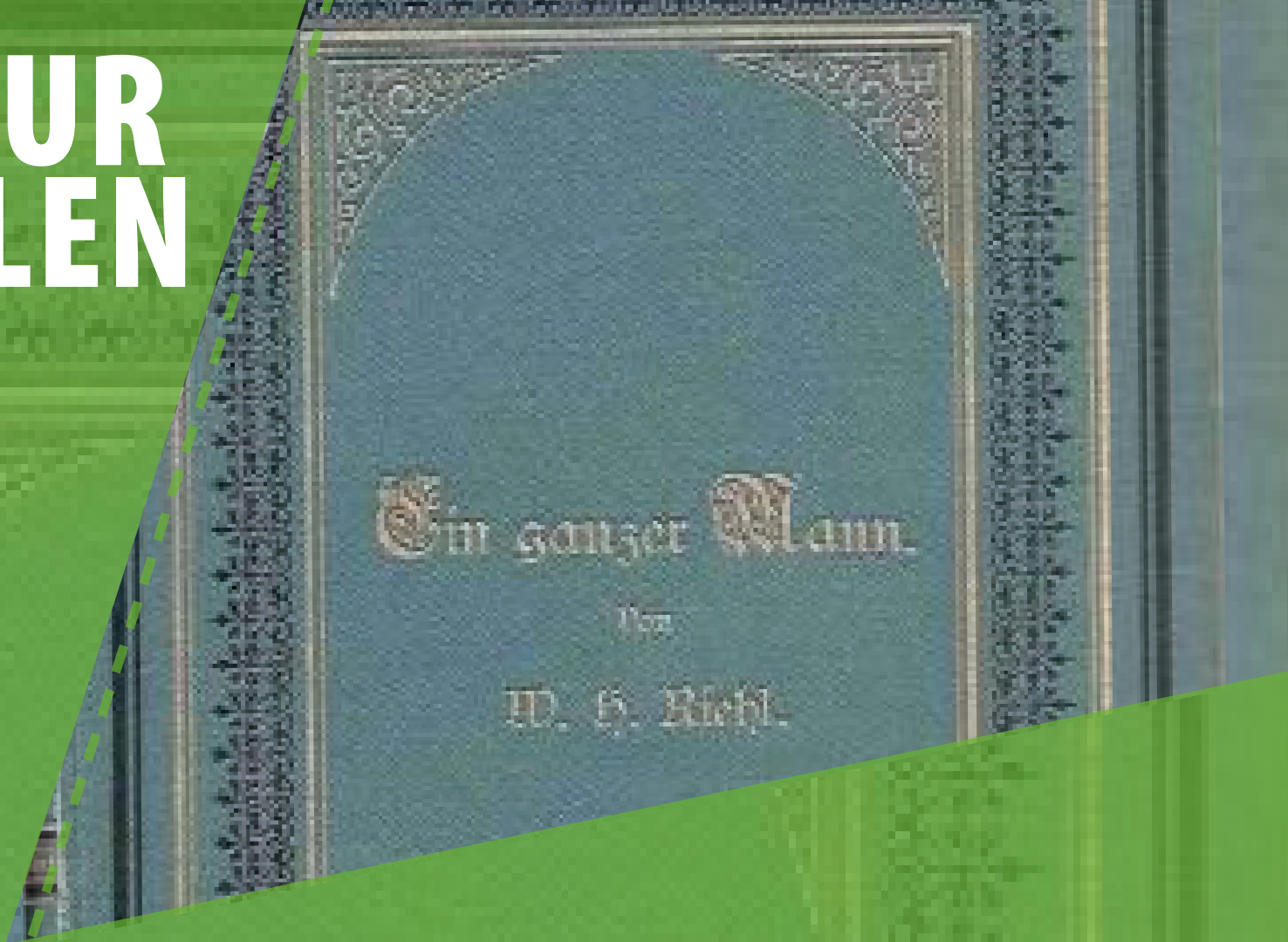


# STUDIEN ZUR MATERIELLEN KULTUR

Karen Ellwanger

Formations of Memory  
An Introduction



**BAND [ 08 ]**

Carl von Ossietzky

Universität Oldenburg

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Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg

26111 Oldenburg

E-Mail: [materiellekultur@uni-oldenburg.de](mailto:materiellekultur@uni-oldenburg.de)

