

Traumatic pasts, literary afterlives, and transcultural memory: new directions of literary and media memory studies

Astrid Erll*

Goethe University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany

Abstract

This article presents new directions of literary and media memory studies. It distinguishes between (1) the study of 'traumatic pasts', i.e. representations of war and violence in literature and other media, (2) diachronic and intermedial approaches to 'literary afterlives' and (3) recent insights into the inherent transculturality of memory and their consequences for literary and media studies.

Keywords: *cultural memory studies; literature and memory; media and memory; transcultural memory*

Cultural memory is a theoretical perspective which links literary and media studies closely to interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences. Memory studies is a broad convergence field, with contributions from cultural history, social psychology, media archaeology, political philosophy, and comparative literature. With the term "cultural memory" scholars describe all those processes of a biological, medial, or social nature which relate past and present (and future) in sociocultural contexts. Cultural memory entails remembering *and* forgetting. It has an individual and a collective side, which are, however, closely interrelated.¹

There are many different ways of engaging in memory studies from the vantage point of literary and media studies. Some scholars are, for example, interested in the significance of ancient mnemotechnics (*ars memoriae*) for literature and art, others study from perspectives such as intertextuality as "literature's memory", canon formation as a way of defining cultural heritage, the relation of narrative, memory and identity, the role of media (such as photographs and movies) for remembering, orality and literacy as different

modes of memory, or memory in the age of digital media. From this wealth of possible approaches, this chapter will—very selectively—present three topics which are currently much-discussed in interdisciplinary memory studies which simultaneously pertain to key areas of literary and media studies:

1. The representation of "traumatic pasts" in media such as literature and film. This topic links memory research to Holocaust studies and the cultural history of war and violence. We encounter mediated "traumatic" memories in Holocaust writing, war movies, "9/11"-novels, the poetry of World War I, and in the ways in which historical injustices and the violation of human rights are represented all over the globe (e.g. colonial wars, slavery in the U.S., South African Apartheid, or the Australian "stolen generation"). The logic of individual and cultural trauma, narrative and other aesthetic forms used to represent memory, and the social functions of literature and film are some of the central questions memory studies has to deal with in this area of research.

*Correspondence to: Astrid Erll, Goethe University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany. Email: erll@em.uni-frankfurt.de

2. The “afterlives” of literature. The study of literary afterlives (which is reminiscent of Aby Warburg’s research on art’s afterlife) opens up a diachronic perspective. Stories appear, disappear, and reappear. Literary works are read, reread, and rewritten across decades and centuries. In the process they are constantly transformed and put to ever-new uses. Intertextuality, rewriting, intermediality and remediation are key concepts which describe the “social life” of texts and other media in a mnemohistorical perspective.
3. Transnational and transcultural memory. Most recently, memory studies has begun to turn away from its prevailing methodological nationalism and become interested in forms of remembering *across* nations and cultures. A similar development can be observed in comparative literature and media studies, namely an increased interest in global media cultures, transcultural writing, world literature, and in the negotiation of colonialism and decolonization, migration, cultural globalization, and cosmopolitanism in literature and other media.

THE REPRESENTATION OF MEMORY IN LITERATURE AND FILM: “TRAUMATIC PASTS”

Literature and film can vividly portray individual and collective memory—its contents, its workings, its fragility and its distortions—by coding it into aesthetic forms, such as narrative structures, symbols, and metaphors. Fictional versions of memory are characterized by their dynamic relationship to memory concepts of other symbol systems, such as psychology, religion, history, and sociology: they are shaped by them and shape them in turn; they may perpetuate old or anticipate new images of remembering and forgetting.

It is at least since the modernist writings of Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf that this close relationship of literature to social discourses of memory has become obvious. In “memory novels” such as Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), ideas about the individual memory which had been circulating at the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. Sigmund Freud’s concept of the unconscious and Henri Bergson’s *mémoire invo-*

lontaire) are staged with specifically literary forms, such as free indirect discourse and a complex time structure.

Literary studies has shown how memory is represented in poetry, drama, and fiction.² Metaphors of memory, the narrative representation of consciousness, the literary production of mnemonic space and of subjective time are some of the key issues in literary studies’ engagement with memory. From a narratological viewpoint, it is interesting to note that the distinction between an “experiencing I” and a “narrating I” already rests on a (largely implicit) concept of memory, namely on the idea that there is a difference between pre-narrative experience on the one hand, and, on the other, narrative memory which creates meaning retrospectively. The occupation with first-person narrators is thus always an occupation with the literary representation of individual remembering. Referring to these and other literary forms, and using Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1850) as an example, Martin Löschnigg subsumes under the term “rhetoric of memory” those narrative means with which the illusion of authentic autobiographical remembering is created.³

