

## Pre-workshop comment

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### My perspective on the field

Wulf Kansteiner has written that the study of memory turns researchers into engaged citizens sharing the burden of the political and moral choices of their time. I am not sure which came first in my case: my interest in memory has emerged from my research in oral history but the latter has stemmed out of my life in a post-communist country. The first oral-history projects I took part in had an archivist impulse rather than a real research agenda: an urge was felt to save from oblivion ways and practices belonging to a past that was quickly becoming 'a foreign country' (Lowenthal) and to rescue the testimonies of people who had not been allowed to speak before. Their memory was perceived as a resource for the painfully needed re-writing of history. A few years later, post-socialist oral history – following current debates – shifted its focus from 'giving voice' and recovering a counter-memory as an alternative to the communist historical narrative, to an interest in the multi-voicedness of the past and the subjectivity of its actors; from neat dichotomies like official–unofficial or public–private to the idea of the fragmentation of memory and of 'memory wars' (whose memories are to be privileged; what to remember and what to forget).

This development has shaped my interest in the relations of biographical memory and cultural memory. When people tell their stories, they resort to the available ways of expressing themselves: they employ the vocabularies, images, genres and plots accepted in their cultural milieu. They refer to a set of cultural conventions although they do not always stick to them but sometimes re-negotiate or even subvert them. I am interested in the changes of these 'collective frames' (Halbwachs) of memory viewing them from a constructivist and presentist perspective, and in how they depend on/interact with cultural memory (based on Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory). In this respect, a central issue is that of the formation, cohesion and evolution of mnemonic communities such as families, local/ethnic communities, generations adapting (to) the stock of cultural memory in their own ways.

**a) The truth of memory: fact and fiction.** I view this issue in terms of the paradox of the truth claims of memory on the one hand (in the case of personal narratives – the autobiographical pact, according to Philippe Lejeune) and the dependence of 'substance' on 'style' on the other (ie the meaning-making through linguistic, stylistic and cultural conventions, recognisable models, etc.) that undermines the unproblematic factuality of any narrative. The emplotment of the 'facts of life' (ie the transformation of the *fabula* into a *syuzhet*) is a process of fictionalisation, which, paradoxically, is meant to make the narrative of the past more 'true to life' and convincing. Why the need for witnessing in contemporary culture – eg the (in)famous case of Benjamin Wilkomirski's fake memoir?

**b) Regimes of memory: spaces, texts, objects, bodies.** The importance of memory seems to grow in periods of crisis and rapid change, resulting in problematisation of identities. In such situations, memory sustains the continuity of the experience of individuals and groups. At the same time, individuals and groups face the question of legitimacy. It is at this point that the established 'regimes' of memory (national literary canons, commemorative rituals, monuments, museums, art and cinema, media discourses) seem to come into play. How do different regimes of memory contribute to the re-figuration of the past? Another interesting issue is how they are established and challenged, and how they change.

**d) The politics and ethics of memory.** How do we reconcile 'the duty to remember' with 'the need to forget' (Ricoeur)? Memory is selective, ie it already embraces forgetting. Retaining without

obliterating is memory only as far as computers are concerned, not humans and their groups. The choice to remember or forget, what to remember and what to forget, is political (in the broad sense at least). The decision how to remember is political as well. Tzvetan Todorov has distinguished between literal memory (descriptive, viewing events as unique 'facts') and exemplary memory (subsuming events under categories, de-individualisation making possible to use the past as a model to learn from). Recognition of literal memory is a recognition of victim status but only exemplary memory is a condition for justice.

## **Position paper**

My work in post-socialist oral history has shaped my interest in the relations of *biographical memory* and *cultural memory*. My perspective on biographical memory is constructivist and I am interested in how various 'collective frames' of memory (Halbwachs) influence individual remembering, how they change and how they depend on/interact with cultural memory. Putting in question Jan Assmann's categorical distinction between communicative and cultural memory (the former being informal, diffuse, working in the mode of biographical remembering, the latter institutionalised and relying on symbolic systems), I am interested in the variety of layers of social memory and their interactions.

### ***Life as a rhetorical project: Fictionalising for the sake of being 'true to life'***

When people tell their stories, they resort to the ways to express themselves that are available: they employ the vocabularies, metaphors and genres accepted in their cultural milieu. They use socially accepted linguistic 'material' to construct their narratives (clichés, formulaic expressions, commonplaces) and they cast their experience into recognisable plots derived from folklore, literature or media. Often, they convey semi-conscious meanings through language saying at the same time more and less than they want to say. They refer to a set of cultural conventions although they do not always stick to these conventions but sometimes re-negotiate or even subvert them. Furthermore, when telling the story of their life, people import a certain logic or rather a teleology, 'a goal and a meaning' (Dilthey). They create a plot selecting and arranging the events so as to fit into that plot (ie they transform the *fabula*, the biographical 'material', into a *syuzhet*, a meaningful plot). This, to my mind, is a process of fictionalisation leading to a situation in which, for the narrator, her life seems to become a rhetorical project – if rhetoric is understood (as I tend to understand it) as related less to aesthetic quality and more to persuasiveness in a non-argumentative way, ie making a story complete and convincing. Thus 'style' (ie the meaning-making through linguistic, stylistic and cultural conventions) seems to work back on 'substance', ie the factuality of experience. The dependence of 'substance' on 'style' seems to undermine the unproblematic factuality of any narrative. At the same time, however, this fictionalisation, or emplotment, of the 'facts of life' is paradoxically meant to make the story of a life more 'true to life', and its performance for the listener more convincing. It is meant to support the truth-claims of the witness, although it is actually not easy to distinguish between a true story and a good story (as a famous writer said, interesting things happen to people who know how to tell about them).

### ***The need for witnessing and the duty to remember***

In the case of personal narratives we always seem to abide by the 'autobiographical pact', according to Philippe Lejeune: the assumption that the autobiographer is a real person telling of her real experiences. The breach of this pact (as eg the in/famous case of Benjamin Wilkomirski's fake memoir) makes us realise the cultural positioning of memory and the need for witnessing in contemporary culture (why should he publish his book as memoir and not as a novel?). At the same

time, it demonstrates the importance of cultural templates – in this case, the Holocaust as the paradigmatic trauma – for expressing and maybe coping with trauma in one's own life. Thus, the question of the interplay of biographical and cultural memory translates into the question of the links between biography and history, between individual experience and changes in the society. The autobiographer is a witness not only to her own life but also to its wider social and historical circumstances ('*The Life and Times of ...*' as in hundreds of biographies and memoirs). Hannah Arendt stressed that the need for witnessing and having witnesses to one's life is inherent in the human condition. In contemporary culture, there seems to be more to it: bearing witness to others' suffering and remembering past abuses seems to have become a moral duty of unquestioned universality. However, the notion of witnessing makes memory a contested terrain: who has the right to be a witness, whose version is the legitimate one, whose truth is to be accepted? The question of the truth of memory is transformed therefore into the question of who is speaking, from what position and to what effect. Memory is selective, it always already implies forgetting. The choice to remember or to forget, what to remember and how, is a moral and a political one. To make this choice, a society has to know how to make truth and justice about the past contribute to peace, democracy and well-being in the present – and, in the first place, what price has to be paid for this achievement, if it is possible at all.

Thus, while the links between biographical and cultural memory can be seen, from a cultural and rhetorical perspective, in the ways narrators draw on the cultural repertoires of their milieux and on the 'regimes' of memory of their societies, the endeavours of autobiographers can also be regarded, from a moral and political perspective, as attempts to make themselves heard and to have their say in wider public debates about the right ways of dealing with the past.