

Memory, consumerism and media: Reflections on the emergence of the field

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Abstract

This article situates the emergence of the field of memory studies in relation to several areas of study: cultural studies, media studies, communication and visual culture. It considers key concepts of those fields – memory practices, technologies of memory, mediation and consumerism – in relation to memory studies. Finally, it reflects on some cautionary aspects of memory studies as it moves forward as a field of study.

Key words

communication; cultural memory; modernity; visual culture

The inauguration of a journal on memory studies prompts reflection, of course, on the coming-into-being of this interdisciplinary field of study. When increasing numbers of scholars began thinking about memory in the 1980s, there was little currency to the idea that memory studies constituted any kind of a field. It was, I would venture, merely a topic, a conceit, an interesting framework through which to pose a set of questions about the politics of identity, community, nation, media and image. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first signs of an emergent field of study were visible as questions about memory made possible a set of enquiries that dovetailed with concerns about identity, the politics of images, the shaping aspects of narrative on historical thinking and the self-scrutiny of established disciplines, such as history, anthropology and literature in the context of postmodern theory and poststructuralist questionings. In addition, scholarship on the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust created a confluence of a renewed generational interest in the memory of, and testimony about, the Holocaust with changing theoretical frameworks and a questioning of disciplinary boundaries.

As is the case with many emergent and interdisciplinary fields of study, the codification of memory studies that began to happen over the last two decades was accompanied by a mini-backlash (Klein, 2000). This seems to be a very predictable phase in

any field of study. In this case, it is interesting to note for which disciplines the topic of memory is considered to be a problem, and for which it is merely an area of expansion. For instance, while the study of memory has been subject to concern within the field of history, for its potential to be amorphous and undisciplined as an area of study and for its implicit critique of historical studies, its emergence as a topic in literature or media studies has been relatively uncontroversial. Yet, it is the case today that much of the most interesting work pursued in memory comes from historians or is deeply indebted to the innovations of historiography over the past few decades.

In the fields in which I primarily locate my work – cultural studies, visual culture, media studies, communication – the interest in memory has not been disciplinarily threatening; rather it has been embraced as an interdisciplinary topic. There are several key aspects to how memory has been addressed in these fields of study that I would like to highlight – the concepts of memory practices, technologies of memory, mediation, and the relationship of memory and consumerism.

The concept of practices is central to the self-definition of cultural studies as an area of study, and while deceptively simple, it is theoretically quite strategic. So, for instance, the shift in cultural studies from an interest in the objects of culture to the practices of culture was a deliberate move toward a focus on individuals' and groups' negotiation with the meaning of cultural forms and activities. Similarly, scholarship on memory and culture has largely emphasized this question of the practices of memory. This has had the effect of devaluing the notion that memory resides in objects in some way, and defined memory more as a dynamic process that is the result of the practices of individuals and groups – practices of memorialization, ritual, the creation of shrines, the debates and battles over the meanings of memory that emerge in the construction of memory institutions. Thus, James Young has argued, for instance, in the case of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, that the debate about the museum and its role was just as important to its construction of memory as the museum and its objects. (Young, 1994).

The concept of memory practices allows for an emphasis on the politics of memory, precisely because of the ways in which the production and construction of memory through cultural practices has as its foundation the notion that memories are part of a larger process of cultural negotiation. This defines memories as narratives, as fluid and mediated cultural and personal traces of the past. A practice of memory is an activity that engages with, produces, reproduces and invests meaning in memories, whether personal, cultural or collective. Thus, an emphasis on practices, rather than objects or sites of memory, highlights the very active aspect (and hence the constructed nature) of memories. Such an emphasis thus shifts attention from empirical concepts of memory to the ways that memories are highly political. The concept of cultural memory (as opposed to collective memory) is deeply allied with the notion of memory practices. Cultural memory as a term implies not only that memories are often produced and reproduced through cultural forms, but also the kind of circulation that exists between personal memories and cultural memories – the personal photograph, for instance, that ends up in the public arena, or the Hollywood film that 'becomes' part of an individual's memory of an event. Thus, the personal photographs that are left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial end up in a government archive and in coffee table books

and, at the same time, the integration of film narratives into personal memories makes it difficult for survivors of historical events to separate their own memories of those events from the film images of them.

