In light of the broad multidisciplinarity of memory studies and the great variety of concepts of memory it has yielded, should one even attempt a definition of ‘cultural memory’? Nicholas Pethes and Jens Ruchatz find this goal neither realistic nor desirable. Thus, they did not even include entries for ‘memory’ or ‘remembering’ in their interdisciplinary encyclopedia (2001) of the same name. They certainly have a point. The ‘supertheory’ of memory that integrates all the existing approaches has yet to be conceived (on some far-reaching attempts, though, see chapter III.3.3). The goal of this chapter is to outline an heuristic model of cultural memory. This model is rooted in anthropological and semiotic approaches to culture, but at the same time it should leave room for as many points of contact with other approaches as possible.

We cannot conceive of memory without using metaphors; in fact, throughout history, the phenomenon of ‘memory’ has itself generated a great many metaphors. In a first step, therefore, the possibilities, limits, and dangers of the metaphorical reference to cultural memory will be carefully examined and two fundamentally different uses of Halbwachs’s term ‘collective memory’ – collective and collected – will be explained. A second step then introduces categories of cultural semiotics and distinguishes among three dimensions of memory culture (material, social, and mental). Third, concepts of cognitive psychology are transferred to the level of culture, in order to locate acts of remembering within a framework of various systems of cultural memory. And fourth, the relationship of memory to the neighboring terms ‘identity’ and ‘experience’ is considered.
IV.1 Metaphors – productive, misleading and superfluous, or: How to conceive of memory on a collective level

One of the established criticisms levelled against theories of cultural memory contends that they are based on an improper transference of concepts of individual psychology to the collective level. Marc Bloch (1925), in his response to Halbwachs’s theses, was the first to point out the problems that arise when terms such as ‘memory’, ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’ are simply furnished with the adjective ‘collective’ in order to transfer to sociocultural phenomena the insights gathered in studying individuals. It is certainly true that there exists no form of collective consciousness (outside of individual minds) to which one could ascribe acts of remembering and forgetting, an unconscious, or the suppression of memory. Cultural memory, collective remembering, or social forgetting are metaphors – as has been emphasized repeatedly (be it as a reproach or as a justification for cultural studies’ approaches to memory). They are linguistic cognitive models with heuristic value, as Harald Weinrich pointed out as early as 1976: ‘We cannot conceive of an object such as memory without metaphors. Metaphors, particularly when they occur in the consistency of semantic fields, are valuable as (hypothetical) cognitive models’ (294) (see also Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Memory, remembering and forgetting have been paraphrased with metaphors since Plato and Aristotle – from wax tablet, seal, and aviary to storehouse and theatre all the way to photography and the computer. Thus, as Douwe Draaisma (2000, 3) points out, ‘ever-changing images are projected onto our theories of memory, a succession of metaphors and metamorphoses, a true omnia in omnibus’. The classical metaphors of memory have always referred to the individual level. This means that when we draw on the concept of memory, we are using a term which is already associated with a range of metaphors. Metaphorizing this term even further – that is, taking the previous tenor (or: target domain) ‘individual memory’ and making it a vehicle (or: source domain) for an understanding of social phenomena such as processes of canonization or public commemorations – can be very suggestive, but also harbors the danger of producing endlessly meandering catachreses, chains of mixed metaphors.

To be exact, in speaking of ‘cultural memory’ we are only sometimes dealing with metaphors proper, but always with tropes, that is, with expressions that have a figurative meaning. Yet not every concept of cultural memory exhibits the same degree of tropology. Basically, there