultural memory that retrieves lost objects and defunct information from a distant past, forging an important return path from cultural forgetting to cultural memory.

If we concede that forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life, then remembering is the exception, which—especially in the cultural sphere—requires special and costly precautions. These precautions take the shape of cultural institutions. As forgetting, remembering also has an active and a passive side. The institutions of active memory preserve the *past as present* while the institutions of passive memory preserve the *past as past*. The tension between the pastness of the past and its presence is an important key to understanding the dynamics of cultural memory. These two modes of cultural memory may be illustrated by different rooms of the museum. The museum presents its prestigious objects to the viewers in representative shows which are arranged to catch attention and make a lasting impression. The same museum also houses storerooms stuffed with other paintings and objects in peripheral spaces such as cellars or attics which are not publicly presented. In the following, I will refer to the actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the *canon* and the passively stored memory that preserves the past past as the *archive*.

This important distinction can be further explained by a reference to the cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt. He divided the remains of former historical periods into two categories: "messages" and "traces." By "messages" he meant texts and monuments that were addressed to posterity,

whereas "traces" carry no similar address. Burckhardt mistrusted the messages, which are usually written and effectively staged by the carriers of power and state institutions; he considered them tendentious and therefore misleading. The unintentional traces, on the other hand, he cherished as unmediated testimonies of a former era that can tell a counter-history to the one propagated by the rulers. If we modify Burckhardt's distinction somewhat, we can perhaps generalize it. Cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and re-use. To this active memory belong, among other things, works of art, which are destined to be repeatedly re-read, appreciated, staged, performed, and commented. This aspiration, of course, cannot be realized for all artistic artifacts; only a small percentage acquire this status through a complex procedure which we call canonization. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the storehouse for cultural relicts. These are not unmediated; they have only lost their immediate addressees; they are de-contextualized and disconnected from their former frames which had authorized them or determined their meaning. As part of the archive, they are open to new contexts and lend themselves to new interpretations.



2. Cultural Working Memory: The Canon

The active dimension of cultural memory supports a collective identity and is defined by a notorious shortage of space. It is built on a small number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated in ever-new presentations and performances. The working memory stores and reproduces the cultural capital of a society that is continuously recycled and re-affirmed. Whatever has made it into the active cultural memory has passed rigorous processes of selection, which secure for certain artifacts a lasting place in the cultural working memory of a society. This process is called canonization. The word means "sanctification"; to endow texts, persons, artifacts, and monuments with a sanctified status is to set them off from the rest as charged with the highest meaning and value. Elements of the canon are marked by three qualities: selection, value, and duration. Selection presupposes decisions and power struggles; ascription of value endows these objects with an aura and a sacrosanct status; duration in cultural memory is the central aim of the procedure. A canon is not a hit-list; it is instead independent of historical change and immune to the ups and downs of social taste. The canon is not built up anew by every generation; on the contrary, it outlives the generations who have to encounter and reinterpret it anew according to their time. This constant interaction with the small selection of artifacts keeps them in active circulation and maintains for this small segment of the past a continuous presence.

There are three core areas of active cultural memory: religion, art, and history. The term "canon" belongs to the history of religion; it is used there to refer to a text or a body of texts that is decreed to be sacred and must not be changed nor exchanged for any other text. The canonized text is a stable reference that is used over centuries and millennia in continuous acts of reverence, interpretation, and liturgical practice. Canonization is also a term for the transformation of martyrs of the Christian church into saints. These saints are remembered not only by stories and images but also by their names, which are inscribed into the calendar and reused for the naming of those who are born on these respective days. A Christian church is an institution of the active cultural memory. With its stone tablets and commemorative sculptures on the walls, especially old churches are unique memorial spaces that span several centuries. This cultural memory is kept alive also by architectural styles, traditions of images, and continuously and periodically repeated liturgical rites and practices.

