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From memory to memory work
Memory has been perceived as a wax tablet, a book, a sheet of paper, a labyrinth, and a loom. As the philosopher of psychology Douwe Draaisma (2010) has eloquently demonstrated, throughout history, metaphors have been applied as heuristic devices to make sense of what memory is. Dominant metaphors have also been derived from the natural environment (clay and dirt, in the Christian Bible), hydraulic engineering, complex machines with springs and gears (as is apparent in the writings of Descartes and Hobbes), electricity and chemistry, and telecommunications (Draaisma, 2010; Epstein, 2016). However, since 60 years or so, the most persistent metaphors to describe what memory is have come from the field of computing (e.g. storage, overwriting, search, retrieval, input, output, etc.). This is no coincidence, writes psychologist Robert Epstein (2016, para. 16), “each metaphor reflected the most advanced thinking of the era that spawned it.” Metaphors about memory both enable but also restrict thinking about it. Especially the research into cognition has not only perceived but also treated memory as an essential part of the human “computer” called the brain. However, as Epstein (2016) critically remarks, our minds are not computers. This is something we should not forget when we talk about memory.

Is it possible to think about memory in a way that does not cloud, but enrich our understanding of it? Memory, both as a concept and capacity and process in the human brain and body, is slippery, something that can never be fully grasped. Hence, it might not be fruitful to conceive of memory as something that is, but rather as something that is practiced, performed, produced, and constructed in the present. This train of thought will be the focus of this chapter's first section. In the second section, I present the concept of ‘memory work’ as a more productive way of thinking about interactions with the past. Memory work is defined here as the engagement with the past through and by specific practices, technologies, and cultural forms. This broad definition thus clearly locates memory as something distributed and as a site of action which concerns the present and future as much as the past. Moreover, it is an inclusive definition, meaning that anyone and anything can potentially and unintentionally engage in memory work.

Memory work is of all times and all places. However, it is affected by the social, cultural, and technological contexts of these times and locales. The third part of this chapter therefore provides a short overview of the state and status of memory work at different times in history. The goal in this part is to show how different practices, technologies, and cultural forms shape memory work, while they are also part of it. Conversely, it also engages with the question how ideas about memory—the value and status attached to it—affect memory work. Fourth, the chapter embeds this dissertation within a wider range of scholarly work and traces some of the guiding insights about thinking of memory as an active construction in the present back to their academic roots. The focus of this chapter is therefore setting the scene by focusing on the ontology, history, and epistemology of memory. Memory’s connection to media will be the focus of the next chapter.
Can memory be?

There is no such thing as memory, because there is wide variety of different things we mean by memory. (Olick, 2012)

Indeed, every fiber of our bodies, every cell of our brains, holds memories—as does everything physical outside bodies and brains, even those inanimate objects that bear the marks of their past histories upon them in mute profusion. (Casey, 1987, p. xix)

What do we mean when we use the word ‘memory’? This question has intrigued and frustrated many philosophers. For example, Aristotle already noted that personal memory (a universal human faculty) can be simultaneously perceived of as a neuro-biological capacity (mnēmē, memory) and a process (anamnesis, recollection) (Nikulin, 2015, pp. 7-8). 4 In this dualistic conception, the former pertains to the brain and body, the latter to the mind. Recollections, essentially, are mental representations of a past experience or something that was communicated to us. Memory is therefore closely linked to imagination (Pickering & Keightley, 2012). However, memory and recollection cannot be pried apart from each other; that is, they only exist apart from each other heuristically and lexically, like notions such as brain and mind, nature and culture. 5 Without memory, recollection is not possible and when we ‘access’ our memory, we always recollect. There is no such thing as ‘pure’ memory, because the moment it is called upon it is being ‘(re)written’—a popular, yet problematic metaphor as we will learn later—in terms of the present.

This dual nature of memory is important to note, because it shows that memory is an internal as well as an external process. Notwithstanding the fact that memory is a neuro-biological, universal human trait, it is embedded within linguistic, technological, cultural and social contexts that change over time and differ per place. Not only does this context provide the subject matter for future recollection (the things we actually remember), the moment and circumstance of recollection is situated in this context. “Each recollection,” write psychologists Merck et al. (2016) “is built out of not only an internalized potential to remember but also external factors, including social factors. As a result, memories are not stored in the head, encoded in some yet understood way in neurological tissue. Rather,

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4 A similar distinction in Dutch is made between geheugen and herinnering and in German between Gedächtnis and Erinnerung. Competitors in memory contests train their memory so that the areas in the brain tasked for recollection work more efficiently (Foer, 2012).

5 Terry Eagleton, for example, in The Idea of Culture (2005) eloquently argues that it is in our nature to have a culture and that our culture affects our nature. Likewise, memory as a capacity and process in the brain enables remembering, yet simultaneously ‘blank’ memory does not exist, not even as a MRI visualization on a computer screen.
they grow out of the interactions between the internal and external” (p. 285). This is also acknowledged by social psychologists Middleton and Edwards (1990) who observe that, in remembering, “significance and contexts are intrinsic to the activity, constitutive of it and constitutive by it, rather than casually influential upon some other thing called ‘memory’” (p. 42). Memory, therefore, can be regarded as a process of social construction.

What does it imply to say that memory is a process of social construction? For one, the phrase suggests that knowledge of the past that is recalled—reconstructed—in the present is affected by the social, cultural, historical, and technological environment of the remembering individual. When people remember, they do so with the building blocks provided to them by language, socialization and interaction with the world surrounding them. The philosopher of science and information Geoffrey Bowker (2008) pointedly critiques approaches to memory that focus on internal processes in the brain:

We don’t analyze the movements of icebergs by studying the bit that appears above the surface of the sea; nor should we study memory in terms of that which fires a certain set of neurons at a determinate time. We as social and technical creatures engage in a vast span of memory practices, from entirely non-conscious to the hyperaware. (p. 8)

This observation is recognized in many disciplines that investigate memory, ranging from psychology (learning and development) and philosophy (being and the human condition) to law (witnessing) and neuroscience (structures in the brain) (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). Human memory can be said to not only be socially constructed, but also materially distributed. Since the advent of molecular biology, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2010, pp. 73-74) asserts, the dominant scientific view is that there are two types of memory in living beings: that of the species (located in the genome, DNA) and that of the individual being (located in the central nervous system; the memory of experience). Humans, however, have the “possibility of transmitting individually acquired knowledge in a non-biological way” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 74). Human memory, therefore, involves practices and technologies of recall and inscription and externalization of the present into the future (which can be media). Memory is an associative and ongoing process that is distributed among other people, things, and places that are historically situated. A remembering individual is always embedded within a constantly changing network of interaction between people and things, while, at the same time, memory would not be possible without a body that remembers.

