Memory in the Age of Diverse Media

A Multidisciplinary Approach to Narratives and Material Forms

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Abstract. This article explores the various narrative and material forms of media memory, focusing on oral and textual traditions, history, literature, imagery, and architecture. The transition from oral to textual narration leads to variation and fragmentation in memories, with textual mediums transforming memory from communicative to cultural forms. History serves as a medium for collective memory and identity formation, while literature plays a vital role in preserving marginal and individual memories, blending imagination and memory. Images and architecture are material mediators of memory that provide unique perspectives on the past, with images serving as memory aids and architecture conveying memories indirectly through monuments, museums, ruins, and trauma sites. The study of these media forms deepens our understanding of how societies remember and interpret their past and the complex interplay of individual and collective experiences.

Keywords: mediated memory · narrative media · history · traumatic · material media

1 Introduction

Memory exists in the human mind, while people inhabit space and time. Our experiences and interactions create memories, which are stored and expressed through various media. Drawing upon Marshall McLuhan's assertion that anything can serve as a medium, this study contends that texts, images, and architecture comprise the media of memory, which can be delineated into narrative and material media [1]. Jan Assmann categorizes memory into scenic and narrative types, with the former being visually organized and disjointed, and the latter linguistically structured and meaningful [2]. However, this distinction is based on the conveying medium rather than the essence of memory. The interplay of material and narrative forms constitutes the aspects of memory mediums.

The shift from oral to textual narrative memory media led to the emergence of cultural memory, which underpins our search for identity. History and literature preserve the complexity of memories, while material media like images and architecture complement textual memory. Together, they effectively communicate the intricacies of human memory.

2   The Narrative Medium of Memory

The narrative medium of memory exists in the form of stories, which in its infancy in ancient times was oral history or oral literature, and after the advent of writing, it manifested itself as texts. Thus, history and literature, previously undivided in the oral tradition, are clearly divided in the written era, each of them dividing their work and conveying different aspects of memory. History, as a medium, conveys an orthodox collective memory; literature, on the other hand, strives to tap into individual and marginal memories that history can hardly narrate completely, and is a memory medium that resists forgetting. Therefore, from the perspective of time, the narrative medium of memory can be divided into oral and textual forms; from the perspective of type, the narrative medium of memory can be divided into historical and literary forms. They are complementary and mutually beneficial, with different qualities, and together they accomplish the instruction of conveying human memory.

2.1   Two Forms of Narrative Media: Oral and Textual

The transition of memory narration from oral to textual mediums has generated varying degrees of impact on the conveyance of memories. Firstly, memories mediated by text are more prone to variation compared to oral traditions. This variation results in the emergence of canonical and peripheral textual mediums, where the process of textual canonization leads to a form of memory orthodoxy.

Contrary to intuition, oral traditions appear to be less susceptible to variations since they lack documented evidence. Jan Assmann posits that the absence of recorded oral memories results in less apparent variations [2]. Only written traditions, rather than oral ones, face continuous pressures of change. The primary distinction between written and oral traditions is that oral traditions are based on repetition, meaning they are devoid of variation, while written traditions permit and even encourage variation. However, these variations only become noticeable when documented, such as in recordings. In oral traditions, memory preservation relies on the repetition of rituals. Consequently, Assmann argues that continuous repetition of rituals is fundamental to maintaining cultural consistency.

In contrast, textual mediums point to memory fragmentation, as texts explicitly exhibit tensions between old and new elements. This characteristic of variation results in diverse texts, which Leo Oppenheim appropriately refers to as "streams of tradition" [3]. These streams absorb texts destined for long-term usage, creating a dynamic river whose waters rise and fall, and whose bed continuously changes. Some texts are lost, while others are incorporated, expanding, abridging, adapting, and compiling literature. Central and peripheral structures gradually become distinguishable, with some texts gaining core positions due to their importance. These texts are copied and cited more frequently than others, ultimately being recognized as canonical and embodying normative and formative values.

The transition from oral to textual mediums signifies a leap from ritual participation to textual reading, transforming memory from communicative forms to cultural forms. Jan Assmann posits that in oral traditions, rituals and festivals ensure the formation

of communication [4]. In societies where writing has not been institutionalized, cultural texts are typically extended through rituals and festivals. These events guarantee the retrieval of communication and the presence of textual exchanges. Festivals render myths a reality, and myths represent the oral organization of specific cultural memories. Festivals ensure the circulation and exchange of formative knowledge within groups, enabling participants to personally experience the re-enactment of myths, effectively erasing the distinctions between past and present.