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## Formations of Memory

### A Whole Man

In his late novel *A Whole Man*, which takes place in 1869, on the eve of the founding of the second German Reich, the conservative folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl conjures up the ingredients of masculine identity, that which makes a man a 'whole' man (cf. Riehl 1897). The protagonist, an opened-minded, modern businessman, active in the Association for the Enhancement of Tourism, who looks upon antiques as 'ancient plunder', is a confirmed bachelor who adheres to the maxim 'a man can do it' (*ibid.*, p. 34). For his completion, however, he needs a companion, a wife (this is the first development shown in the protagonist): no mere housewife, but rather an emancipated woman who travels and frequents health spas (cf. *ibid.*, p. 36). She is characterised, and this is remarkable against the backdrop of contemporary images of traditional femininity, as a 'true child of the present, as most women' (*ibid.*, p. 198). But at the same time, and this is the second realisation by the protagonist, he must concern himself with the past, which is presented in the novel as the reconciliation between biographical remembrance and collective, local patriotic memory. This memory will be objectified, organised and arrayed in a museum of local history. Thus parallel to the development of masculine identity takes place a transformation of an aristocrat's private collection of exclusive individual objects and curiosities into a civic and national memory, situated in this museum, which exercises its 'educational force' not only on the protagonist (cf. *ibid.*).

Although the sister of the private collector becomes temporarily the guardian and keeper of the objects now worthy of being placed in a museum (she is herself patriotic and attached to the memory of her brother, whose student association cap, worn at the meeting at the Wartburg in 1817, is received, now pacified, into the collection (cf. *ibid.*, p. 72f), the private collector himself and all the more the agents

of the new institution of the cultural and historical museum are males. This holds by no means only for conservatives. Thus Leora Auslander has drawn attention, in her study of the consumer behaviour of the nineteenth century French bourgeoisie, to the 'collectors' of valuable objects worthy of being monumentalised as a project of middle-class masculinity, which emerged after 1830 as the counterpart to the female consumer of consumer goods for the private household (cf. Auslander 1996, p. 85ff).

The private collector realises fantasies of his immortality and the completion and expansion of his ego, and thereby acquires identity.<sup>i</sup> His collector's zeal can at the same time be attached to the service of the national state and its effects ramify into local patriotic groups. In all modern Western states at the end of the nineteenth century, artistic, cultural and natural historical collections were differentiated and assigned each to its own museum, which categorised and exhibited national knowledge, connoisseurship and tradition as a cultural legacy with the double purpose of education (in addition to school and the military, the museum was regarded as a major institution for the development of young citizens) and representation in the sense of presentation, and so the production of a national 'identity' resting on the foundation of national memory. The key to the identity of the subject, as of the nation, lay in the past. The idea of the completion of the individual, even of his duty to propagate memory and commemoration, came into view from this perspective in the national communities of the nineteenth century.

The amalgamation of memory, civic-national masculinity, and modern identity, is formed, as is well known, through its demarcation in regard to the Other, whether this be through the axis masculine/

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<sup>i</sup> The topos of collecting as an activity that establishes identity runs through numerous educational and psychological writings during the entire twentieth century.

feminine or one or another racialised or sexual difference in the broadest sense. It was consolidated in the nineteenth century, according to Michel Foucault, under the conditions of a comprehensively encroaching sexualisation that operated even in the architecture of boarding schools and in a hitherto unknown manner in the body of the subject, and that was made possible by new medical practices (cf. Foucault 1983 [1976]). Precisely, 'deviations', called in the seventeenth century, according to Foucault, merely 'stumblings' – correspondingly, in former legal practice, 'sodomy' was defined as an 'illicit act whose author is to be considered only as its legal subject' (*ibid.*, p. 58) –, now became comprehensive categories. 'The new hunt after marginal sexualities led to an embodiment of perversions and a new specification of the individual [...] The homosexual of the nineteenth century has become a personality who possesses a past and a childhood' (*ibid.*), belonging to a 'species' with its own history which, like women, never escapes the purportedly completely determining power of its assigned sexuality.