The social materiality of memory is repeatedly stressed in contemporary studies of memory, from psychology to history to sociology. Summing up their comprehensive history of memory and memory studies, Olick et al. (2011) state that:
The new insight of memory studies is thus not merely that memory is omnipresent but that it is at once situated in social frameworks (e.g. family and nation), enabled by changing media technologies (e.g. the Internet and digital recording), confronted with cultural institutions (e.g. memorials and museums), and shaped by political circumstances (e.g. wars and catastrophes). (p. 37, emphasis mine)

The fact that memory is situated, enabled, confronted, and shaped by external forces and circumstances—i.e. that it cannot be disconnected from unique contexts—suggests its fluidity and malleability.

Recent studies in neuroscience and cognitive psychology underwrite philosophical and social constructivist approaches to memory as being changed or forged anew in each new associative context, because of the changes in our brain formed by new experiences that came after the event that is reconstructed mnemonically6 (Merck, et al. 2016; Hoskins, 2016b; Bourtchouladze, 2002; S. Johnson, 2004; Finkenauer et al., 1997; Prager, 1998; Van Dijck, 2007). This blurs the line, often drawn in the literature on memory, between personal or individual and collective or social memory. In the words of Misztal (2003):

Such a perspective, by pointing out that individual memory is socially organized or socially mediated, emphasizes the social dimension of human memory, without, however, necessarily being a straightforward projection of the shared remembering […] While it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than just a personal act. (pp. 5-6)

The past is not simply stored as a coherent, chronological film in our minds, but rather “it must be articulated to become memory” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3). Memory is consequently formed through a blend of practices, technologies, and cultural forms—whether they are language, a ritual, a film, a tweet, a YouTube clip, a Wiki, or a Facebook post—and is thus connected to not only self but also others. This idea will be the focus of the next chapter, which dives deeper into the relationship between memory and media.

The ‘social’—in ‘social construction’—could thus be used inclusively and actively: individuals interact with the people and objects surrounding them, which shapes memory. Association might thus be a more suitable term than social interaction (Latour, 2007, p. 8). Actors, both human and ‘nonhuman’ change ‘the social’ itself in and through each interaction. This also leads to the observation that memory is caught in the dynamics of power. The what, when, why, how, who of memory is informed and shaped by actors with which they associate. These actors range from national institutions and historians

6 Whenever the term mnemonic is used in this text it should not be mistaken for having to do with “memetics” or “memes.” Mnemonics are the strategies and tactics people use to remember while memetics is a developing field within social biology and cognitive science that attempts to describe processes of cultural transmission of ideas and practices.
to political activists and media. Besides “social,” the word “construct” implies action and practice, something people do, using the resources available in their environment, while simultaneously this environment affects their very doing. As a result, “memory is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are not simply mediated but are structured by social arrangements” (Olick and Robbins, 1998, p. 109).

Consequently, groups actively shape memory and memory can shape groups. Whenever memory is externalized—that is, practiced, expressed, or performed in one way or another—it enters into the public realm by drawing from it and feeding into it. Many names have been given to the type of memory under consideration here: collective, cultural, communicative, social, public, and popular memory are just a few. Memory in the form of invented traditions is essential to the functioning of societies (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012) and every family, class, or religious community actively shapes a memory of its own (Halbwachs, 1992). This affects the form and content of individual memory. “‘Nation,’ ‘tribe,’ ‘society’ are general names whose sole substance lies in their actual members who share common myths, traditions, beliefs, etc.” (Gedi & Elam, 1996, p. 35). In this sense, collectives do not have a mind or will on their own. Rather, the individual actors within collectives adhere and live by the idea or image of the collective. They “imagine” their community (Anderson, 2006).

This does not mean that these abstractions do not have any real-world effects. A sense of a shared past may also act as a resource for present action. Individual and collective actions often rely upon ideas and feelings that are the result of memories of belonging to a group. For example, political action relies on shared memory of discontent in order to take place (cf. chap. 6). The imaginative group can instigate individual action; for example, people fight for their nations, celebrate the anniversaries of tribes, or live according to society’s norms and values. The idea of the existence and belonging to a bigger group is a force with considerable strength. Shared memory may bring people together or separate them. ‘Collective’ memory, like ‘the social’ or ‘society,’ is therefore not fixed but a process of contestation and (re)negotiation. Collectives do not possess a memory of their own; rather, the idea of the collective is carried, (re)constructed, and expressed by individuals within a social framework who uses certain objects, symbols, technologies, rituals, practices, and techniques of remembrance. Consequently, the idea of shared past experience or knowledge functions as a common denominator that may inspire (political) action and interweave with personal memory.

In summary, memory comprises the capacity and process of re-constructing and representing the past in the present, or preserving the present for future recall. It is a process, because it is never fixed, static, or finished. It is a reconstruction, because it utilizes and requires various resources, practices, techniques, technologies, and experiences. It is a representation, which implies that it is encoded with meaning, decoded, and recoded within existing cultural contexts. It is a capacity of the individual human body and mind, yet it is social through and through, because it is never just a capacity. It is always in a process.
of becoming, connected to and associating with the outside world. Memory is therefore always partly personal, partly collective. The ontology of memory—its being—is fluid. We will never quite grasp what it actually is. Like the past, as soon as we ‘fix’, ‘label’ or ‘capture’ memory, or use metaphors to describe it, we disregard or do not do justice to another aspect of it. We therefore need a different lens through which we can make sense of our engagements with the past. To this end, this dissertation employs the concept of memory work.

**Memory work**

Connecting the words ‘memory’ and ‘work’ is a fruitful exercise because it shifts our attention toward memory’s dynamic, interminable, and performed nature, instead of seeing memory as a static ‘thing’ that ‘is’. The word ‘work’ has a number of meanings and different connotations that are relevant with regard to memory. According to the dictionary, work may mean an activity “in which one exerts strengths or faculties to do or perform something” or that an individual “engages in regularly to earn a livelihood” (Work, n.d.). It might mean “effective operation,” something “produced or accomplished by effort, exertion, or exercise of skill” or “something that results from a particular method of working, operating.” Work could also be “energy expended by natural phenomena” or the “result of such energy,” as in “dunes are the work of sea and wind.” In plural form it might mean “a place where industrial labor is carried on,” “the moving parts of a mechanism,” a “performance of moral or religious acts” and when something is “in the works” it is “in process of preparation, development, or completion.” Work in each of these definitions connotes dynamism, interminableness, practice, and performance.

