V
Media and Memory

V.1 Media and the construction of memory

Cultural memory is unthinkable without media. It would be inconceivable without the role that media play on both levels – the individual and the collective. On the individual level, the sociocultural shaping of organic memories rests to a significant extent on mediation: memory talk between a mother and her child, oral communication within a family, the significance of photographs for media-based (re-)constructions of our childhoods, the influence of mass media and its schemata on way we code life experience. Even more so, memory on the collective level – that is, the construction and circulation of knowledge and versions of a common past in sociocultural contexts – is only possible with the aid of media: through orality and literacy as age-old media for the storing of foundational myths for later generations; through print, radio, television and the Internet for the diffusion of versions of a common past in wide circles of society; and, finally, through symbolically charged media such as monuments which serve as occasions for collective, often ritualized remembering.

Thus not only do media have a constitutive relevance for both levels of memory; they also represent an interface connecting the two areas. Since Halbwachs and Warburg, a basic assumption of cultural memory studies has been that memory is neither an entity abstracted from the individual nor a result of biological mechanisms such as heredity (see chapter II). It is for precisely the reason that we must understand media and mediation as a kind of switchboard at work between the individual and the collective dimension of remembering. Personal memories can only gain social relevance through media representation and distribution. This is particularly obvious in the case of
eyewitnesses: Only through interviews or the publication of letters do their experiences become an element of cultural memory (‘externalization’). Conversely, the individual only gains access to socially shared knowledge and images of the past through communication and media reception (‘internalization’).

In light of this inherent mediality of memory, it is no surprise that cultural memory research is often simultaneously media research. However, just like memory, media do not simply reflect reality, but instead offer constructions of the past. Media are not simply neutral carriers of information about the past. What they appear to encode – versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms, concepts of collective identity – they are in fact first creating. In addition, specific modes of remembering are closely linked to available media technologies. For example, the detailed histories of nineteenth-century historiographers had no counterpart outside the medium of the book. The elaborate national histories of authors such as Jules Michelet or Leopold von Ranke are not to be found in the oral tradition, nor in historical paintings or rituals. History in this form simply did not exist in other media or indeed at all in a reality outside the media. Solely the medium of the book exhibited the capacity to present an enormous multitude of memory-relevant information in a temporal-causal order – and thus to construct national history in the detailed form that the scholarly historiographical method developed in the nineteenth century required.

This power of media to create realities has been emphasized in media theory from its very beginnings. Sybille Krämer (1998, 14f.) offers a remarkably clear summary of the cultural significance of media:

Media do not simply convey messages, but instead develop a force which shapes the modalities of our thinking, perceiving, remembering, and communicating. ... ‘Mediality’ expresses the idea that our relationship to the world (and with this all of our activities and experiences) is shaped by (and the world is made accessible through) the possibilities for distinction which media open up, and the limitations which they thereby impose.

Whatever we know about the world, we know through media and in dependence on media. The images of the past which circulate in memory culture are thus not extrinsic to media. They are media constructs. This does not make them counterfeit or unreal; mediality represents instead the very condition for the emergence of cultural memory.