When the religious canon was translated into the arts in secular modernity, it became a canon of classics. This canon is not as fixed and closed as the religious canon but open to changes and exchanges. Sacrosanct writers such as Milton and Nobel laureates such as T. S. Eliot have lost much of their former prestige during the last thirty years. In the postcolonial era, the Western literary canon is hotly contested and undergoing considerable transformations (see also Grabes, this volume). Although canons change, they remain indispensable tools for education; without them academic fields cannot be established, university curricula cannot be taught. The canon of classical texts is not only taught from generation to generation but also performed on the stages of theaters and in the concert halls. A canon of paintings and artifacts is repeatedly presented in museums and traveling exhibitions, and literary classics are stable elements in the book market. It is only a tiny segment of the vast history of the arts that has the privilege of repeated presentation and reception which ensures its aura and supports its canonical status.

A third realm of active cultural memory is history. Nation-states produce narrative versions of their past which are taught, embraced, and referred to as their collective autobiography. National history is taught via history textbooks, which have been appropriately termed "weapons of mass instruction" (Charles Ingrao). National history is also presented in the public arena in the form of monuments and commemoration dates. To participate in a national memory is to know the key events of the nation's history, to embrace its symbols, and connect to its festive dates.

Cultural memory, then, is based on two separate functions: the presentation of a narrow selection of sacred texts, artistic masterpieces, or historic key events in a timeless framework; and the storing of documents and artifacts of the past that do not at all meet these standards but are nevertheless deemed interesting or important enough to not let them vanish on the highway to total oblivion. While emphatic appreciation, repeated performance, and continued individual and public attention are the hallmark of objects in the cultural working memory, professional preservation and withdrawal from general attention mark the contents of the reference memory. Emphatic reverence and specialized historical curiosity are the two poles between which the dynamics of cultural memory is played out.

The tension that exists between these two poles can be further illustrated by two different approaches to literary criticism. In 2003 and 2004, two books appeared on Shakespeare, one by Harold Bloom with the title *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, and one by his former Yale student Stephen Greenblatt with the title *Will in the World*. Both books became bestsellers, although they could not have been more contrary in their approaches,

methods, aims, and premises. Bloom writes in the spirit of the canon, developing a praising style, venerating the text and its author with a semi-religious fervor. Greenblatt, on the other hand, establishes a relation of distance and estrangement to his object of research. While Bloom de-contextualizes the text to make it the object of devotion, Greenblatt places the text back in its historical context, reading it side by side with other texts of the epoch. One adopts the strategy of the canon, investing the text with existential meaning and framing it with an aura; the other adopts the strategy of the archive, aiming at destroying the aura (Greenblatt and Gallagher 12). The tension acted out between Bloom and Greenblatt is the tension between the canon and the archive, or, in other words, between the contraction of cultural memory and its expansion.

3. Cultural Reference Memory: The Archive

The institutions of passive cultural memory are situated halfway between the canon and forgetting. The archive is its central and paradigmatic institution; to understand this dimension of cultural memory, it is necessary to explore the history and function of the archive. In literary studies, the archive is a concept that, just like trauma, has moved into the center of poststructuralist and postcolonial discourse: in this career, however, it is often disconnected from the empirical institution and used in metaphorical ways as a highly suggestive trope. According to a famous statement by Foucault, the archive is "the law that determines what can be said" (186f.). To bring this statement closer to the level of empirical institutions, it can be rephrased in the following way: The archive is the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past.

As the paradigmatic institution of passive cultural memory, the archive is the opposite of the memorial space of the church: It is the unhallowed bureaucratic space of a clean and neatly organized repository. Archives were developed in ancient cultures together with writing systems and bureaucratic structures of organization. In their primary function, they served the ruling class with the necessary information to build up provisions for the future through stockpiling. They also served as tools for the symbolic legitimation of power and to discipline the population. Examples of such political archives are, for example, the Inquisition files or the files compiled by the East German State Security (Stasi). Archives always belonged to institutions of power: the church, the state, the police, the law, etc. Without extended archives of data, there is no state bureaucracy, no strategy to organize the future and no control over the past. Archives of data provide important tools for political power (*Herrschaftswissen*).