The point here is the criticism of such formations of identity on the strength of constructed individual and collective memories. They result in a firmly established hegemonial 'identity' that is, on the one hand, attainable only in the form of heteronormative masculinity, but is, on the other hand, based on 'identities' of the 'Other' that are fabricated, categorised and assigned within the orbit of its own production. These deviant 'identities' continue to appear to this day in ever new varieties. Concepts of identity such as that of the subject have changed under the conditions of late modernity. But not infrequently positions that have been made into minorities are presented as closed 'cultures', whose memory, in the form of 'their' history, is reconstructed through the difference from other changing 'cultures'.<sup>ii</sup> That is what makes identity politics so difficult.

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ii Cf. Josch Hoenes (Hoenes 2005).

### Cultural discipline as disciplines of memory

The cultural disciplines were decisive participants in the discourse of the work of remembrance (Erinnerungsarbeit) around 1900. Markus Fauser has spoken of a 'determination of their function as disciplines of memory' (Fauser 2003, p. 7) that united the debates of the diverse departments. This was by no means true only of those disciplines oriented to the past such as the folklore study, which recorded, secured and meant to preserve for posterity customs, usages, linguistic forms, costumes and utensils that were threatened by modernity or industrialisation, but also of those oriented to the present such as anthropology, linguistics and sociology. It was a matter of the critical self-assurance of scholarship and society against the backdrop of the progressive fragmentation of knowledge. This led, as is generally known, to a long-term change of historical categories. In this connection, the upward revaluation of historical anthropology and the invention of the history of mentalities point to the major role of memory, which the cultural disciplines now discern to be the fundamental impulse for historical action and therefore declare to be the core of their study.

It has only been in the last twenty years that the subject of memory has attained a comparable topicality. To begin with, the possibilities, limits and effects of the new storage media and techniques of cultural memory stood in the foreground of the debate<sup>iii</sup>, while at the same time there was a notable and persistent tendency to a classical approach to musealisation focussed on exhibits and their materiality.<sup>iv</sup> The fundamental role played by the remodelling of memory in regard to the need for legitimation resulting from changes in social structures and transformations of systems at the end of the twentieth centu-

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iii Aleida Assmann offers a summary account (cf. Assmann 1999).

iv Here, I can refer only summarily to the extensive museological literature on the second great wave (after the turn of the century) of museum foundings since the 1970s and their significance.

ry should also be pointed out; it had its counterpart in the necessity to design meaningful *curricula vitae* in a highly individualised society. Moreover, Harald Welzer explains the fresh development of memory studies in the cultural disciplines into a 'meta-concept or even a paradigm' as a 'loss of terrain' (Welzer 2004, p. 155) to the dominance of expanding neuro-scientific research into memory, traceable not least to their new procedures of visualisation.<sup>v</sup>

In the end the driving force of the contemporary discourse about memory and remembrance consists in the debates between the self-reflective and increasingly academic actors of new social movements and the hegemonial guardians of cultural memory. The articles in this volume revolve round these conflicts. If the cultural memory of the Western nation-states in the phase of its formation were 'masculinely' encoded and, as Foucault has shown, the corresponding 'identities' were sexualised, then what is required is an ongoing analysis of the significance of the sexes in this process up to the present shifts.<sup>vi</sup> This is inconceivable without post-colonial perspectives. What place have, for example, black Germans in the cultural and the social family memory?<sup>vii</sup> How do immigrants deal with the loss of their extra-fa-

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v The findings of the neurological sciences, however, play the ball back to the cultural disciplines (as Welzer also points out): first, in that they operate only with the concept of 'information' which is processed in the brain; second, in that their object of research comprises the neural processes in the brain of individuals, but not the socially and interactively formed contents of memory; and third, in that the latter are a *sine qua non* because the brain, as a plastic organ, evidently develops in direct dependence on social surroundings, experiences and actions and so is 'the product of a biological, psychological and social process' (Welzer 2004, p. 155).

vi Proceeding from the National Socialist genocide, Eschebach and Wenk have made a decisive contribution to the relation of memory and gender, which has inspired and provided a foundation not only for Silke Wenk (*cf.* Wenk 2005) but also for almost all the articles in the volume her article has been published in (*cf.* Ellwanger et al.), especially that by Patricia Mühr (*cf.* Mühr 2005) and Nicole Mehring (*cf.* Mehring 2005).

