

The Rote Armee Fraktion: Memory and the Construction of Art, Film and Literature

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Abstract

This article explores the current popularity of memory studies in academia, by looking specifically at the basis of the methodology by critically analysing key theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs and his theory of collective memory and Pierre Nora's *Sites of Memory*. These theories are then applied specifically to the portrayal of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) in the art of Gerhard Richter, the films of von Trotta, Schlöndorff and Edel as well as the literature of Heinrich Böll. After the trial and (contested) suicide of the core members of the gang, this period holds a particular significance in the memory of the Left in Germany. At the time, as well as in recent decades, many films and novels have been created in order to contextualise the events and to ratify the conflict between supporting the ideology of the group, whilst condoning their terrorist methods. Gerhard Richter painted and exhibited *October 18, 1977* in Berlin during 1988-89, which questioned the portrayal of the RAF in the media as well as the issues of nostalgia, memory and cultural manipulation of historical events. This paper discusses theories of memory and their manifestation in works of art as well as evaluating the use of a methodology of memory studies for critical analysis of particular events in history.

Background

In recent decades there has been a proliferation of historical assessment in the field of memory studies. The concept was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs in his essay *On Collective Memory* (1950) which built upon Émile Durkheim's 1912 work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Halbwachs stated that all memory is referential to the social group(s); that collective memory is in symbiosis with individual memory, thus creating a continual loop, causing the development and perpetuation of the memory in question (Winter & Sivan 1999, p.24). Pierre Nora (1989) developed the theory in the 1980s to include most importantly *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Sites of Memory). The application of memory theory has since permeated many academic disciplines, although Alon Confino (1997, p. 1387) states that the application of memory to any topic without critique has created a lack of direction in the field, rendering a need for re-evaluation in order to make the practice useful once more.

This has led to the development of more specific modes of analysis, such as cultural transfer studies which question the dynamics of appropriation, modes of transfer and the subsequent decontextualization and resemantication. Vološinov (1973), for example analyses memory in relation to language and states that memory is created by an inner dialogue which is subject to interpretation and conversation with others. The biologist Steven Rose (2003) sees memory and consciousness as adaptive environmental processes, and the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962) views speech, language and memory as social constructs.

Analysis

I intend to discuss the concept of memory in relation to the actions of the RAF in the 1970s in West Germany. Halbwachs himself stated that 'crucial public events leave deep imprints in the minds of direct participants' (Coser 1992, p.30). The events of left-wing terror have had a massive impact on German cultural memory, which has caused the proliferation in recent decades of novels such as those by Heinrich Böll (*The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* most notably), films by von Trotta and Schlöndorff such as *Die Bleierne Zeit* and *Deutschland Im Herbst* which analysed public reception of the RAF as well as the art of Gerhard Richter. The subject of the RAF suffers the problem of politicisation as the movement itself had many supporters, although many did not condone the use of political violence. Confino (1997, p.1393) warns that a political assessment reduces memory to ideologies and ignores the collective consciousness and its social manifestations, yet we can say in this instance culture and collective consciousness are political as they refer to contested power relations. A 1971 poll by the Allensbach Institute found that five per cent of the population would harbour a member of the RAF overnight, which shows the popularity of the movement and goes some way in demonstrating its impact on German cultural identity. As Cornils (2002, p.112) states, 1968 was 'a short term political failure' with 'long-term socio-cultural effects'. In order to demonstrate effectively the complexity of memory studies I intend to highlight the key themes within the discipline of memory and then relate them to the RAF. In this way I hope to show how the concepts can be practically applied to a field of research.

Whenever discussing memory, one must be wary of indulging nostalgia; however, nostalgia can be seen as a way of placing an individual within a political time. Nostalgia has been referred to by Fritzsche (2002, pp. 64-65) as pervading the modern world and defined as how 'the virtues of the past are cherished and their passage...lamented, [with] no doubt that

they are no longer retrievable'. Halbwachs' (1992, pp.48-49) theories on nostalgia are perhaps more pertinent; he states that, as people grow older, memories of their youth become more idealised and sanctified, even if the events were traumatic. LaCapra (2001, pp.22-23) suggests that those who empathise with extreme events may feel what he terms a 'fidelity to trauma' by which he means they will feel an 'unconscious desire to remain within trauma'. He goes on to suggest that traumas are a means of creating an identity within a certain social group, which he terms 'founding traumas' (LaCapra 2001, p.23). This can be applied succinctly to members of the RAF generation who are often termed '68ers', as the protests of 1968 were a worldwide rebellion against a particular world-view.