Memory work can be more personal or more collective, but always simultaneously involves individual agency and societal structure, just like any type of ‘work’. On a personal level, when we engage in memory work, we exert our faculty to remember in order to construct the past in the present. Memory work involves the body and mind and might therefore be the result of bodily energies and efforts. Memory work might require skill and exercise of skill, or involve particular methods or operating procedures. On a societal level, some people engage with the past in order to earn a livelihood; they are professional memory workers, such as archivists, curators, or historians. They help carry certain interpretations of and reflections on the past into the future. Memory work might be performed industrially or following industrial logics, as in the case of the ‘nostalgia industry’, which includes cultural forms such as films, books and TV-series. What is true on both levels is that memory work always involves a process of preparation, development, and completion. Yet, when a past is ‘completed’ through memory work it is ready to be broken down again and to be built upon; new pasts are always in the works.

The term memory work has been employed across disciplines, but despite its casual use, it has only sparingly been theorized and not one, unequivocal definition or application of
the term dominates academic discourse. Most discussions on the concept, though, see memory work as something strictly human and as something intended, purposive, and conscious. Annette Kuhn (2010, p. 303), for example, suggests that memory work is a “conscious and purposeful staging of memory” and that it is an “active practice of remembering that takes an inquiring attitude towards the past.” Correspondingly, the past, and memories thereof, is “material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities” (Kuhn, 2010, p. 3). Memory work, or memory-work, is also a social science research method developed by feminist scholar Frigga Haug and others in the 1980s (Onyx & Small, 2001; Haug, 1987). The method helps explore “the process whereby individual women become part of society, and the ways in which women themselves participate in that process of socialization” (Onyx & Small, 2001, p. 773). It thus uses participants’ individual memories of lived experience in order to reflect on and critically examine how they socially construct their identities. Most explicitly, Lohmeier and Pentzold (2014, p. 778) conceive of memory work as “bundles of bodily and materially grounded practices to accomplish memories.” As such, memory work “involves purposive practices in and through which the past is expressively and consciously represented, interpreted, reflected and discursively negotiated” (Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014, p. 779).

Even though memory work can be purposive human engagement with the past, this dissertation argues that memory work is not only restricted to humans and not always purposive. Rather, objects, things, technologies, places, forms and content can be part of and engage in memory work too. That is, agency in memory work is not only reserved for humans, but is distributed among people and things. Objects, cultural and symbolic forms, and technologies may ‘steer’ and shape memory in peculiar ways, may contain it, and may remember for us.

This latter thought is inspired by actor-network-theory (ANT) and the work of Latour. In ANT, what is meant by ‘social’ differs from common usage of the term, both in academic and popular discourse. As Latour (2007) writes: “In most situations, we use ‘social’ to mean that which has already been assembled and acts as a whole, without being too picky on the precise nature of what has been gathered, bundled, and packaged together” (p. 43). That is ANT is “based on the assumption that ‘reality’ as we encounter it, is the product of complex interactions between human and non-human actors (e.g., technologies and artefacts)” (Van Loon, 2008, p. 114). Controversial in this theory is that agency is not reserved for human beings, as Van Loon (2008) writes:

> Actors can be humans, animals, technologies, angels and gods. That is, the nature of an actor is not predefined, it is simply linked to act, which in turn solely depends on whether the impact of its actions has consequences for other actors. Action is thus not tied to intentionality. (p. 115)
In ANT, the social itself is deconstructed and not taken for granted as an essential structure or force. Latour (2007) argues that “there is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations” (p. 108, emphasis in original). These mediators translate, that is, they transform, distort, or alter the meaning or elements they transport within the network (i.e. they are not neutral) (Latour, 2007, p. 39). By treating actors and ‘nonhuman’ actants as mediators, social ties are problematized, yet simultaneously made less abstract and not taken for granted. Mystifying notions such as “social force” and “social dimension” are thus broken down. Likewise, memory work is a ‘social’ process wherein connections are made, and continually remade, between mediating and associating people, technologies, objects, and ideas.

What is meant by this is best illustrated by an example. Consider the following scenario: In January 2013, Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands announced she would abdicate the throne in favor of her son, then Prince Willem-Alexander. Together with my wife, I watched the Queen’s address to the nation on TV. Millions of people watched it with us. We agreed that we saw Beatrix as a nice grandmother and exchanged our personal memories of her. We showed each other pictures of last year’s Queen’s Day on our phones. I sent a WhatsApp message to my mother, who is a royalty fan, and asked what she thought about the abdication. She said she was touched and told me how her just deceased father was a supporter of the royal family. I looked at my Facebook Newsfeed and concluded that joking memes were already being created. Much more happened during and right after the address, but this small amount of information provides more than enough material to make the point clear: the memory of Beatrix was reconfigured and reassembled collectively at the moment of her abdication, by people (Beatrix, my partner, me, my mother), by groups (the Dutch nation, me and my partner, Facebook users, cameramen), and materials (TV, memes, photographs, phone). Each of these nodes within this particular network of interaction, reassembled—some to a higher degree than others—my own memory of Beatrix, other individuals’ memory, and that of various groups.

The materiality of memory, or, rather, the intricate connections and translations between technologies of memory and actors engaged in memory work, begs more illustration in order to lure it out of abstraction. In a provocative essay, Katrina Schlunke (2013) asserts that material objects can produce ever-changing “memory effects” and that they are therefore active in the translation and mediation of the past into the present:

To think memory as also material, and so as memory effects, provides us with a more telling idea of why memory constantly exceeds any easy division between individual and collective and between the unconscious and conscious—for ‘effects’ are not divisible into any binary nor curtailed by any linear order of time. (pp. 253-254)
The physical and temporal dimensions of objects “order” or “structure” memory. Schlunke illustrates this by two different technologies of memory, in terms of physicality and temporality, concerning Captain Cook. One is a matchbox copied on which is displayed a miniature version of E. Phillips Fox’s painting *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770*. The other is a huge statue of Cook in Cairns, Australia. Both objects produce different effects in different times: where once the statue stood proud, it is now producing a memory effect that is no longer wanted: colonial oppression (2013, p. 259). In the case of the matchbox Cook is “inscribed in the ordinary”; miniaturized, Cook is to be played with and “no longer doing the national historic work of being an iconic and untouchable symbol of colonial control” (2013, p. 255). What becomes apparent in Schlunke’s examples is that the material, in its mere presence, is capable of changing our ideas and attitudes towards the past.

The insight that agency in memory work does not only lie in humans changes the way we can think about intentionality in memory work. A cultural object might be designed with a specific purpose in mind, but it might have unintended mnemonic effects. For example, a statue of a historical figure whose name we do not know might trigger a host of unexpected memories and associations. What is more, an object or symbolic form that was not intentionally designed or produced to carry particular knowledge or experience from one point in time and place to another might just do that. Van Dijck (2007, p. 7) describes these varying degrees of intentionality well:

> We can take a picture just for the sake of photographing or to later share the photographed moment with friends. While taking a picture, we may yet be unaware of its future material form or use. However, any picture—or, for that matter, any diary entry or video take—even if ordained to end up in a specific format, may materialize in an unintended or unforeseen arrangement.