vii *Cf.* Nicola Lauré al-Samarai's (Lauré al-Samarai 2005).

miliar context of memory?<sup>viii</sup> How far is 'family', as a configuration of the sexes, the mode of a currently changing social memory, how far a hardy cultural pattern? Is it meaningful to distinguish these forms? The debate about cultural memory has become global – 'native Americans'<sup>ix</sup>, social groupings from Namibia or South Africa, like many others, have formed themselves into communities of memory that challenge the structures, contents and modes of appropriation of the hegemonial memory of Western modernity.<sup>x</sup>

### Concepts of memory and remembrance

Memory and remembrance are complex phenomena that need to be treated in a trans-disciplinary manner. This makes immediate sense when we bear in mind the lively interplay between technology and body images, as for instance the computer with a gigantic hard disk has served as a model of memory that has predominated in the last third of the twentieth century. This image was seductive at the levels of both individual-biographical and semantic and of collective cognitive memory – and it promises at first a quite democratic opening. Yet under the conditions of mass production in an individualised society it becomes increasingly a problem how to preserve the growing stock of what is regarded as remembrance-worthy comprehensively and 'objectively', with a view to maintaining its openness for later use with

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viii *Cf.* Karen Michelsen Castañón (Michelsen Castañón 2005).

ix *Cf.* Lüder Tietz (Tietz 2005).

x *Cf.* the application of doctoral students for support for a summer academy: an analysis of especially German history and commemorative culture under the aspects of post-colonial and anti-racist theory is still largely outstanding. Recent studies in this area, for example, those of Conrad & Sutterlüty (2002) or Steyerl (2002), have shown the relevance of such investigations. It remains to search out traces of experiences and traditional representations and practices in German culture and society that are founded in a colonialist and nationalist project. For, as Encarnación-Gutiérrez Rodríguez has observed, 'Post-colonialism is a site of political location. This site is interwoven into the memory and the legacy of a colonial past and its present implementations and effects' (quoted in Steyerl 2002).

changed questions instead of making a selection at the outset. The cultural heritage of a society (but who is excluded, who included?) should tend to integrate all by permanently setting elements of the social memory, the traces of everyday actors, in a museum: part of a history from under, including the history of women, which has supplemented and modified history writ large with methods like oral history.

Thus the idea of cultural-historical collections that, instead of displaying isolated objects, archived and musealised complete settings, have been regarded since the 1970s and 1980s as innovative; for instance, the complete inventory of a dairy, including the conversations held there, which were scrupulously recorded in the final months before its planned closing and transfer to a museum.

This idea of a repository corresponds to ideas of digital production and constructed a paradigm of memory that conceives memory as a hard disk and remembrance as the direct access thereto. Remarkably, it has only been with the advent of modern brain research that a turn from the model of memory as a repository has received acceptance. This has rendered the comparison to the computer invalid, as also the common categorical distinction between memory and remembrance.

Perception, which is always selective and at the same time supplemented by a context of meaning, is apparently impossible without a simultaneous remembering and emotional evaluation (Roth 1994, p. 78ff). Remembering, in turn, comes to resemble a fresh perception. The saving of a memory in the long-term memory<sup>xi</sup> occurs slowly:

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xi The literature distinguishes an ultra short-term memory, a short-term memory, and a long-term memory. Depending on the author, three to five overlapping memory systems are defined within the long-term memory, which apparently emerged at various evolutionary stages of brain development: the last being the 'episodic or biographical memory', probably specific to human beings, which comprises the entirety of explicit, conscious, intentional memory, takes form in communities of memory, is fundamentally emotional connotated,

engrams – that is, memory traces, changes in the brain, that result from the neural coding of an experience (cf. Schacter 1999 [1996]) – need to be consolidated; memory is bound up to acts of reflexive remembering. Wolf Singer has pointed out that already stabilised memory traces can become, through their actuation or repeated remembering, again unstable. This means that 'engrams, after repeated remembering, are no longer at all identical with those that were left by the primary learning process. Memory traces are re-written by remembering' (Singer 2000). If remembering goes hand in hand with re-writing, the context within which this remembering takes place is probably also re-written, old memories being embedded in new contexts and actively changed, and the original perspective overwritten (cf. *ibid.*). The consequences for an assessment of the authenticity of memories are decisive; see here the 'false memory' debate (cf. Schacter 1999 [1996]).