In the fields of visual culture and media studies, the study of memory has often focused on what can be seen as technologies of memory, in which memories are experienced and produced through technologies. Technologies of memory, while they might include memorials, souvenirs, bodies and other objects, are increasingly visual technologies of mass and mediated forms – photographs, films, television shows and digital images. It is extraordinary to consider the degree to which the still photograph has been so central to scholarship on memory, and the role that the photograph continues to play in concepts of memory. This points in many ways to the complex interrelationship of contemporary concepts of memory to modernity. As the quintessential modern medium, photography has been endowed with particular kinds of cultural meanings – as a trace of the real, evidence of the past and a harbinger of death – that exemplify modernity's ambivalent embrace of the new while holding onto a nostalgia for the past.

Cultural and individual memory are constantly produced through, and mediated by, the technologies of memory. The question of mediation is thus central to the way in which memory is conceived in the fields of study of visual culture, cultural studies and media studies. This means that concepts of memory in these fields tend to consider it dynamic, contagious and highly unstable – the famous photograph becomes a part of an individual's memory and personal memory is incorporated into a narrative film; we all have 'personal' memories that come to us not from our individual experience but from our mediated experience of photographs, documentaries and popular culture. There are many different terms being used for these kinds of mediated memories: Marianne Hirsch uses the term 'postmemory' to describe those memories inherited, not one's own yet a part of one's psyche; Alison Landsberg uses the term 'prosthetic memory' to refer to memories that circulate through mass culture and are acquired by people for whom they have no lived experience (Hirsch, 1997; Landsberg, 2004).

In addition, the relationship of mass culture to memory has often addressed concerns about how popular culture and mass media can co-opt memories and reconfigure histories in the name of entertainment – what has become known, for better or for worse, as the 'Spielberg style' of history, in which simplistic narratives are deployed to evoke particular empathetic responses in viewers, and through which memory texts are fashioned. Thus, the relationship between mass culture and entertainment forms and memory has been fraught from the early years of modernity with a fear that memory can be transformed, co-opted, and appropriated through popular culture forms.

This central concept of the mediation of memory has been crucial to the increased interest in memory in media and cultural studies. It has also raised in important ways questions of the politics of the image, debates about authenticity and issues of commodification and consumerism. Thus, to examine the mediating role of visual technologies in the construction and production of memory is also to consider the role played by cultural objects of 'inauthentic' cultural status. Here again, we are reminded of some of the key tenets of cultural studies as it emerged in the late 20th century – that cultural objects

that have been traditionally considered to be beneath scholarly scrutiny have much to tell us about cultural meaning. Thus, in my own work, I am interested in the cultural negotiation that can be found in simple objects such as snow globes, memorial teddy bears and souvenirs. It is a challenge for scholars to take these kinds of 'inauthentic' objects seriously while not over-reading them as more than what they are, or as more culturally resistant or conformist than they are. I am interested in how kitsch objects of memory function and what it means that history often gets repackaged as kitsch. For instance, in the USA in the wake of 9/11, a culture of kitsch memory objects has emerged, from FDNY teddy bears to World Trade Center paperweights to snow globes that re-imagine the twin towers still standing. These are kitsch objects – they proscriber particular emotional responses and promise to make consumers feel better – and they are also memory objects that participate in a set of narratives about the innocence of the nation. Thus, such objects of memorialization encourage particular kinds of political acquiescence. It is precisely these kinds of objects of analysis that push at the limits of theorizing about cultural 'making do' and demand that we as scholars take seriously the relationship of seemingly 'innocent' cultural objects to politics.

An analysis of the relationship of memory to consumerism thus seems to me to be a crucial aspect of the work of memory studies, precisely because of the integral relationship between memory culture and global consumer networks. Issues of consumerism in relationship to loss, grief and remembrance are not new – indeed, the emergence of a memory industry can certainly be seen in the early 20th century memory practices as well as during the 19th century. Yet, the importance of commodification and consumerism to memory practices does point, yet again, to the particular manifestations of memory culture in modernity and the relationship of technologies of memory to mass culture. Thus, I would argue, the project of memory studies is, in many ways, a project that must return, again and again, to questions of modernity.

The emergence of a new journal, such as *Memory Studies*, marks a particular kind of codification of a field of study. On the occasion of such an institutionalization of the field, I offer, in conclusion, a set of cautionary thoughts about the field of memory studies. In doing so, I acknowledge that my perspective is derived from my situation in the fields of cultural studies, visual culture and media studies, all relatively loosely defined interdisciplinary fields of study that have few stakes in disciplinary histories.