This dissertation follows Van Dijck’s (2007, p. 5) definition of memory work as involving “a complex set of recursive activities that shape our inner worlds, reconciling past and present, allowing us to make sense of the world around us, and constructing an idea of continuity between self and others.” Van Dijck thus points at the dynamic and relational aspects of memory work—involving a set of practices, cultural forms and technologies—and at its function of bridging past and present.

Following this line of thinking, memory work always involves processes of mediation and association on a number of levels. First and foremost, memory work mediates, on a temporal level, between past and present and between present and future. On the one hand, the past is reconstructed in the present through memory work, which may include selection, interpretation, and meaning-making vis-à-vis the past. On the other, memory work designates the transference of the present and past into the future. Whereas documenting and registering the present are aimed at future recall, commemorating and reminiscing go back in time, linking the past to the present and vice versa. On a relational level, memory
work involves processes of mediation between people, between individual and group, and between people and ‘nonhuman’ things. On both the temporal and relational levels, this mediation can be done by the communication technologies we call media, but it is important to remember that memory work may involve (and always has involved) a vast range of mediators.

Conceptually, memory work comes close to remembering. However, using the phrase ‘memory work’ instead of ‘memory’ or ‘remembering’ is not a mere semantic trick. While remembering is often perceived of as the personal act of bringing something to mind again, memory work, from the start, involves practices, technologies, and cultural forms—it is socially embedded, materially distributed, shaped culturally, and mediated. The concept of memory work immediately points at the ‘social’ aspects of engaging with the past in the present, or carrying it, in specific form, into the future. The concept emphasizes the procedural character of engagements with the past. By employing the idea of memory work, this dissertation clearly demarcates the terrain under investigation, instead of getting lost in all the different ways we might think of memory and remembering. Memory work, instead of ‘memory’ or ‘remembering’, immediately indicates the past as something ‘under construction’ by not only individuals and groups, but also technologies and objects, who are socially and culturally embedded. Memory work is of all times and places, but is shaped by historical circumstances. The next section will explicate this idea by providing a short history of memory work.

**A short history of memory work**

Memory work has taken different shapes throughout human history. Technologies, practices, and cultural forms differ per time and place and have affected the shape of memory work. Simultaneously, memory work shapes these technologies, practices, and cultural forms. This section aims to show that memory work has always involved processes of mediation and association between people, things, ideas, places. Moreover, the goal here is to demonstrate that the past has always been an assemblage in the present and that technologies (especially media) have always imprinted their specific characteristics on memories they carry and transfer into the future.

Such an overview is necessary in order to show that digital memory work—the focus of the rest of this dissertation—is a product of evolution, rather than revolution. Simultaneously, it allows investigations into what is new about digital memory work, how it differs from previous eras in which different media were dominant. That is, how digital memory work can be seen as constitutive of a new era of memory. Throughout the below, the goal is not to answer the question what memory is in terms of the internal workings of the human brain and its cognitive functions. The goal here is to show that memory work is constituted by practices, technologies, and cultural forms, ranging from the oral tradition and mnemotechniques to the book and electronic and media today. In memory work,
political forces and power structures in the present as well as the past continue to affect what knowledge and experience is transferred and reconstructed but also how and why: “the past [...] is not a dry, neutral record of what went before but an ideologically inflected cultural resource that communicators draw upon in their interactions with others” (Blair, 2006, p. 57).

An excellent guide for this short but necessary trip through the history of memory can be found in the work of Annales School historian Jacques Le Goff (1992). Le Goff (1992, p. 54) distinguishes four phases in the history of memory that lead up to a fifth, the contemporary “overflowing” of memory: “(1) ethnic memory in societies without writing, called ‘primitive’; (2) the rise of memory, from orality to writing, from prehistory to Antiquity; (3) medieval memory, in equilibrium between the oral and the written; (4) the progress of written memory, from the sixteenth century to the present." Le Goff’s historical periodization is based upon the work of French paleontologist Leroi-Gourhan, who divided up the history of memory according to dominant forms of communication: “oral transmission, written transmission with tables or indices, simple file cards, mechanical writing, and electronic sequencing” (cited in Le Goff, 1992, p. 54).7

Although Le Goff’s approach to the history of memory discusses dominant attitudes toward the past and memory work, these phases are not cleanly separated from each other but flow into each other, both in space and time. Of course, we still orally transmit knowledge and experiences of the past. However, our dominant means of transferring the past into the future have radically changed. Instead of “memory specialists” such as historians of the court, elders, and priests, who would authoritatively pass on what was important for society to remember, contemporary societies use semi-automated, technology-supported means of memory work. These shifts have had implications for the power dynamics at play in memory work. Whereas the power to interpret and re-present the past lay, for the largest part of human history, in the hands of the socio-political élite, it has gradually come to involve different and more actors. However, to say that memory work has been truly liberating throughout history is a fallacy: certain actors have had and will have a stronger voice in memory work than others, depending on their capital (economic, cultural, social), practices and access to and use of resources and technologies.

Le Goff first discusses societies that did not have a system of writing. These societies (constituting the greater part of human history) consisted of small, closely-knit and often tribal groups who transmitted their pasts from generation to generation through oral histories. These “ethnic memories” often had a genealogical character and were infused with

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7 What must not be forgotten is that Le Goff’s classification of memory is focused on Western culture and history. Nevertheless, his approach is useful to provide a structured overview of the state and status of memory throughout history. The goal of this section is therefore not to provide an in-depth discussion of the various periods of memory, but rather to demonstrate that the state and status of memory differ and are dependent on dominant sociotechnical and communicative arrangements of societies in time. Even though Le Goff’s work will be central in this section, it will be amended by views from other historians of memory.
myth (Le Goff, 1992, p. 55). A group’s past was carried by elders and was therefore “living,” in a sense that it was not, or barely, archived or stored (Hutton, 1993, p. 17). Thus, memory was also granted “more freedom and creative possibilities”; it was free and vital (Le Goff, 1992, p. 57). Therefore, Daniel Lowenthal (1985) writes in an important study, for people living in these societies “the past was not a foreign country but their own” (p. 13). Ancestral spirits played a role in the everyday lives of people within societies with oral traditions. At the same time, the past had to explain present events and relationships. Memory work was instrumental in this; it was central to judging current and past events and it legitimatized social order in the present (Evans-Pritchard, 1986, p. 105). Key in this mnemonic social cohesion were habit, ritual, custom and performance, which structured the knowledge of the past and were prompted by “the felt need to reiterate the wisdom bequest by the past” (Hutton, 1993, p. 17). Memory was highly valued because these cultures without script depended on it to be the keeper of custom, tradition, and rules, but also, the basic knowledge of the practices of everyday life (Carruthers, 2008, p. 12). Therefore, Rose (2003, p. 70) writes, “people’s memories, internal records of their own experience, must have been their most treasured—but also fragile—possessions.”