The possibilities and limits of literary representation are gauged when it comes to the memories of violent history, such as war, terror, and genocide. Recent studies, often comparative in their approach, have looked at the literary memory of the world wars, the experience of colonialism and decolonization, of authoritarian regimes, genocide, and of global terror. Nine Eleven can be conceived of as a global traumatic event. It has brought forth a large body of Anglophone writing which tries to give literary shape to its impact on cultural memory (e.g. the novels by Don De Lillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, Moshin Hamid, and Ian McEwan). It is, however, clearly the Holocaust which takes center stage in the project of conveying traumatic pasts through literature and other art forms. As in the mnemohistory of other events, we can distinguish between different generations and perspectives of writing about the Holocaust—for example, survivors’ testimonies (Primo Levi), writers of the second generation (Art Spiegelman), and various other forms of imaginative reconstruction (from Anita Desai to Ann Michaels)—and ask how the memories of those who experienced the events first-hand are transmitted to their children

and grandchildren (transgenerational memory) and to people not immediately involved in the events (prosthetic memory, see below).

It is especially within American discussions that the notion of trauma as a “crisis of representation” has gained great prominence. This idea was introduced to literary studies in the framework of poststructuralist thinking, notably by Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*.⁴ In a clear-sighted, critical survey of the expanding field of trauma studies, Ruth Leys identifies at its heart of the concern with the “constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era.”⁵ In poststructuralist trauma discourse, “the Holocaust is held to have precipitated, perhaps caused, an epistemological-ontological crisis of witnessing, a crisis manifested at the level of language itself.” Such equations between the individual and the cultural, the biological and the linguistic levels, can be highly misleading and the ethical consequences of trauma studies’ tendency to personify texts (i.e. to conflate literary works with real people) must be critically assessed.

Media studies’ approaches to memory are perhaps better suited to getting to grips with the question of how literature and film represent traumatic pasts—and to what degree these “pasts” are always already mediated memories. Marita Sturken, for example, in *Tangled Memories*, studies how the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic were turned into elements of cultural memory by means of television, movies and other popular media.⁶ Sturken brings out the complex entanglements of memory and media in the social arena. She emphasizes the active and memory-productive role of media: “Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides”.⁷ Addressing the experiential dimension of mediated memory, Alison Landsberg introduced the notion of “prosthetic memory”.⁸ Landsberg studies the age of mass culture, with a particular focus on the effects that representations of slavery and the Holocaust in literature, cinema and museum exhibits have on memory. She argues that what makes mass media so powerful in memory culture is that they allow us to “take on” other people’s

and groups’ experiences and memories “like an artificial limb” (ibid., 20). For Landsberg, prosthetic memory has deeply ethical implications: it is characterized by its “ability . . . to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender”.⁹

THE “AFTERLIVES” OF LITERATURE

Approaches to the “life” and ongoing impact of literary stories and patterns address the basic process of memory in culture: that of continuation and actualization. In reconstructing the “social life” of a literary text we may ask how it was—across long periods of time—received, discussed, used, canonized, forgotten, censored, and re-used. What is it that confers upon some literary works, again and again, a new lease of life in changing social contexts whereas others are forgotten and relegated to the archive? These questions can be addressed from social, medial, and textual viewpoints—and the phenomenon of literary afterlives will arguably be tackled best by a balanced combination of all three.

1. The *social perspective* emphasizes the active appropriations of a literary text by social actors. How do changing social formations—with their specific views of history and present challenges, their interests and expectations, discourses and reading practices—receive and re-actualize literature? How do different generations respond in changing ways to the same literary work? The worldwide reception of Shakespeare, Bunyan or Milton across the centuries gives ample evidence of how different audiences de- and resemiotize literary works and how different readings may be related to transformations in society.
2. Looking at literary afterlives from a *media culture-perspective* means directing attention to the intermedial networks which maintain and sustain the continuing impact of certain stories: intertextual and intermedial references, rewriting and adaptation, forms of commentary and cross-reference. Using the concepts of premediation and remediation I have shown elsewhere how the narratives and iconic images of the “Revolt of 1857” (a colonial war in Northern India against British rule) were pre-formed by stories and images

of similar earlier events (such as the “Black Hole of Calcutta” of 1756), then remediated in colonial and postcolonial contexts across the spectrum of available media technologies (from newspaper articles to novels, photography, film, and the Internet), in order to turn, finally, into premediators of other stories and events (such as the Amritsar massacre of 1919, nostalgic postimperial novels of the 1950s, or current debates about terrorism).¹⁰