Cultural memory manifests in two forms: the process of textual canonization and identity formation. The formation of canonical texts and the establishment of identity collectively constitute the two modes of cultural memory expression. Textual preservation surpasses oral traditions in duration, making it a preferred medium for rulers seeking to immortalize their reputations. Assmann states that cultural memory opens up temporal depths far beyond the realm of communicative memory [2]. He asserts that written mediums enable continuous readability, ensuring the perpetuity of the self, serving not only as a medium of immortality but also as a pillar of memory. The lasting nature of text is an essential reason why it serves as a medium of memory, complementing the aforementioned forms of expression—canonical formation and identity recognition—together constructing humanity's cultural memory.

2.2 History as a Collective Memory Medium

The relationship between memory and history has been debated among scholars. While Michel Foucault sees history as an examination of recollections [5]. James Young argues that researchers should not strictly separate history and memory [6]. Some scholars differentiate individual memory from collective history, while Habermas distinguishes collective memory from history [7]. Le Goff contends that "new" history emerges from collective memory [8].

Jan Assmann and Habermas explore the connection between collective memory and history using similar examples, such as the citizenship process. Assmann equates national history with collective memory, while Habermas highlights the complexity of this relationship through the example of an aphasic patient. Jörn Rüsen offers a balanced view, stating that history relates to the experiential aspect within collective memory [9].

History serves as a medium to convey collective memory, allowing the collective to attain a sense of identity. Assmann and Aleida both introduce the concept of "cultural memory." Aleida examines the relationship between secular political history and collective memory, emphasizing the role of history in shaping and transmitting collective memory [10].

In conclusion, while the exact relationship between memory and history remains debated, it is evident that history is an important medium for collective memory. This connection is crucial for collective identity formation, as history provides a foundation for understanding and sharing past experiences that shape a group's sense of belonging. Recognizing this relationship helps researchers understand the complex interplay of individual and collective experiences, deepening our knowledge of how societies remember and interpret their past.

2.3   Literature as a Means of Resisting Oblivion

Milan Kundera contends that literature resists enforced forgetting imposed by political historical narratives, preserving marginal and individual memories. Literature uniquely combines imagination and memory, granting memories greater permanence through cross-generational resonance [11]. Traumatic memories, a prevalent theme in literature, illustrate the paradox of language's limitations in expressing pain, yet its effectiveness in healing trauma.

Autobiographical literature preserves individual memories and signifies the transformation of creation stories to include ordinary people. It complements collective memories found in historical mediums and demonstrates the multifaceted nature of historical facts. Literature synthesizes imagination and memory, conveying shared emotions and spirituality for future generations. Poets historically bestowed immortality on heroes, and enduring literary works require both the author's imagination and the reader's empathy.

Literary permanence relies on authors' artistic adaptation of events and readers' ability to empathize with characters, fostering understanding and sympathy [12]. Literature creates "possible" worlds, allowing readers to engage with characters across time through imagination and empathy. This preservation of human memory and the emotional connection it elicits drive human life in a positive direction.

3   Material Mediators of Memory

Material mediators of memory encompass imagery and architecture, both possessing distinct characteristics compared to written language, thus sparking intellectual debates surrounding these two memory mediums. Images serve as memory aids by reproducing scenes realistically, while simultaneously reshaping them— the precision of images contrasts with the ethereal nature of memory, illuminating the multifaceted aspects of complex memories. Architectural structures, such as monuments, museums, ruins, and sites of trauma, preserve and convey memories as material mediums. Architecture and memory form a complementary relationship, with different structures serving as unique mediums. Monuments and museums embody prescriptive collective memories as architectural mediums, while ruins and sites of trauma reveal the complexities of collective memory, activating forgotten recollections, engaging in dialogue with the present, and alluding to the future.

3.1   Images as Memory Mediums: Reconstructing Reality

Images, as memory mediums, have drawn the attention of thinkers due to their opposition and competition with textual mediums. In ancient Greece, Plato considered the relationship between text and memory, asserting that text is merely a tool for memory. Ancient Roman mnemonic techniques, however, emphasized the enhancement of memory through images. Potent images, through their striking impressions, become difficult to forget and can support less vivid conceptual memories. In this sense, strong emotions were deemed crucial support for memory in ancient Greek and Roman mnemonic techniques.

During the Renaissance, the competition between images and text as memory mediums intensified. Images, due to their susceptibility to decay, faltered, while the enduring and repetitive nature of text satisfied humanity's quest for immortality. Images, sculptures, and architecture, unable to effectively resist the erosion of time, were left as eroded ruins, whereas text fulfilled the eternal desires of individuals. Francis Bacon inherited Plato's concept of "imitation," viewing images as inferior imitations of the present, while the ideas carried by text could reference the future [13]. Milton even directly regarded text as a democratic symbol resisting tyrannical churches, with images—opposing text—seen as accomplices of the church [14].

