

Conference Report

The Cultural Memory of Mass Violence: Re-mediation and Pre-mediation

Organisers: Juliane Prade-Weiss (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich), Dominik Markl (Georgetown University, Washington, DC), and Vladimir Petrović (Boston University)

Locations: Munich (and online)

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How do narratives and dynamics of cultural memory function in relation to mass violence? How do historical narratives influence political strategies for legitimizing future violence? Given the ongoing Russian aggression – in which Russia has used the memory of the fight against National Socialism for its aggression – the relevance of these questions could not be greater. Exactly 30 years after Jan Assmann's foundational *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992) was published, this conference re-examined the questions of memory culture in an interdisciplinary approach. The conference, organised by Juliane Prade-Weiss, Dominik Markl and Vladimir Petrović, presented a wide range of theoretical approaches in seven presentations and a panel discussion, linking perspectives from religious studies, history, philosophy, literature, and memorial site practice. This provided a broad overview of inscriptions of memories of mass violence in cultural memory – the public space, in memorials, murals or literary texts—and allowed for applying these insights into current debates.

The first talk by ASTRID ERLI (Frankfurt) laid the cultural memory studies foundation for the following lectures. Erll explained basic concepts of the conference such as “pre- and remediation” and linked them with a productive critique of current research: While current studies on memory culture focus on the consequences or processing of events of massive violence, Erll advocates for a shift to the time before. She demonstrated this using the example of the Sepoy Uprising of 1857 against British colonial rule in British India: These events were presented in English media as the “Indian Mutiny” – a colonial narrative that was repeated in popular culture and in 1919 contributed to the shooting of peaceful demonstrators in Amritsar. Based on this example, which connected memory-practice and future violence, Erll elaborated on the definitions of an unconscious collective cultural memory, which, based on analytical approaches such as those of psychologist Daniel Schacter, allows for work with everyday collective memories. She showed how important the focus on shared, implicit memories currently is in an outlook on studies on the memory of the Second World War: while in Western countries Pearl Harbour or the Shoah were named as the most important events, in Russia, it is the Battle of Stalingrad. Using this, Erll demonstrated the connection between cultural memory and the justification of future violence and laid the ground for the rest of the conference.

Three presentations focused on ways in which mass violence is inscribed in public space:

DOMINIK MARKL (Washington DC) used the example of obelisks to show how monumental representations of mass violence shape public space from ancient Egypt to today's Washington without their dimension of violence being immediately apparent. While in ancient Egypt, explicit representations of violence served as allegorical demonstrations and legitimations of power, this direct level of representation is often missing in later examples: from the Colosseum in Rome to the architecture of National Socialism. Viewers must decode these representations themselves. Using different obelisks, Markl then developed his concept of the “shadow”, which is reminiscent of Aleida Assmann’s *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (2006) and focuses on the implicit quality of the anchoring of memories in cultural memory introduced by Erll. Markl's shadow concept goes beyond the dichotomy of implicit and explicit inscriptions. Using the example of the Vatican obelisk, on which a cross was placed in 1586 symbolically placing ancient Egypt under the rule of the Church, he illustrates how demonstrations of power and appropriation remain inscribed in monuments as unspoken messages. Another example that he pointed out was the Washington Obelisk: built between 1848 and 1884 with slave labour, its white, unmarked surface leaves the violent land seizure of America unnamed, while continuing the historical legitimizing dimension of the power of the ancient obelisks on the North American continent. Markl concluded with the questions raised by obelisks as monumental representatives of power and justification of mass violence in the political centre of the USA for current museum culture.

VLADIMIR PETROVIĆ (Boston) presentation focused on the question of how to address past colonial violence against indigenous populations in North America, through the internment of “Praying Indians” on Deer Island. Beginning with a trip taken by the three conference organizers to New England in 2021, Petrović described their search for inscriptions of violence in public spaces. How are the war crimes against the Nipmuc during the Piquet War remembered on-site? With extensive historical knowledge and many pictures, the speaker illustrated the search for traces on Deer Island, where memory culture and sewage treatment facilities intersect and information panels about the acts of violence are placed under historical Irish crosses. According to Petrović, it is this ambivalence between visibility and concealment that interlocks explicit inscriptions in public spaces with forms of forgetting i.e., “they are hidden in plain sight”.