The global protest movement was a moral reaction to many elements of the post-war society; consumerism, the Vietnam War, the decline in colonialism, a reaction to authority and hierarchical institutions and a widespread restructuring and redefining of the role and functioning of universities. The movement began with sit-ins and teach-ins at universities across the Western world and quickly developed into protest marches and in West Germany in particular, into terrorist activities. Herbert Marcuse, who was seen as the spokesman of a generation, at a 'teach-in' in 1967 at the Freie Universität in Berlin advocated a 'new theory of man' underpinned by 'the genesis of a new morality' (1970, p. 65). Cornils (1996, p.40) believes 'many people psychologically live in [1968], creating for themselves...an alternative reality'. This is a reference to the *Geistesgeschichte* and collective memory; the idea that the carriers of collective memory are the general population, the mood of the time and the attitude of the common people (Winter & Sivan 1999, p.20).

Transnationally, many have made the teleological connection between 1968 and 1989 and then to the individualism of the 1980s.¹ Winter states rather polemically that:

'[after 1968] it would take another 20 years for the dreamers to return. But when they did, in 1989, they did so on the shoulders of their predecessors. No 1968, no 1989' (Winter 2006, p.168).

Many members of the activist movements went on to resurface in mainstream 'teaching or other public service professions' (Minnerup 1998, p.205). As such, a memory of relative success has been transmitted into the German far left. In Germany today, many members of the new political generation have consciously rejected the politics of 1968 in order to create for themselves a new framework and a new means of identity, thus showing

¹ See for example Hanshew (2010, pp. 145-146)

how particular memories can in fact be rejected by a new social unit. Samuel (1994, p.x) clarifies this by arguing that memory is a product of the time, exists within 'theatres of memory', changes with each generation and with the perception and intention of the social group to whom it belongs.

Halbwachs 'was the first to have used the concept of collective memory systematically' in reference to particular 'social frameworks' (Confino 1997, p.1392). He states 'we preserve memories of each epoch of our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated' (Halbwachs 1992, p.47). Film is an interesting medium through which to view the activities of the RAF, as many were made at the height of the events as well as in more recent years. Hoerschelmann (2001, p.78) states that the function of film is to 'contribute to the ongoing process of negotiation and contestation that structures Germany's public memory'.

The key members of the RAF were put on trial in 1977 in a purpose-built high-security prison in Stammheim. Here, the activists carried on their activities in the form of hunger strikes, political publications and conversations with left-wing intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1977, three members of the RAF (Andreas Baader, Jan Carl Raspe and Gudrun Ensslin) were found dead in their cells, adding both to the drama and to the unfinished nature of the debate the members started. Heinrich Böll's novel *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1975) written at the height of the Stammheim trial, shows how the activities of the RAF were heavily reported and manipulated by the media. This can easily be transferred to the representation of terrorists in a post-9/11 world saturated by the media. This elucidates Winter and Sivan's (1999, p.13) argument that the encoding and distortion of memory can happen immediately after an event as the result of the media, advertising and culture of the time. This can also be seen in the way 1968 is framed by different disciplines such as political scientists analysing the intellectual flow that led to terror, in contrast with the sociologists' interpretations of the divisive societal pressures.

A film of Böll's novel, directed by Schlöndorff and von Trotta (1975), was released a year later after Böll was labelled a 'terrorist sympathiser' by the Springer Press, for condemning their treatment of the RAF members (Knight 2004, p.57). The film can be seen as a critique of the press but also of the irrational politicisation of the state, with Schlöndorff himself stating that 'we were using film as a weapon', thus questioning the validity of the

film as representational of collective memory (Crowdus & Porton 2001, p.4). Hoerschelmann (2001, p.95) however, indicates the significance of film in contesting official memory which, in this case, was that of the media. In reference to *Die bleierne Zeit* (The German Sisters), also directed by von Trotta (1981), based on the life of the RAF member Gudrun Ensslin, Elsaesser (1989, p.233) states that the film 'manages to convey, through symmetries and parallels built into the events, a symbolic dimension that gives mythical status to events that at the time were barely three years old'. In the film's reception, there was much criticism regarding the films represented reality, and von Trotta herself stated that 'the film in fact contains many of her own memories' (Knight 2004, p.100). This illustrates how individual memories are combined and supplanted in order to create a collective identity. In production, the film was only able to come into existence if it focused on the personal lives of the people involved, rather than analysing the political events and motivations (Knight 2004, p.101). This demonstrates the impact of political censorship on cultural memory, and the ease with which state-approved memory can be transmitted.