Time, however, quickly outdates these archives. Once they are outdated, they lose their political function and relevance, transforming them into a heap of (possibly compromising) rubbish. If they do not disappear altogether, they may enter into the new context of the historical archives. These relicts of the past are not trashed, because they are considered to be of historical or scholarly interest. The historical archive is a receptacle for documents that have fallen out of their framing institutions and can be reframed and interpreted in a new context. We must therefore distinguish between *political archives* and *historical archives*. While political archives function as an important tool for power, historical archives store information which is no longer of immediate use. They are a very recent institution, dating back to the French revolution. The revolution brought about and sealed a violent break with the past out of which not only a new future but also a new historical sense was born. Ernst Schulin speaks of "a birth of historical consciousness out of the violent break with tradition" (24). The modern idea of progress and a new form of antiquarianism, namely historical scholarship, evolved side by side. Both presuppose a break between past and present. After having withdrawn from the past its normative values and claims, it could be subjected to historical scrutiny. If power is based on the political archive, historical scholarship is based on the historical archive.

The objects in the historical archive have lost their original "place in life" (*Sitz im Leben*) and entered a new context which gives them the chance of a second life that considerably prolongs their existence. What is stored in historical archives is materially preserved and cataloged; it becomes part of an organizational structure, which allows it to be easily sourced. As part of the passive dimension of cultural memory, however, the knowledge that is stored in the archive is inert. It is stored and potentially available, but it is not interpreted. This would exceed the competence of the archivist. It is the task of others such as the academic researcher or the artist to examine the contents of the archive and to reclaim the information by framing it within a new context. The archive, therefore, can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage (*Zwischenspeicher*). Thus, the institution of the archive is part of cultural memory in the passive dimension of preservation. It stores materials in the intermediary state of "no longer" and "not yet," deprived of their old existence and waiting for a new one.

Although there are many different kinds of material relicts, the past, as Margaret Atwood has put it, is largely made of paper, and paper must be taken care of. She calls archivists and librarians "the guardian angels of paper" to whom we owe thanks, because "without them there would be a

lot less of the past than there is" (31-32). These guardian angels are so inconspicuous that they remain almost as invisible as the angels themselves. Other important guardian angels of transmission were the scribes who copied texts from fragile papyrus scrolls onto the much more durable carrier of parchment in late antiquity, but also the Irish monks who copied ancient classical books and stored them in their libraries although they were not part of their own tradition and they did not make use of them.

4. Embodied and Disembodied Cultural Memory

The selection criteria for what is to be remembered and circulated in the active cultural memory and what is to be merely stored are neither clear nor are they uncontested. In the modern print age of libraries, science, and the growth of encyclopedic knowledge, the storage capacity of the archive has by far exceeded that which can be translated back into active human memory. In the age of digital media, the growing rift between the amount of externalized information and internalizable knowledge becomes ever more dramatic. As the capacity of computers is doubled every two years, the external storage capacity of the digital age has expanded even further, while the human capacity for memory remains the same due to its neural constraints. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel had referred to this uncontrollable process as "the tragedy of culture."

According to Plato, the "tragedy of culture" started with the introduction of (alphabetic) writing, because this technique of notation separated the knower from the known and made knowledge available to the non-initiated. Plato argued that writing does not transmit memory but produces a memory ersatz. Though already inherent in the introduction of writing itself as a form of externalizing knowledge, the distinction between a cultural working memory and a cultural reference memory has been considerably exacerbated with the new institution of the historical archive. In Western democracies, these two functions of cultural memory have come to be more and more separated. But they are, contrary to Simmel's (or Nietzsche's) apprehensions, in no way unrelated. The two realms of cultural memory are not sealed against each other. On the contrary, they interact in different ways. The reference memory, for instance, provides a rich background for the working memory, which means that elements of the canon may be "estranged" and reinterpreted by framing them with elements of the archive (which is the method of New Historicism). Elements of the canon can also recede into the archive, while elements of the archive may be recovered and reclaimed for the canon. It is exactly this

interdependence of the different realms and functions that creates the dynamics of cultural memory and keeps its energy flowing.