The Renaissance period cultivated a depreciation of images and an elevation of text. However, the transparency of text celebrated by Renaissance humanists faced opposition in the 19th and 20th centuries. The capacity of images as cultural memory mediums to leave profound impressions was recognized, and their mysterious, enigmatic, and self-contradictory qualities were considered particularly close to the unconscious.

As memory mediums, images are direct and visible representations of intense emotions, both silent and inexhaustible in their expression. Their silence lies in their direct visibility and lack of need for words, while their inexhaustibility manifests in the imagination of people's stories and the emotional potential evoked by images. Traumatic memories require literature, but literature alone is insufficient. Language cannot express the terrifying realities of war and genocide or convey the suffering inflicted upon the body. Images, akin to the body's inscription of memories, are valued by thinkers for their precision. However, this characteristic also endows images with an anti-memory quality.

Roland Barthes elevates images to the status of memory, suggesting that they can replace memory and are therefore anti-memory. This is because memory exists in the mind and has an illusory quality, whereas images are concrete representations of reality. Barthes' concept of anti-memory refers to the true reconstruction of memory based on its fictional nature, implying both "restoration" and "reconstruction" [15]. Images not only function as mnemonic substitutes but also serve as the most reliable evidence of a past that no longer exists, providing a trace of reality from a past moment.

Walter Benjamin's perspective helps clarify the apparent contradiction in images functioning as both memory and anti-memory. According to Benjamin, these images should be understood as thought-images, continuously illuminating the complex phenomenon of memory from new angles [16]. The number of these images is fundamentally infinite, even if the types of metaphors are limited. In the digital age, memory is no longer seen as traces and storage but as a malleable mass, constantly reshaped in the changing perspectives of the present. From this viewpoint, images illuminate the various corners of memory, making it a malleable, rewriteable phenomenon rather than a fixed, singular one.

3.2   Architecture as a Memory Medium: Revisiting Familiar Grounds

Architecture serves as an auxiliary memory medium, indirectly conveying memories unlike text or images. Today, we face the intensification of memory challenges, necessitating the transformation of experiential memories into cultural memories for future

generations. Architecture, such as monuments, memorial sites, museums, and archives, supports memory activation and serves various mediatory functions.

Monuments and memorial sites preserve and convey national memories, often romanticizing war experiences. They help later generations reconstruct historical memories, shape new traditions, and foster national spirit. Monuments influence collective memory, national identity, and cultural identities of visitors worldwide. They function as political symbols enforcing collective identity and summoning future historical goals, acting as robust pillars of national memory and conveyors of national beliefs and spirit, preserving regulated national memory.

Museums are expanded versions of monuments, integrating all aspects of collective memory into a unified narrative, determined by the society that creates them. According to Pierre Nora, museums symbolize artificial collective memory, compensating for contemporary memory deficiencies through institutionalized memory [17].

Ruins, unlike monuments and museums, represent forgotten structures that revive memories when revisited. The Renaissance's excavation of ancient Roman ruins exemplifies this, with historical sites and remnants serving as memory catalysts. The Renaissance perception transformed ruins into memory pillars, where observers vividly recalled the history associated with these locations. As long as history is inherited and remembered, ruins serve as pillars and cornerstones of memory.

Ruins reveal memory's dual nature—forgotten yet vivid, with the potential for resuscitation. The Renaissance rediscovered identity and cultural affinity in historical ruins, sparking interest in national identity and the search for a forgotten past. Material remnants are preserved, becoming elements of stories and nexus points for new cultural memory, requiring interpretation through linguistic heritage.

Trauma site architecture reflects diverse memories and perspectives, distinguishing itself from conventional architectural memory media. These sites deepen impressions through their evocative sensory impact, embodying collective suffering and shared experiences. Returning to and remembering these sites rebels against prescribed collective memories and reveals the complex facets of our shared past.

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of narratives and material forms of media memory highlights the rich and diverse ways in which societies remember and interpret their past. The transition from oral to textual memory narration, along with the roles of history, literature, imagery, and architecture, serves to preserve, convey, and give meaning to our collective and individual memories. Understanding the intricate relationship between these mediums allows us to delve deeper into the complex interplay of individual and collective experiences and the formation of cultural memory and identity. By exploring the varied facets of media memory, we can better appreciate the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the importance of preserving and engaging with the past to inform our present and future understanding.

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