

MEMORY BETWEEN IMAGE AND NARRATIVE:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH¹

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*Bild ist dasjenige, worin das Gewesene mit dem Jetzt
blitzhaft zu einer Konstellation zusammentritt.*

(Walter Benjamin. *Das Passagen-Werk*,
ed. R. Tiedemann, 578, N 3, 1. Frankfurt, 1982.)

The link between various kinds of narratives and the construction of social memories has, after the work of Paul Ricoeur and many other scholars, become obvious to historians, anthropologists, and social scientists in general. If, as Ricoeur has argued, to narrate a story is not only a way to recall it, but also a means “to refigure one’s own experience of time” (Ricoeur 1991: 9), then narrativity has to be seen not only as a particular literary style, but also as a form of existence of memory itself. From this perspective, many historians (White 1973), but also some psychologists (Bruner 1990), have been tempted to argue that no memory is imaginable without a narrative frame. Ricoeur writes for instance:

“Le temps ne devient humain que dans la mesure où il est articulé sur un mode narratif, et le récit n’atteint sa signification première, que quand il devient une condition de l’existence temporelle.” (1991: 105)

The relation of social memory to images is less clear. All his life, Aby Warburg (1932) tried to outline a general theory of social memory based on images as well as on texts. His emphasis on the complex relations between visual symbols and meaning, on the necessity to consider a picture or a sculpted object as an element in a series of representations that might involve ritual actions, texts, oral traditions, or even mere mental images, certainly

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is a decisive step toward a new approach to this question. Since his death, however, Warburg's ideas on social memory have been poorly developed, and much has still to be done to understand how a cultural tradition can rely upon images.

However, recent anthropological research on cultural traditions suggests that there are at least two ways of constructing social memories. One works through the narration (and continuous renewal) of a set of stories. The other, often linked to the elaboration of a ritual memory, tends to make a number of relatively stable images more and more complex: more and more "loaded" with meaning, and more and more persistent in time.

The task of the seminar was to approach these aspects of the role of memory in the constitution of a cultural tradition, from three different perspectives. The first is anthropological research, based on empirical fieldwork as well as on comparative analysis of memory techniques and practices in the so-called "oral traditions". The second perspective is the cognitive one. It has become quite clear that no empirical work on "oral traditions" or on other memory-related techniques can afford to ignore what psychologists have to say about the cognitive processes involved in these processes. The third perspective is the historical one: a number of works on writing systems and on the arts of memory in our own history have proved very fruitful, and still are an example for anthropologists interested in these topics.

In accordance with these different perspectives, the Seminar was organized in three sessions:

1. Memory and Cognition for Cultural Traditions

David Rubin, Duke University, NC

Visual Imagery and Narrative Reasoning: Two Systems that Structure Memories

Pascal Boyer, Washington University in St. Louis, MO

Religious Thought Requires no Memory: Supernatural Concepts as a By-Product of Brain Function

Katherine Nelson, Columbia University, New York, NY

Individual Memory and Social Narrative: A Developmental View

2. Iconographies and Oral Traditions: Case Studies in Anthropology

Carlo Severi, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

Image and Narration in the American Indians' Picture-Writing

Michael Oppitz, Zurich/Berlin

Image and Narrative in the Nepali Shamanistic Traditions

Anne-Christine Taylor, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

Body Painting as a Mnemonic Device: Three Case Studies in Amazonia

3. Images and Narratives in Early Writing Systems

Jan Assmann, Heidelberg University

Cultural Memory and Cultural Texts

Jean-Jacques Glassner, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

Proper Names and Gods' Names in Writing

Viola König, Dahlem Ethnological Museum, Berlin

Memory Between Image and Narrative: Myths of Origin and Migration Legends from Mesoamerica as Shown in the Codices

Three main points have emerged from the discussion, which has been lively and productive:

1. A significant number of processes of propagation of representations in a society (though not all, as argued in Boyer's thought-provoking paper) involve mnemonic processes.

2. The narrative and iconic modes of memorizing knowledge, however, are not to be seen as separate ways of mental representation. They seem to interact in very significant ways. Both from the point of view of psychology (Rubin, Nelson) and from the point of view of anthropological research (Severi, Assmann, Taylor, Glassner), it appears that the intervention of iconic traits within a narrative context results in intense saliency. For instance, "sound images" (like repetitions, interjections, etc.) are active even in narration among children, or in monologues, as shown by the case study presented by Katherine Nelson.

3. From an anthropological perspective, the discussion has shed further light on the use of iconography in oral traditions. An analysis of the Amazonian and North American traditions has shown that the iconographies are always related to a specific domain, often ritually determined. Among these domains, the representation (and memorization) of lists of names (both geographical names and personal names) seem to play a dominant role.

In conclusion, in so-called oral traditions, image and narration seem to entertain an asymmetrical relationship: while the iconic mode can deeply influence narration, the narrative mode can scarcely be translated in iconic terms.

References

Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Temps et Récit*. Vol. 1. Paris: Le Seuil, 1991.

Warburg, Aby. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute Publications, 1999. (First edition: *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1932.)

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.