TERMINOLOGY

One of the primary critiques of memory studies is that the term memory has been used in highly ambiguous and speciously vague ways. Thus, anything can be called memory (as long as it is not history, as long as it is connected to affect, as long as it can be used to invoke the past). As Kerwin Klein has written in his critique of memory studies, 'We sometimes use *memory* as a synonym for *history* to soften our prose, to humanize it, and to make it more accessible' (Klein, 2000: 129). Terms such as public memory, national memory, collective memory and cultural memory have all been deployed by various scholars as means to suggest certain kinds of memories that are not a part of

history and are distinct from personal or individual memories. While I agree with Klein's assertion that the use of the term memory can often be vague and ill-defined, I also feel that the field will not be well served by a preoccupation with terminology. I would thus argue that debates about terminology should be set aside while attentiveness to that terminology (defining one's own terms, for instance) should be affirmed.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

It is one of the challenges of a field such as memory studies that it spans the social sciences and humanities, and it is incumbent on scholars working on memory to read broadly across these fields. The challenge is to reconcile, when fruitful, the very different theoretical models for memory that are deployed in different fields and also to not force interdisciplinary questions when they are less reconcilable. The interdisciplinary aspects of memory studies should be in dialogue as well with the study of visual culture and new media. The policing of disciplines should have little place in memory studies.

THE 'INAUTHENTIC'

One of the key aspects of the field of memory studies is that it can mine those areas of study, and those objects and images, that might seem most counter-intuitive to the study of memory. This means, for instance, to think about the capacity of objects and images that might be traditionally considered to be within the realm of the 'inauthentic' – such as commodities, mass-produced souvenirs, greeting cards, postcards and kitsch objects as well as forms of popular culture such as television dramas and feature films – to produce and maintain cultural memory. In contemporary society, the stuff of consumer culture is an integral component of the structures of feeling and affect of our times. As such, I see the field of memory studies as offering the potential to examine deeply the immense implications of truly seeing cultural forms outside of the modernist binary of high and low.

FETISHIZING THE CATEGORY ITSELF

Finally, it seems to me that one of the primary cautionary concerns of the field of memory studies is the importance of viewing memory – personal, cultural, national – in context and in perspective. That is, we need to affirm the importance of not awarding memory too much authority, too much authenticity, too much power. Since philosophical discussions of memory first began in ancient times, memory has been perceived to be in crisis; clearly this is a trope that needs to be re-examined. If it is always in crisis, then what are we attempting to invest into it that exposes its vulnerability, fragility and intangibility? The potential to fetishize memory as a topic, and to grant it too much weight, is of course one of the pitfalls of designating memory studies as a field of

study. Is memory always a positive value, something to be longed for and fought over? The relationship of memory to forgetting is crucial to the field of memory studies, and a cautionary, if not ironic, examination of the reasons that memory has emerged as a focus of academic study at this point in history should always hover over the field and demand our scrutiny.

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MEMORY

Why memory's work on journalism does not reflect journalism's work on memory

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Abstract

This article discusses the symbiotic, though uneven, relationship linking scholarship on journalism and memory. Though work on collective memory has yet to recognize the centrality of journalism as an institution of mnemonic record, memory creeps into journalistic relay so often that it renders journalism's memory work both widespread and multi-faceted. This renders journalism a key agent of memory work, even if journalists themselves are averse to admitting it as part of what they do and even if memory scholars have not yet given journalism its due.

Key words

collective memory; journalism; news

Memory and journalism resemble two distant cousins. They know of each other's existence, acknowledge their shared environment from time to time and proceed apace as autonomous phenomena without seeming to depend on the other. And yet neither reaches optimum functioning without the other occupying a backdrop. Just as journalism needs memory work to position its recounting of public events in context, so too does memory need journalism to provide one of the most public drafts of the past.

Two questions motivate the symbiotic, though uneven, relationship linking journalism and memory. What do memory's journalistic work and journalism's memory work look like? And why are they not the same?

MEMORY'S WORK ON JOURNALISM

To say that memory work depends in part on journalism is to state a truism that should be obvious to memory scholars though it is not necessarily recognized by journalists. In that the work of memory draws from a wide range of sources – performances, testimonies,