The second phase in the history of memory Le Goff (1992) distinguishes is that of societies in which literacy existed but was far surpassed by individual memorization as a technique of keeping the past. Memory work in Antiquity was more a matter of technique than technology. In Greek and Roman antiquity, memory as human capacity was highly valued and treasured among philosophers and the intellectual élite. For example, Plato (427-347 BC) remarks that all “knowledge is but remembrance” and Cicero (106-43 BC) states that memory is “the treasury and guardian of all things” (qtd. in Misztal, 2003, p. 31). Memory work was seen as an art on which a life of learning was based. Cicero saw individual memory as something that needed to be trained in order for one to become a good orator and before him the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos (c. 556-468 BC) developed a technique of mental image-places, memory palaces, in which mnemonic objects could be placed for later retrieval (Le Goff, 1992, p. 65; Hutton, 1993, pp. 27-28). 8

The ancient philosophers were skeptical of using writing for memorizing. Plato—writing down the thoughts of his teacher, Socrates—makes this point clear in his famous allegory of the God Teuth who exhibits his invention of writing to the king of Egypt, Thamus. The latter, unimpressed, reacts:

Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely upon writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead.

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8 Today, this technique is still used by participants in memory contests, as Joshua Foer demonstrated in his bestseller Moonwalking with Einstein. Additionally, an incredible amount of self-help books concerning mnemonics also exists. Apparently, memorizing has become gimmicky in our present societies, in which mass digital storage and recording has replaced our efforts to remember by heart.
of on their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a recipe for recollection, not for memory. (Plato, 1973, p. 96)

Writing, especially in ancient Greece, was regarded subordinate to memorizing things internally. The technique, or art, of memory was seen as the basis of all learning and all true knowledge and, therefore, was thoroughly studied and esteemed, whereas the technologies of memory, for example the wax tablet and writing on paper, were reluctantly used (Hacking, 1995, p. 203). Writing did enable commemoration and documentary recording to emerge as mnemonic practices, but on a small scale (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 114).

Behind the technique of remembering advocated and practiced in the ancient world lay a deeper mode of thinking. The paradigm through which thinkers and orators made sense of the world was wholly based on this systematic training of individual memory. Memorized knowledge was the master key, the *clavis universalis*, to understanding of the universe (Hutton, 1993, p. 29). The memory places or palaces described above functioned as the prime technique of memory work for some 2000 years. It was considered an art, *Ars Memoriae*, and was explained in books such as *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero’s *De Oratore*, and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* (Yates, 1966; Carruthers, 2008). Historian Frances Yates (1966) shows that the art of memory has been used for different purposes and through different philosophical lenses, from the ancient Greeks to the Renaissance Neo-Platonists.

In his *History as an Art of Memory*, Hutton (1993) extends Yates’s thesis by arguing that the early Neapolitan historian Giambattista Vico (1670-1744) reinterpreted the art of memory as a “technique to uncover forgotten origins understood as lost poetic powers,” an idea that resonated in the poems of the Romantics (Hutton, 1993, p. 35). Early written texts formed Vico’s body of study, as he tried to unveil the mysteries and truths about the oral tradition. Ultimately, Hutton (1993, p. 51) argues, Vico’s approach to the history of memory was an art of memory in itself, “for it enabled historians in the modern age to unlock memories hidden in the recesses of a distant past in which ideas and images were directly connected.” Hutton shows that the art of memory has transformed throughout history and has been used for different purposes within changing societal, scientific, and philosophical paradigms. One of the most important factors in the changing faces and uses of memory was writing, something Vico has also argued.

However, not until the third phase within the history of memory Le Goff (1992) describes, a growing balance between literacy and internal memorization can be found. Even though oral traditions and trained memory practices were still important and highly valued in pre-modern European societies, written materials about the past were increasingly being spread which resulted in a “tension maintained between those two forms” (Innes, 1998, p. 3). Like societies with an oral tradition, memory in medieval peasant communities was local and familial, rather than national (Fentress & Wickam, 1992, p. 153). Memory work revolved around Christianity, from being structured by the church calendar to being shaped by religious education (Le Goff, 1992, pp. 68-72). Moreover, “[i]n the Middle Ages, memory
enjoyed a high status not only because it was valued enormously as a container of virtues and an instrument of thought, but also because of concerns about loss of knowledge” (Misztal, 2003, p. 36). In similar vein, Carruthers (2008, p. 14) states:

The choice to train one’s memory or not, for the ancients and medievals, was not a choice dictated by convenience: it was a matter of ethics. A person without memory, if such a thing could be, would be a person without moral character and, in a basic sense, without humanity.

In her fascinating work on memory in the Middle Ages, *The Book of Memory*, Carruthers (2008) argues that “medieval culture was fundamentally memorial” and that training of memory was the basis not only of learning but also of “character, judgment, citizenship and piety” (pp. 9-11). Books, which were valuable and often not in possession of the scholar, were used to memorize from, instead of being used as a reference. Memory, or *memoria* as Carruthers (2008) describes mnemonic culture, was much more than just a technique of memorization; it was a “rich complex of practices and values” (p. 16). Thus, individual memory acquired through training was still, like in Antiquity, trusted over the externalization of it through writing. During the Renaissance, the ancient art of memory was, like the arts in general, reborn and gave rise to a renewed interest in the past (Hutton, 1993, p. xiii).

The fourth phase within the history of memory roughly emerges around the time of the introduction of the printing press. Elizabeth Eisenstein (2012) argues that the use of the printing press ushered in subsequent standardization and increased dissemination of the text. This resulted in the gradual stability of a vision of the past. On multiple levels, but very apparently so on that of commonly held beliefs and knowledge, the printing press was an agent of change. This period was marked by a new type of text-based historical consciousness and shared memory which “depended on the readers’ awareness of temporality, and this in turn led to the recasting of mnemonic schemes, previously conceived spatially, onto timelines on which historical events served as places of memory” (Hutton, 1993, p. 19) and the realization that “knowledge, even the most important parts of it, could no longer be held in memory” (Yeo, 2001, p. 78).

Important to note is that this process of change from memory based on an oral tradition to textual literacy was a gradual process affected by many historical actors, both emergent and residual. Innovations converged with traditional ways to re-present the past, capture the present, and transfer it into the future. For example, Eisenstein (1966) notes that “the mythical and historical remained blurred for a full two centuries after printing” (p. 51). Le Goff’s (1992) distinction of the different historical modes of memory are similar to Hutton’s (1993) linking of changing modes of communication to historical perspectives on memory: “orality with the reiteration of memory; manuscript literacy with the recovery of lost wisdom; print literacy with the reconstruction of a distinct past; and media literacy with the deconstruction of the forms with which past images are composed” (p. 16).
The widespread use of the printing press and subsequent rise of print culture steered a number of historical factors that cumulated in the emergence of a national consciousness and the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawn; 1990). Memory work played an important part in this from the 19th century onward. Gellner (1983) and Anderson (2006) argue that the national language of print instigated a common and stabilized language in which common national denominators could be expressed. In other words, citizens could “think the nation,” something that was impossible before the existence of a common print culture and a capitalist system of production and dissemination that supported it (Anderson, 2006, pp. 44-46). Anderson (2006) takes the formation of the United States of America at the end of the 18th Century as an example. He argues that “pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen played the decisive role” in the struggle for independence from the old world and the creation of the image of the nation, not economic interests, Liberalism, or Enlightenment (p. 65).