3. In a more *text-centred perspective*, we may ask if there are certain properties of literary works which make them more “actualizable” than others, which effect that the works lend themselves to rereading, rewriting, remediating, and continued discussion. For example, studying the long and rich afterlife of Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819), Ann Rigney has shown that the novel’s continuing appeal can be attributed to a combination of two (seemingly contradictory) characteristics of its plot: More than any other novel by Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* is both “highly schematic” and highly “ambivalent”. On the one hand, it offers a basic narrative paradigm that can be used as a model “for dealing with *other* events”; on the other hand, it keeps readers puzzled and engaged by its “de-stabilizing tension between the outcome of the story and its emotional economy”.¹¹

The “afterlives-approach” asks, in a diachronic perspective, about the continuing impact of literature, how it manages to “live on” and remain in use and meaningful to readers. It means addressing the complex social, textual and intermedial processes involved in this dynamics, and it therefore requires a sophisticated combination of various approaches, some of which can boast a long tradition in literary studies: close textual and media analysis, the study of intermediality and intertextuality, the history of literary functions, and the social history of literature and art.

TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSCULTURAL MEMORY

Memory studies was long characterized by its “methodological nationalism”. This is best exemplified by Pierre Nora’s influential *Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1992), a collection of essays about

French sites of memory. Many critics drew attention to the nation-centeredness of Nora’s approach and to the fact that the *Lieux*-project in fact “forgets” the history of cultural exchange within Europe, cultural transactions with the French colonies, and the significance of migrants’ memories. Such entangled histories also impinge on memories in the Anglophone world: British trade and colonialism, the multi-ethnic foundations of, say, Canada and the United States, and the complex migration patterns of the twentieth century have all led to a wealth of shared, transnational and transcultural sites of memory (cf. Hebel 2009)¹².

For those interested in transcultural memory, postcolonial studies, with its focus on the persistence, or working-through, of the colonial past, can offer valuable insights. Key concepts, such as “writing back”, the Middle Passage as “traumatic event”, or “colonial nostalgia”, clearly display a memory-dimension. One characteristic feature of the New English Literatures, for example, is that they often represent and construct transcultural memory: Caribbean literature “re-members” the Black Atlantic;¹³ Black British Literature plays with genre memories,¹⁴ migrant and diasporic writing creates “figures of displacement”.¹⁵ In his study on the significance of Holocaust memories in the age of decolonization Michael Rothberg has introduced the notion of “multidirectional memory”.¹⁶ With a view to South African fiction, Sarah Nuttall has developed concepts such as “negotiation” and “entanglement”, which help address literary responses to the divergent and contested memories arising from different racialized identity groups.¹⁷

What current discourses of globalization and “memory in the global age”¹⁸ sometimes, however, tend to overlook—and what a decidedly historical perspective on memory will quickly bring to light—is that transcultural remembering has a long genealogy. It is actually since ancient times that contents, forms and technologies of memory have crossed the boundaries of time, space, and social groups, and been filled in different local contexts with new life and new meaning.

The “transcultural” is therefore not only a category for studying memory in our current globalizing age, or an alternative to the two approaches delineated above, but a perspective

on memory that can in principle be chosen with respect to all historical periods and with a view to both the synchronic circulation of representations (e.g. of “traumatic pasts”) as well as to the diachronic dimension of memory (“afterlives”). Literary and media studies can contribute to an understanding of such “traveling memory” by reconstructing the routes of powerful stories (like that of Odysseus or the “pilgrim’s progress”), mnemonic rituals (e.g. the “Two Minutes Silence”) or media-technologies and -formats (such as docufiction) in their local, translocal, and global dimensions.

NOTES

1. See, Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
2. For example, Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* [Memory Spaces: Forms and Transformations of Cultural Memory] (Munich: Beck, 1999); Ansgar Nünning, Marion Gymnich, and Roy Sommer, eds., *Literature and Memory: Theoretical Paradigms—Genres—Functions* (Tübingen: Narr, 2006).
3. Martin Löschnigg, “‘The Prismatic Hues of Memory...’: Autobiographische Modellierung und die Rhetorik der Erinnerung in Dickens’ *David Copperfield*.” *Poetica* 31, no. 1–2 (1999): 175–200.
4. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
5. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 267f.
6. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
7. *Ibid.*, 9.
8. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
9. *Ibid.*, 21.
10. Astrid Erll, *Prämediatio—Remediation. Repräsentationen des indischen Aufstands in imperialen und post-kolonialen Medienkulturen (von 1857 bis zur Gegenwart)* [Remediation. Representations of the Indian uprising in imperial and post-colonial culture media (from 1857 to the present)] (Trier: WVT, 2007).
11. Ann Rigney, “The Many Afterlives of Ivanhoe,” in *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Jay M. Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 207–234, 215f.
12. Hebel, Udo J. *Transnational American Memories* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2009).
13. Lars Eckstein, *Re-membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).
14. Jan Rupp, *Genre and Cultural Memory in Black British Literature* (Trier: WVT, 2010).
15. Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser, and Yolande Jansen, eds., *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).
16. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
17. Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post Apartheid*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).
18. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).