

Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Memory, Archives*. First English Edition. Transl. Aleida Assmann and David Henry Wilson. New York: Cambridge University Press 2011. xi, 402 pg. ISBN 978-0521165877.

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This deft survey of memory and culture, by one of the founders of memory studies, is simply indispensable to understanding the field as experienced, crafted, understood and denied in the twenty-first century. Though written for scholars, its clear structural presentation of the development of constructs of memory as philosophy, and application, in social sciences, technics, and politics make it valuable also to the general educated reader. In collaboration with David Henry Wilson, Professor Assmann, a professor of English literature at the University of Constanz, personally rendered her essays from the original German (*Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1999) into equally scholarly English. Few authors can do this. Assmann's chief concern and insights are in the intellectual and literary realm, but the implications for culture and society of technology's role in memory, and its material and statist applications sadly make her emphasis upon individual consciousness and recollection almost nostalgic.

The book is organized into meditational vectors upon traditions, perspectives, media and discourses, and ranges broadly from art, social science, theory, to the Holocaust and the evolving nature of recent societies and emerging cultural taxonomies, such as the museum, the memoir, and digital memory.

Primal, intellectual, and mass consciousness has been a specific focus of western intellectuals, a concern maximized since the rise of printing and a literature-hungry middle class. Awareness, sensation, recall, recollection, the identification and/or manufacture of symbols were first the purview of linguists, poets, theologians, and jurists before language and memory became specific tools for modernizing political systems and economies. Professor Assmann's collection of essays also traces the theoretical basis for these developments, refracted through recent texts, Shakespeare and nineteenth century Romanticism, in works that may not be as familiar to readers no longer presented with an older canon.

She sums up “. . . the artists shape our memory because it is they who give to the transitory and the ephemeral ‘a local habitation and a name’ (Wordsworth), thus creating what ‘the world will not willingly let die’ (Milton)”

(5). By happenstance, voices from the turmoil of the French Revolution and Cromwell’s Commonwealth have named the problem of memory as “local habitation” and decided that what “the world will not willingly let die” meets current concerns rather neatly.

As the author indicates, libraries of books have been written upon modern memory and identity since the familiar initial work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, which explored it as a function of individual experience and neurology, modified or altered by social needs. Proustian sense memory, that twentieth-century individual insight, gives way to Pierre Nora’s studies of “places of memory” determined and claimed by various parties in the wake of the Great War; consciousness is awakened by a sense of what is lost.

Nora shows us memory managed as a public utility, with commemoration as its handmaiden in French choices of how, when and where to remember World War I, and which factions, parties, and classes made or denied those choices. Shakespeare’s history plays also show the importance of “forgetting” to conclude cycles of violence. This, as well as the Gambetta quote on French revanchism in 1872 “Pensons-y toujours, n’en parlons jamais” points to a more complex reality when memory is still linked to personal experience, and less malleable to reinterpretation (63). The transmutation of memory into art, textual, visual, and later cinematic works will further complicate forgetting, making it possible, or impossible, by the editing of images in monuments, representation in politics, mass culture and educational materials, as well as experience retailed through oral history. Assmann views this process as filling a “memory box” or ark, equally a reservoir of identity and a burden.

She suggests that due to his evocative literary exploration of voluntary and involuntary memory Marcel Proust is the “secret patron” of research into oral history (262). Memory is not static when continually invoked and restated, leading youthful memory to devolve into symbol, a key factor in the “False Memory” disputes in 1980’s North America. Emotion, neurologically, can implant the memory due to the intensity of feeling, but affective theory makes no claims as to the accuracy of the memory – leading to what novelists call “the unreliable narrator,” and other potential confusions or manipulations with great social impacts, incidental, or planned. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut, a survivor of the firebombing of Dresden in World War II, found that trauma made him unable to express that experience save through fiction. Memory could only be recovered in his voice objectifying the experience, not directly narrating.

In the chapter on “Places,” Nora’s assessment of the preservation of the Nazi death “factory” Auschwitz whether as pilgrimage, point of meditation, or educational museum makes a key point that “conserving” a place or narrated experience is no guarantor of “authenticity.”

Documentation, preservation of contact zones, and the evocation of an aura are cultural productions, no matter the earnestness of the society, or the expertise of the curator. In ancient landscapes, urban and rural, there is also the question of how much to remember, how much trauma can be safely invoked. The memory of pain in many places of memory is “cultural geography” and a decision must be made to “will it not to die.” After witnesses die, within a generation this memory becomes an archival question, Assmann’s “Storage” category. In the matter of the Holocaust, seventy years after World War II, a reliable map and database of all the death and work camps, as well as slave labor camps across Europe, is still in the early stages of development. As the Frankfurt School suggested during the first years of documentation (315), this project may be one of modernity’s examples of the impossible fragmentation of experience,.

Some of the most stimulating perceptions in this study deal with modernity and media, what Assmann calls “the ecology of culture,” a question of “permanence, decay and residue.” In the matter of remembering and forgetting, German and French scholarship has been debating and defining trauma and memory since the 1970s, as belated war criminals and sequestered art and property continued to come to public scrutiny. The climate of reassessed memory would only expand with decolonization of the French Empire, culminating in the Algerian war. A generation after the death of Spain’s dictator Francisco Franco (1975), Spanish cultural memory and law, aided by the new technology of forensic DNA analysis, are doing memory work in rediscovered mass graves and the hospital records of stolen children, recovering family lineages. Memory can be static, refined, denied, but also persists in surprise even from the detritus of human societies.

The final category of unclassified memory, data, material and corporal goods, lacks context, and was previously “rubbish.” Historians used to dismiss it as “antiquarian” or hobby research for the retired and the topically obsessed. Scientists now recover information from old textiles, ossified fecal remains, astrophysicists gain indices into ancient astronomy from computer analysis of light patterns and placement of prehistoric megaliths, from sources once left to the interests of Druid hobbyists such as William Stukely. But for Assmann, such data is an index to modernity, an encyclopedia of the text of the dead. The unexamined archive is a resource that may well spawn cognitive strategies to better remember, through artistic interpretation, and technical means, but it also faces the challenge of metastasizing growth and problematic audiences and grids, to consciously understand what is to be remembered.

Most importantly, Assmann concluded in 1999 and reaffirmed in 2011 that memory is an amalgam of forgetting, choosing, and processing what is recorded. Though much remains uncharted from the twentieth century, one should also note that the digitization and massive commercial and government storage of diurnal information by electronic means, the rise of twentieth-century metadata, presents a huge challenge to the individual, the society, and the scholar – what shall we forget? What shall we remember? Again, who decides, and by what cognitive or political structure?

Does the cyber memory box represent personal or collective experience? Is this the final “local habitation” for modernity? What is recorded, clearly from this survey and the bulk of pre-digital experience, is not fully known, either to the artist, the scholar, or the social group. The data hives of the electronic global community, full of “state secrets” and “proprietary information,” present the chance for a larger discussion on the function and structure of memory, as well as the possible irrelevance of the modern individual consciousness.