New world bureaucracies and the creation and spread of local newspapers, which represented local and regional imagined communities, were economically beneficial for businessmen of the new world—printer-journalists had a good market in the colonies—but it was the content of these newspapers that created a sense of colonial community that differed greatly from a continental one. In the colonies’ footsteps, during the early 19th Century in Europe, with rising literacy rates, starting among the Bourgeoisie, “it became easier to arouse popular support [for the Revolutions], with the masses discovering a new glory in the print elevation of languages they had humbly spoken all along” (Anderson, 2006, p. 80). Language is crucial in imagining a community and building “particular solidarities” upon which nationalism is constructed, but “[p]rint-language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 133-134). 9

With the spread of nationalism came the idea of expressing the nation in historical terms. Great men and glorious battles were the “pearls strung along a thread of narrative” of an invented ancient national past (Anderson, 2006, p. 109). In the writing of coherent national narratives in 19th century Europe, the resurrection and appropriation of historical figures and events for the uses of the present becomes apparent (Hobsbawn, 1990, pp. 52-57). For example, past leaders who did not even speak the language of the imagined nation they historically represented were used for the construction of present nationhood, or a specific date coupled to an event was chosen as the founding of a nation (Anderson, 2006, pp. 109, 137). In modern nations, historical heroes are remembered, but their specific historical contexts and existences are forgotten (Anderson, 2006, pp. 201-203).

Especially Anderson’s treatment of imagined communities can be extended beyond the context of the nation and the rise of nationalism. His ideas about history, memory, and forgetting are crucial in the coherence and unity of the ideas about a group’s past

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9 However, what Anderson calls the “Last Wave” of nationalism was able to bypass print-language through new means of communication, thus reaching literate and illiterate masses simultaneously (p. 140).
and their identity (Broersma & Koopmans, 2010). Communication technologies, like the printing press in Anderson’s case study, can help produce and disseminate ideas about an imagined group present and past existence. Doing so, they can temporarily fix and stabilize a certain people’s associations with each other in the present and to an imagined past that helps strengthen these associations. Group identity can be formed through these stabilized associations between people and past and present, like Anderson shows in terms of the nation.

The idea that there have been clean historical and cultural discontinuities in the types, ways, places, and forms of memory work throughout the past is an artificial, yet helpful, construction. Today, people still visit museums, libraries, and archives, watch the eight ‘o clock news, celebrate national memorial days, write personal diaries, and still take pictures for individual use only. Simultaneously, however, they share memoires on their Facebook pages, visit memorial websites, write blog entries, link to each other’s and televised stories, and edit and spread iconic news photographs that help shape particular group memories. In other words, the types, ways, practices, places and forms of memory work change alongside media and communication technologies. Media, as technological carriers of information, change: some are forgotten, influence each other, given new meaning and some are invented anew. This leaves its marks on memory work. The present and past are made sense of and used both in ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways, and by mixes of ways. This has been true throughout the past. As we have seen in this section, from oral cultures through print culture to today, techniques, and technologies played an instrumental role in memory work and the status of memory at different historical moments. Insights such as these have a long history in sociology, cultural studies, history and what has fairly recently been called memory studies. The next section will therefore delve deeper into the epistemological ground laid under the concept of memory work.

**A short history of memory studies**

Any history of memory work is a history of memory studies. The historians of mnemonic practices, objects and forms are themselves embedded within intellectual environments and traditions that are specific to their times. Whereas the first three sections of this chapter developed the idea of memory work and its variations throughout history, this section will trace the intellectual lineages of the idea. The goal of this section is not only to show how theorists have thought about the “social dimension” of memory and memory work, but also how theoretical concepts such as “collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1992) and “cultural memory” (Assmann, 1995, 1997) are products of their time and require updating and rethinking in the digital age. How memory work can be “rethought” is the topic of the next two chapters and the short history of the field that follows in this section provides the basis for these chapters.
In the example of the rise of nationalism, memory studies’ own historical context becomes ostensible. Since the 19th century, which saw a rapid increase in scientific research and academic activity, the scientific and philosophical inquiry first into history and then into memory was starting to become more popular. With the spread of nationalism in this century came monuments, national holidays and an increased interest in national histories (Anderson, 2006, p. 194; White, 1973, pp. 135-143). The studies of memory in the nineteenth century that were the result of this interest were not detached from research in biology and natural science, but were seen as extensions of it (Olick et al., 2011, p. 12). Examples of this are studies by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Ewald Hering, Samuel Butler, and Richard Semon who used insights of (evolutionary) biology to explain cultural traits, using terms like “species-memory” and “mnemes” (Olick et al., 2011, pp. 11-12). It was not until 1902, however, when the term “collective memory” was first used by Austrian novelist Hugo von Hofmannsthal who wrote of “piled up layers of accumulated collective memory,” but this was a poetic rather than an academic use of the phrase (qtd. in Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106).

With the formal institutionalization of sociology at the end of the nineteenth century a rather new approach to memory emerged. In the 1920s and 1930s, historian Marc Bloch used the term collective memory in his studies of feudal society; art historian Aby Warburg applied the term social memory to art as repositories of history; and pioneering psychologists Pierre Janet and Lev Vygotsky approached memory in the light of the experience of time and as being wholly influenced by culture (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106). A student of both philosopher Henri Bergson and sociologist Émile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs published his landmark study *Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925, which still is considered to be a foundational text in collective memory studies. Halbwachs developed his theory of the social frameworks of memory while he worked at the University of Strasbourg. Here, his ideas were shaped in a rich and progressive intellectual climate. Halbwachs sparred intellectually with historians such as Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, but also with psychologist Charles Blondel (Coser, 1992, pp. 5-6). This is important to note because especially his *Legendary Topography of the Gospels of the Holy Land* is very much a response to these intellectuals who attacked Halbwachs for his Durkheimian approach to the social.¹⁰

Halbwachs’s *Social Frameworks of Memory* is often quoted throughout the literature on memory, but is sparsely discussed at length. While it is not the aim here to thoroughly critique Halbwachs, his work has been highly influential in studies of memory and memory work. His basic point is that “one may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). In other words,

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¹⁰ Lewis Coser’s introduction to *On Collective Memory* describes how Halbwachs was part of a young and aspiring group of interdisciplinary scholars in France right after the First World War. The discussions these intellectuals had are very similar to academic debates over interdisciplinarity today.
“memory is a collective function” (p. 183). This implicates, explains Pentzold (2009, p. 258), that:

Memory is constructed in the individual during communication with other members of a given social constellation. It lives and sustains itself in communication processes. Moreover, memories act like social order parameters or frames (cadres sociaux). An individual places his/her thoughts in given frameworks and therefore participates in a collective memory so that he/she is capable of the act of recollection.