VJERAN PAVLAKOVIĆ (Rijeka) focused on the explicit visibility of memories of mass violence in public spaces. His talk addressed how the memory of crimes in Srebrenica is still being fought over. Drawing on Aleida Assmann’s four formats of memory – individual, social, political, cultural – Pavlaković specifically concentrated on their political aspect. The talk began by elaborating on the unique historical situation after the collapse of Yugoslavia, as a result of which the public space was constantly shaped by religious and political monuments existing side by side. Pavlaković illustrated the different reception of the Yugoslav war in the former republics of the multi-ethnic state with the example of the different names such as “Homeland War”, “Patriotic War” or “War of Liberation”. He pointed out that this struggle continues in the material forms of commemoration, in memorials, and monuments. He also noted that even supposedly “neutral” monuments, such as the Peace Monument of Srebrenica,

reveal the complex relationship between covering up the massacre and coming to terms with it and how the memory of the genocide is made consumable and commercialised through commemorative tourism. Pavlaković emphasised the current shift in the struggle for memory: the stone monuments being vandalized, demolished or re-inscribed in and around Srebrenica, the shift from bureaucratic and expensive monuments to murals. Pavlaković opened up a temporal dimension in shaping memory landscapes that raise new research questions and connects to other countries.

Overall, the three talks demonstrated how different monumental forms of memorializing mass violence can shape public spaces – and how they can be politically instrumentalized and explicitly designed, searched for, and/or decoded. This broad overview of memory landscapes was complemented by three presentations that analyzed the narrative dimension of memory work using specific case studies, documentary fictions, family stories, and reports by Holocaust survivors.

In his talk on the legacy of Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, CHRISTOPH THONFELD, head of the historical department of the Dachau concentration camp memorial, linked space and text, theory and practice. Using the diverse media treatment of Lasker-Wallfisch's memories, which include her own manuscripts and autobiographical texts, as well as opera and interactive interview installations by the BBC, Thonfeld exemplified how individual memories can be made accessible to an audience. In doing so, he focused on questions of self-determination and heteronomy in the mediation of memories through the various media forms. Spanning from Lasker-Wallfisch's personal motives for telling her own story to her reservations about the heteronomous processing of her memories, and public interest in them, Thonfeld highlighted the pressing dilemma of memorial practice. On the one hand, it is necessary to preserve the memories of survivors of the Holocaust and make them accessible to as wide an audience as possible. On the other hand, he expressed strong reservations against attempts to make them interactive. This, he argued, shifts the focus from preserving to teaching and shifts the agency from the interviewees to the viewers.

While Thonfeld reflected on the processing of real memories of mass violence in cultural practice, STEPHANIE BIRD (London) focused on questions of narrating mass violence from a literary-studies perspective. She opened up important theoretical questions about genre, narrative perspective and form through a close reading of Merle Kröger's documentary fiction "Die Experten" (2021). Bird outlined how the very form of the family archive and the changing internal focalisation associated with it in the novel can make different perspectives on historical events visible. This shows the heterogeneity of perspectives and the malleability of historical narratives. Simultaneously, she problematised the fact that the novel reads as a historical thriller and documentary fiction: bibliographies and quotations from BND files stand next to descriptions of fictional photographs and family history. Bird was particularly critical of Kröger's failure to consistently maintain the suggested dividing line between fact and fiction in her account of the political events of the 1960s. The proclaimed claim of truth in the novel, supported by the extensive sources and reference apparatus, is torpedoed. Kröger's novel thus

exemplifies the question of how to read postmodern fiction of historical events. Bird concluded that “The Experts” might suffer from too little fiction and urged for greater trust in fiction.