From the neuro-biological point of view, remembering on the whole takes on the character of 'data-supported inventions' (*ibid.*). These inventions, which place unstable data in a meaningful context and simultaneously modify again the individual memory, obey specific narratives which are developed in social interactions within the guidelines of the cultural memory and, one must infer, are actuated or overlaid with every staging of public commemoration, with every museum visit, with every viewing of a film on historical events.<sup>xii</sup>

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and is the presupposition for the formation of identity. Similarly disposable at the conscious level is the 'semantic memory' in the form of a system of knowledge; for instance, what has been learned at school or university. Interesting for the debate in the cultural disciplines is finally the 'procedural' memory, which, as part of the 'non-declarative, implicit memory', designates by far the greatest number of memories that are activated unconsciously: processes of movement and body postures, or the speaking of a language (Welzer 2004, pp. 157ff; quoted in Markowitsch 2002, pp. 79ff; Roth, 1994).

xii Cf. Broeck on literature, Mühr and Wagenknecht on film, and Mehring on a bunker museum, all of which use examples of media of cultural memory to study their contribution to the present debate and to the forms of reception, and begin precisely where the neuro-



### Formations of the collective memory

In the 1920s Maurice Halbwachs already formulated the thesis that remembering is constantly (re-) constructed from the standpoint of the present (cf. Halbwachs 1985 [1925]). He was one of the first to investigate more closely the relation of the individual and the collective memory, and I should here like to make a plea that he be read again against the backdrop of the present debate about memory. By collective memory, Halbwachs understands neither an entity detached from social practices nor a mere combination of individual memories, but rather a way of remembering that takes place within a 'social' context or 'frame of reference', within which individuals are capable of remembering and of participating in their respective group memory (*ibid.*, p. 21f). In sharp distinction to his teacher Bergson, Halbwachs perceives no substantial distinction between the rememberings of the subject and those that take place within the social context, with the exception of the (not more closely defined) greater stability of rememberings organised within the latter<sup>xiii</sup>, under which he includes material fixations (as in his treatise on the significance of rituals; cf. *ibid.*, p. 292).<sup>xiv</sup> Halbwachs also already integrated, if only vaguely,

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biological approaches leave a decisive blank: the inter-crossing of collective and individual memory.

xiii 'The events are memories, but the frame is likewise formed of memories. Between them there is this difference, that the latter are more stable [...], that we use them to find and to reconstruct the former' (Halbwachs 1985, pp. 143f [1925]).

xiv 'Against this background of a concept of 'collective memory' felt to be over-stretched and undifferentiated, Jan Assmann would introduce the analytical distinction between a social and a cultural memory. Proceeding from Halbwachs's idea of 'family memory', Assmann defines 'social memory' as determined by everyday oral communication, reaching back at the most three generations, and having little hierarchy or structure. 'Cultural memory', on the other hand, is of longer duration, is therefore capable of being monumentalised, and highly structured. It is concretely related to a definite collective's concept of identity, organised, determined by clear relations of inclusion and exclusion according to a canon or a censor, shaped (for instance, through rituals), and finally consolidated by active tradition (J. Assmann 1988). This distinction is problematic for several reasons: it imputes that orally handed-down narratives are amorphous, it fades out the integration of manifestations of 'cultural' memory in everyday practices, and the reverse, and above all it reproduces

the visual dimension of memory; there is 'no idea without image, [...] idea and image [...] designate [...] two aspect under which society can simultaneously regard the same objects' (*ibid.*, p. 371).<sup>xv</sup>

What happens, however, when the memory frame of a group changes or disappears? This question, today timelier than ever, Halbwachs treats at several levels that carries it further. According to Halbwachs, this process on the one hand draws after it a disappearance or recasting of the individual memory – this an anticipation of the previously described neuro-biological concept of the deletion or over-writing of engrams. Were this to occur as a more or less automatic adaptation, however, we should have the picture of a speciously harmonious and stable society. Only Halbwachs's assumption of the co-existence of different group memories (family memory, religious memory, class memory) harbours the now prominent idea of competing communities of memory.<sup>xvi</sup> The sketched set of questions itself, finally, implies the possibility that social frames of memory and the remembrances of its component groups come into contradictions with each other that are not resolved through the grace of amnesia. From this point of view, memory is the result of social conflicts in which 'unofficial memories, hitherto little studied, sometimes [have] a stubborn histo-