Without others, or the social frameworks subjects are formed by and interact with, there is no structure or coherence in memory, Halbwachs argues: memories are “recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned. In reality, we are never alone,” he writes (1992, p. 23). People cannot think about a past event without using a structuring language. “Discoursing,” Halbwachs calls this and to discourse “means to connect with a single system of ideas our opinions as well as those of our circle” (1992, p. 53). Consequently, memories are collective even though others might not have shared them. “It suffices,” Halbwachs (1992, p. 53) writes, “that we cannot consider them except from outside—that is, by putting ourselves in the position of others—and that in order to retrieve these remembrances we must tread the same path that others would have followed had they been in our position.”

Halbwachs continues deliberating three important social institutions that constitute social frameworks of memory in his time: the family, the religious group, and social class. He discusses rules, codes, and conventions in each of these social settings that guide interaction and structure feeling, which in their turn direct a certain worldview and sense-making. Additionally, he shows that through traditions, ceremonies and rituals the specific group is held intact and reaffirms a subject’s place in it. Through these processes a “traditional armor” is created that shows to which group a certain person belongs and simultaneously carries around and is reminded of (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 59). Pivotal in this idea is that:

There is no point in seeking where they are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them, upon condition, to be sure that I turn toward them and adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking. (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38)

Halbwachs repeatedly tells his readers that underlying the mechanisms of the institutions he discusses are the deeper structures of society. This is also the case for collective memory. Even though groups reconstruct the past “with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts, and traditions left behind by that past,” but simultaneously, and maybe more
importantly, “with the aid moreover of recent psychological and social data, that is to say, with the present” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 119). Halbwachs argues against Freud’s ideas on memory that had become popular around that time. Freud (1966) believed that all memories were unconsciously stored as in an encyclopedic archive and could actively be retrieved through psychoanalysis. Halbwachs, by studying his own dreams, argued that in the unconscious state of sleep it is impossible to remember coherently and, consequently, a social framework is needed to do so (Coser, 1992, p. 23; Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 41-42; Hutton, 1993, p. 78).

At this point, it is vital to remind that Maurice Halbwachs was heavily influenced by Émile Durkheim’s ideas on sociology and society. Durkheim has often been criticized of his conceptualization of society as an abstract, metaphysical being that is disconnected from the individual subjects that collectively constitute it. Historians Gedi and Elam (1996) are right in stating that “all ‘collective’ terms are problematic—and ‘collective memory’ is no exception—because they are conceived of as having capacities that are in fact actualized only on an individual level, that is, they can only be performed by individuals” (p. 34). In Durkheim’s sense, social forces and deep social structures steer society and its individuals, rather than the ever-shifting associations—that can be located in symbols, representations, documents, institutions, working practices, artifacts, talk, etc.—between individuals that are called groups or collectives (cf. Tarde, 2000; Latour, 2007; Olick et al., 2011, p. 20). Halbwachs is more careful than Durkheim in his distribution of social power in societies, but it is crucial to note that there is the danger of hyperbole when it comes to the description of collective memory and thus making it otherworldly. Gedi and Elam (1996) go as far as to argue that “the inconcreteness of ‘collective memory’ is the stumbling block in Halbwachs’ theory” (p. 38). Indeed, collective memory is constructed by people, materials, practices, institutions, and places; or, to put it simply, memory is made of ‘stuff’ that can be tracked, traced, and studied. It is not mystical or placed outside the associations between individuals, things, and organizations.

These associations do, however, influence ideas and actions and why, what, where, when and how individuals in collectives engage in memory work. Consequently, there is always a political or ideological layer to memory work. After Halbwachs, and especially from the 1980s onwards, a host of memory researchers have rightly focused on the materiality, politics, and ideology of memory, lifting the mystical aura of collective memory to show that “collective memories do not exist in the abstract” (Neiger et al., 2011, p. 3). Nevertheless, Halbwachs laid the foundation for these socio-political inquiries into memory.

The early work by Halbwachs, other Durkheimians, and the (social) psychologists of the first two decades of the 20th century was followed by a relatively quiet period in the history of sociological inquiries into memory, but it is a myth that Halbwachs’ work was largely forgotten, only to be rediscovered during the late 1980s (Olick and Robbins, p. 107; Olick et al. p. 139, p. 157). Halbwachs’ empirical study of collective memory, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte*, translated as *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels*
in the Holy Land was published in 1941, four years before his death in a Nazi concentration camp. The heritage of his thoughts can be found in studies by sociologists and anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (1962), Lloyd Warner’s *The Living and the Dead* (1959), E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s famous book *The Nuer* (1940) and maybe most explicitly in Roger Bastide’s *The African Religions of Brazil* (1960). These landmark studies use the foundation of Halbwachs’s work in order to further examine memory work and the function of the present in the shaping of the past.

Although an in-depth examination of the theories expressed in these works is out of reach here, it is essential to note that these authors all reevaluated the concept of time in relation to memory. Their case studies of religious, city, and tribal communities focus on the rituals and traditions with regard to the past and veneration of ancestors. Memory is reinterpreted as myth, often religious, and is considered to be a well of timelessness, tapped into and kept alive through rituals and traditions whose origins are lost, but at the same time have a present social function to keep the group intact. Simultaneously, living memory, that is, the memory of living generations passes into myth over time and the markers and places that carry memory are dependent on the present socio-geographical situation of the group. Therefore, collective memory of a specific group can only survive “insofar as they can insulate themselves in the existing frameworks of society” (Bastide, 2011, p. 162). Bastide and his contemporaries wrote their studies of tribal memory in a time in which the broadcast media, and especially television, gained influence within the media landscape. Media theorists started to analyze in what ways electronic media influenced society and cultural practices therein. From the 1970s onward this type of investigation also turned its critical lens toward memory, which cumulated in the so-called ‘memory boom’ of the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the most important concepts developed in this new surge of research are part of what Le Goff (1992) has called the “contemporary revolutions” of memory.