Although we cannot imagine a culture without an active cultural memory, we can well imagine a culture without a passive storing memory. In oral cultures in which the cultural memory is embodied and transmitted through performances and practices, material relics do not persist and accumulate. In such cultures, the range of the cultural memory is coextensive with the embodied repertoires that are performed in festive rites and repeated practices. Cultures that do not make use of writing do not produce the type of relicts that are assembled in archives. Nor do they produce a canon that can be enshrined in museums and monuments. In order to do justice to cultures based on embodied forms of transmission, UNESCO has recently created a new category, referring to their cultural capital as "intangible cultural heritage." The new law of 2003 revalorized nonverbal forms of knowledge and protects a heritage that consists of practices, dances, rituals, and performances. Diana Taylor has written eloquently on the power of the Western archive over indigenous performance in the Americas. She has drawn attention to "non-archival systems of transfer" and "indigenous embodied practice as a form of knowing as well as a system for storing and transmitting knowledge" (18). Embodied repertoires and performances cannot be fixated and stored externally; they are multiplied and continued "in a constant state of againness" (Taylor 21). In an oral culture, cultural memory that is stored in embodied practices and live performances is kept within human limits and cannot expand indefinitely.

In totalitarian states, there is also no storing memory, but for very different reasons. In such a state, as Orwell has shown in his novel *1984*, every scrap that is left over from the past has to be changed or eliminated because an authentic piece of evidence has the power to crush the official version of the past on which the rulers base their power. Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith is a paradoxical archivist who is engaged in the ongoing project of effacing traces and rewriting the sources to make them mirror the present concerns. This paranoid effort is deemed necessary for the protection of the state because an independent reference to the past can trigger a counter-history that challenges the totalitarian version of the past and undermines the state.

5. Conclusion

Total recall is only possible in the science fiction movie of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Memory, including cultural memory, is always permeated

and shot through with forgetting. In order to remember anything one has to forget; but what is forgotten need not necessarily be lost forever. The canon stands for the active working memory of a society that defines and supports the cultural identity of a group. It is highly selective and, as Harold Bloom has put it, built on the principle of exclusion. The function of the archive, the reference memory of a society, provides a kind of counterbalance against the necessarily reductive and restrictive drive of the working memory. It creates a meta-memory, a second-order memory that preserves what has been forgotten. The archive is a kind of "lost-and-found office" for what is no longer needed or immediately understood. The historical archive helps us to position ourselves in time; it affords us the possibility of comparison and reflection for a retrospective historical consciousness. We must acknowledge, however, that archives are selective as well. They are in no way all-inclusive but have their own structural mechanisms of exclusion in terms of class, race, and gender. These mechanisms, however, have in recent decades become the focus of critical attention, debate, and investigation, which are themselves powerful agents of change. Luckily, there is not only intentional but also accidental preservation when hidden deposits are discovered. They are what involuntary memory is to voluntary memory. But even counting in accidental discoveries, the past remains, as Thomas Carlyle once put it, a "miserable, defective shred." While historians have to adjust their research and questions to the extension and range of the archives, literary writers may take the liberty to fill in the gaps. Atwood writes: "[T]he parts left unexplained—the gaps unfilled—I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention" (35). Toni Morrison is a writer who deals with the gaps in historical records and archives in yet another way; the gaps that she discovers are the wounds in memory itself, the scar of a trauma that resisted representation and can only belatedly, long after the deeply destructive events, become articulated in the framework of a literary text. In a novel like *Beloved*, Morrison's imaginary literary supplement to historical memory is not a filling of the gap but a marking of it.

I wanted to show that both the active and the passive realms of cultural memory are anchored in institutions that are not closed against each other but allow for mutual influx and reshuffling. This accounts for the dynamics within cultural memory and keeps it open to changes and negotiations. I also wanted to show that the archive is an institution with a history and specific functions. Like the recognition of human rights, the archive is an important achievement of civil society and perhaps not the least by which we may judge its strength.