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(evidently not deliberately or reflectively) gender ascriptions such as 'feminine' proximity to everyday life, family orientation, reliance on oral communication, flexibility, and restricted access to monumental material (restriction to textile commemorative media) versus 'masculine' super-temporality, written culture and hierarchy.

xv This perspective was brought into sharp focus in the 1920s by Aby Warburg in his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne. Elemente eines Bildgedächtnisses* (Warburg 2003 [1924ff, published posthumously]), in which he understands pictorial memory as a form of social memory. For Warburg, images lead their own life and art is an 'organ of expression' that 'stores expressive energies' over a long span of time.

xvi Beginning with the shifts in forms of memory of the Nazi genocide, Insa Eschebach and Silke Wenk have brought into the debate the competing memory communities of the children of culprits and of victims, and focussed on the significance and functions of implicit and constantly co-negotiated images of gender (cf. Eschebach/Wenk 2002, pp.14; cf. Wagenknecht).

rical force' (Burke 1996, p. 105 [1989]): here one cannot help thinking of Warburg's 'mnemonic energy of things' (in Welzer 2004, p. 165). Renate Lachmann (1993) has suggested that the past of a community can never be completely forgotten in the sense of 'deleted'. Yet in specific historical constellations it can 'be rendered unconscious' (Erdheim 2004, p. 93).

Aslant the thesis of the production of a social unconscious, Harald Welzer (2001, 2004) has undertaken, with his concept of a 'social memory' (Welzer 2004, p. 165), the extension of memory to non-conscious, non-intentional, and casual practices<sup>xvii</sup> that 'transport and convey the past and past meanings' (*ibid.*). Here on the one hand may be seen a connection to the neuro-biological category of implicit procedural memory<sup>xviii</sup>, and on the other hand its extension through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which situates an implicit corporeal memory in hegemonial space. This suggests drawing on Foucault's concept of the 'counter memory', which lies closer to the idea of an implicit corporeal memory<sup>xix</sup> than to a declamatory and intentional counter memory of minoritied groups, though it is gladly so used. Wenk und Eschbach (2002) take up a remarkable omission and create a focus of precisely the non-intentional parts of cultural memory and the official acts of remembering bound up with its institutions on the thereby invariably co-produced images of gender. Silke Wenk

follows up this reflection and concentrates on 'visual politics': ways, as imperceptible as they are effective, in which hegemonial patterns of cultural memory are inculcated by various media into memories (*cf.* Wenk 2005).

Halbwachs talks of 'ideas' having to 'resist' memories, having to 'stand up to' traditions (Halbwachs 1985, p. 385 [1925]). Clear-sightedly, he noted that deviating groups ' [contrast] not their present to their past, but rather invent new forms of the past by seeking, for instance, to identify themselves with the past of other groups' (*ibid.*) – the fight for recognition and visibility of minoritied groups is memory politics. But can one today still simply assume a transfer of identifications? Have there not long been new media, new forms, to make the 'Other' visible? If one pursues the idea of a predominantly implicit mode of remembering, it becomes clear that this is simply not possible. In addition to the inspection of hegemonial formations of cultural memory and their effective power, therefore, it is a necessity to analyse the possibilities and the limits of counter-movements, the manner of their representation, and the conditions of their articulation.

*Translated from the German by Jonathan Uhlener*

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xvii Cf. Aleida Assmann's concept of a (still) non-integratable 'storage memory' (Speicher Gedächtnis), which she sets beside the official 'functional memory' (Funktionsgedächtnis) (A. Assmann, 1999, pp. 134ff).

xviii Cf. Schacter 1999 [1996].

xix Foucault develops as a basis for his conception of 'counter-memory' a concept for the analysis of *descent* ("Herkunft") in Nietzsche's sense: "Descent attaches itself to the body. It inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus [...]. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. It takes it to expose a body totally imprinted by history" (Foucault 1990, p. 148 [1977]). Through this attachment of history to (corporal-)memory counter-memory becomes possible: "a transformation of history into a total form of time" (*ibid.*, p. 160).

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