Research into the politics of identity and ideology and the social construction of knowledge and society were—and still are—pivotal to the understanding of memory work in these terms. In their excellent delineations and histories of the field of memory studies, Olick et al. (2011) and Olick and Robbins (1998) show that the interest in collective memory has its roots in new ways of examining issues of power, identity, ideology, and other matters of social organization. The conception that “identities are projects and practices, not properties” and that they are socially and historically constructed within the dynamics of normalization and contestation has been extended to the realm of memory (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 122). Olick et al. (2011) write:

11 A short biography of Halbwachs can be found in Lewis Coser’s introduction to *On Collective Memory* and here (in German): http://www-classic.uni-graz.at/sozwww/agsoe/lexikon/klassiker/halbwachs/22bio.htm

12 Countering the surge of cognitive studies into memory at the end of the 1980s, John Shotter (1990), for example, eminently argues for social constructivist approaches to memory.
We now take for granted ‘constructionist’ approaches that emphasize the ways images of the past distort, are deployed for instrumental purposes, propagate myths, and so on. In the process, however, we should not forget the novelty and power of such perspectives, nor should we reduce them to a version of ‘lies my country told me.’ (p. 42)

This insight led to studies of memory that focused on practices, (social) institutions, places, and objects and their relation to overarching themes like identity and ideology. For example, well-known studies that examine the socio-historical construction of the nation in terms of national memory are Nora’s (1989) inventory of French sites of memory (Lieux de mémoire) and similar projects in other countries like the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands (Loewen, 1995, 1999; François and Schulze, 2005; Winter, 1995; Van Vree et al., 2010). These large projects can be connected to the “intense and widespread interest” to the linking of memory and national identity and the contemporary memory industry (Kammen, 1991, p. 3). On the topic of American Presidents, themselves emblems of the American nation, Thomas Johnson (1995) and Barry Schwartz (2000), respectively, argued how the image of Nixon and Lincoln has been remodeled under the hammer of time.

Jan Assmann (1995, 1997) developed the influential term “cultural memory,” in order to tackle the difficulties of memory with regard to the individual and the collective, ideology and identity, and contestation within groups and society at large. Refining and updating Halbwachs’s theory, Assmann (1995) defines collective memory as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive frameworks of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (p. 126). He distinguishes cultural memory from communicative memory which is constituted by “those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications” (p. 126). As such, the latter form is non-specialized, role-reciprocal, thematically instable and disorganized. Moreover, communicative memory has a moving temporal horizon of three to four generations, or about 80 to 100 years, as it is dependent on living, communicative subjects and has no fixed or binding point in time (pp. 126-127). Communicative memory can, however, pass into objectivized culture, for example texts, monuments, and rites. In this process of transition, the link to the group creating this reference is not lost, Assmann (1995) contends, because through this “concretion of identity” groups derive “formative and normative impulses” that reproduce their identity (p. 128).

The subsequent cultural memory that emerges from this process of transition has a fixed point and is marked by a distance from everyday communication. In this sense, cultural memory is transcended ‘lived’ memory that is maintained through cultural forms (texts, rituals, buildings) and institutional communication, which leads to the “culturally institutionalized heritage of a society” (Assmann, 1995, p. 130). The stabilization of cultural memory through objectification supports a clear demarcation of the group and thus cre-
ates a sense of belonging and identity. This does not mean that cultural memory cannot be reconstructed in order to relate to the present. Here, the archive of stored objectifications of the past acts as a “total horizon” of uses of the past and it enables a “mode of actuality” (p. 130). Of course, this is a process of institutionalized selection, specialization, and cultivation and it generates a “clear system of values” and attributes different degrees of importance to certain symbols (p. 131). The last point that Assmann makes in his description of cultural memory is its inherent reflexivity. Common practices are made sense of and given meaning through proverbs, rites, values, etc. Moreover, cultural memory “draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass” information about the past (p. 132).

Assmann’s model of cultural and communicative memory can be critiqued in the light of digital technology. Zierold (2008), for example, asserts that “recent memory processes in fact cannot be discussed as part of ‘cultural memory,’ as this is defined as referring to founding myths of an absolute past” (p. 401). The vast pool of electronically and digitally recorded memories of the past 80-100 years—the timespan of communicative memory Assmann identified—cannot be regarded in these mythic terms. Therefore, Zierold (2008) argues, “a more abstract, non-normative concept of memory which accepts that the forms of social memory change together with the development of the media broadens the horizons and brings into focus just those kinds of contrary and paradoxical developments we experience today” (p. 402). Moreover, the constant hyperlinking, sharing, friending, liking, online can be seen as active practices with both a communicative and a cultural dimension that help shape our understanding of the past—as will be discussed more in depth later.

In response to Assmann’s model, Marita Sturken (1997) defines cultural memory as “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning” (p. 3). Thus, Sturken shows how the meaning of individual memory changes when it is shared publicly and how cultural texts and objects are intertwined with history. She also stresses the importance of popular culture in the formation of cultural memory. Sturken’s idea of cultural memory is similar to popular memory, a notion first introduced by Michel Foucault. Popular memory, closely related to Foucault’s notion of counter-memory, is the historical knowledge of a group that is placed outside official historical discourse (Foucault, 2011, pp. 252-253). Today, this popular memory is being reprogrammed by television and cinema, “[s]o people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been” (Foucault, 2011, p. 253). Being concerned with power and control throughout his work, Foucault argues that the control over what people watch and thus remember about themselves is a powerful tool in politically positioning groups: “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles” (p. 253).

Foucault’s concerns were shared and methodologically extended and applied by the Popular Memory Group, a research team at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary
Cultural Studies, between 1979 and 1980. Looking at popular memory as a “dimension of political practice” the Popular Memory Group (1982) examined oral histories and media texts (p. 211). They underwrote the importance of telecommunications in the construction of collective forms of memory, something that will be further elaborated on in the next chapter. They stated: “of all parts of the historical apparatus the electronic media are perhaps the most compelling and ubiquitous” (Popular Memory Group, 1982, p. 209). By the 1980s, television and, more broadly, visual culture, had become one of the key popular providers of information about the past, which led to studies of popular memory such as George Lipsitz’s *Time Passages* (1990) and Edgerton and Rollins’s edition *Television Histories* (2001).

The abovementioned authors are all primarily concerned with the relationship between popular conceptions of history, shared ‘unofficial’ memories, and the mediation of the past through cultural object and technologies. They focus on identity politics, resistance to dominant ideologies, social power and control through memory work. The past, in these views, is very much the battleground of present interests. This dissertation ascribes to these insights, but also aims to update and appropriate them to the study of contemporary memory work. What happens when memory work takes place in a media-saturated world? How do our pasts change when our practices, cultural forms, and technologies that are used to express and carry it are increasingly digital? And, how is the power to shape our pasts re-distributed within a society in which media are omnipresent and pervasive? Have we entered a “fifth stage” of memory, as Le Goff (1992) would phrase it? And, if the answer is yes, how do the dominant media of our time enable, shape and partake in memory construction? Such questions will be the focus of the next chapter.