In her talk, JULIANE PRADE-WEISS (Munich) linked memories of mass violence with their representation in literary texts to deepen the analysis of literary family archives as spaces of memory. Like Bird, Prade-Weiss also used a close reading of a novel to formulate general observations. While Bird’s focus was on the tension between fact and fiction, Prade-Weiss examined the literarisation of theoretical concepts of memory research on the basis of Maria Stepanova’s “In Memory of Memory” (2019, trans. 2021). In the novel, a first-person narrator with Jewish-Russian ancestors attempts to reconstruct the gaps in her own family archive by means of diary entries, letters and photographs, whereby National Socialist and Soviet terror are remembered together. In her presentation, Prade-Weiss traced various motifs of the novel in detailed readings and showed how, for example, memory spaces can be rethought and general theories of cultural memory, such as “Postmemory”, can be criticized through the concept of “traumatic enfilade”. As in the novel, individual experiences are intertwined with structural silence and non-listening – individual family history is interwoven with narratives of Russian national memory and violence experienced earlier with complicity later beyond a legal responsibility. Against this background, Prade-Weiss ended her talk with an analysis of the leitmotif of the novel: the mass-produced porcelain figurines. These adorn the cover of the Russian edition. They are intended as packaging material, “for mutilation” – the meeting point of consumer culture and terror and mass violence of totalitarianism. With a view to Bird’s criticism of a lack of trust in fiction, Prade-Weiss’ reading of “In Memory of Memory” showed how fiction can undermine the distancing position of documentary texts and invite exploration of complicities in commemorative culture.

The conference was concluded with a panel discussion that featured the seven speakers as well as the historian MARTIN SCHULZE-WESSEL (Munich). This provided an opportunity to specifically discuss the connection between remediation and premeditation in the context of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, bringing the various approaches of the speakers in relation to each other and opening new perspectives on the war itself.

In addition to the role of social networks such as Twitter and the influence of trolls on them, the podium discussed the overlap of the present with narratives of the past. The discussion also touched on memory manipulation in Russian textbooks as well as the Russian strategy of depicting Ukrainians as fascists in order to dehumanize them. This was related to questions of memory culture related to the Holodomor or the USSR. Astrid Erll highlighted three existing narratives used by Putin: first, the “enemies from outside” such as Napoleon, second, the narrative of a Russian unified culture as “Russki Mir”, and third, Moscow as the “Third Rome”. Thereby linking the discussion back to the beginning of the conference: the nationally different memories of World War II were put in relation to the Russian war of aggression and at the same time the Western image of Russia was questioned.

The final panel discussion thus not only highlighted the necessity of Astrid Erll's initial call to focus on premeditation in order to recognize future violence early on, but also emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary conferences that bring together different disciplines in dialogue.

9:00 - 9:15 Introduction

9:15 - 10:00 Astrid Erll (Frankfurt),

From "Memory After Violence" to "Memory Before Violence"

10:00 - 10:45 Dominik Markl (Washington, DC),

Monumental Representation of Power and the Justification of Mass Violence

11:15 - 12:00 Christoph Thonfeld (Dachau),

"I do not want to talk publicly, but if I am asked, I respond as well as possible." Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and the Medialisation of Holocaust Memory

12:00 - 12:45 Vjieran Pavlakovic (Rijeka): *Srebrenica Memoryscapes: Grafitti, Monuments, and Public Space and the Medialisation of Holocaust Memory*

(in lieu of Miranda Jakiša, Vienna)

14:00 - 14:45 Stephanie Bird (London),

Merle Kröger's "Die Experten" and Its Thrilling Intervention in Memory Polemics

14.45 - 15:30 Juliane Prade-Weiss (Munich),

Foregrounding the Media of Memory:

Transgenerational Trauma in Stepanova's "In Memory of Memory"

15:30 - 15:45 Vladimir Petrović (Boston),

The Internment of the "Praying Indians" on Deer Island:

A Cleansing Memory Report

16:15-18:00 Podiumsgespräch mit Martin Schulze Wessel (Munich):

Russland – Ukraine: Krieg um die Erinnerung