Germany in Autumn (Brustellin et al., 1978) uses the activities and trial of the RAF members to show the problems with post-war German politics, however it fails to critique the events of October 1977 itself and instead the events become 'symbolic sites for an affirmation of the political and historical project of the New Left' (Hoerschelmann 2001, p.95). Here, Nora's comments regarding sites of memory extend to the use of particular locations in films to extrapolate a particular memory from its audience. More recently films such as *The Edukators* (2004) and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008) show a more sensationalised view of the terrorist activities. Weingartner has specifically said that in *The Edukators* he intended to impart some of the revolutionary energy of 1968 on a new generation and, in doing so, 'challenge a prevailing trend towards its commodification by restoring its significance as a politically symbolic episode' (Homewood 2010, p.342). The question as to whether this was successful is almost impossible to tell, though the intention implies a prevailing trend to reconstitute the way in which the RAF are portrayed in the media.

Alon Confino (1997, p.1396) addresses the concept of successive generations' attempts to deal with repressed memories through literature, though we must be wary of how to analyse explicit and implicit meaning and connotations. Whitehead (2009, p.40) believes that in 'the passage from oral to written transmission, memory undergoes a profound transformation' that allows for historical enquiry. This is particularly interesting in relation to

our field as there has been a recent proliferation of literature in relation to the RAF, although generally the authors have been members of the 1968 generation. These include Peter Schneider, who published not only fictional accounts of the period but also an autobiography entitled *Rebellion and Madness, My 1968* (2008) which consists of diary entries during his involvement in the movement at the Freie Universität alongside Ulrike Meinhof and Rudi Deutske. This is interesting in terms of the process of memory, as the text itself is contemporary with the events of 1968, but the excerpts chosen and their reception is based in reflection and reanalysis.

Shafi (2006, p201) discusses three novels in reference to cultural memory, with particular attention paid to the commonly held view that the generational divide was one of the main motivators of the student protest. LaCapra (2001, p.23) states that most literature and art dealing with trauma 'involve the feeling of keeping faith with trauma in a manner that leads to a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through'. As Winter and Sivan (1999, p.12) suggest, 'density of memory is enhanced by the emotional nature of an experience', as is the wealth of memory created by the sheer scale of events in 1970s Germany. More recently, the former activists have published autobiographies in order to 'convert their memories into fiction and history in order to maintain the significance of 1968 for the future' (Rinner 2010, p.201). Cornils (2010, p.283) usefully looks at the sense of nostalgia and loss that many of the participants felt for the time in which they felt that they could alter history, especially as these moments were cut short by the descent into violence. He adds that literature manages to return a human dimension to the increasingly historicised debate (Cornils 2010, p.283). As Hoerschelmann (2001, p.85) states, 'popular memory often does not find expression in the written accounts of official culture, but remains an informal tradition'. Preece (2003, p.363) points out that most of the literature relating to the activities of the RAF are largely fictional with only three autobiographies which all relate to Ulrike Meinhof). There is a proliferation of works, both literary and cinematic which focus on the female terrorist, Preece (2003, pp.366-367) comments that this is more to do with 'the public-appetite for female urban guerrillas' than any particular memory or actual representation of the events.

This raises the important point in the debate, that when looking at memory through art and literature, we must be mindful that the artefact has a commercial audience and cannot necessarily be taken as a representational view of the collective memory. Kansteiner (2002, p. 192) clarifies this by stating that instead of analysing the cultural artefact itself we must look at

reception and public interpretation as more representative of the collective memory. In Marianne Herzog's autobiography (1980) for example, she chooses to recollect only her time in prison, rather than her motives for crime (Preece 2003, p.369), thus developing Halbwach's (1992, p.50) view that 'we are free to choose from the past the period into which we wish to immerse ourselves'. The implication is that the collective memory is somewhat distorted by what information is held in the framework. The use of auto- and biographical accounts and documented interviews also replaces 'real' memories thus the individual memory is supplanted by the collective.

Schama (1995, p.7) has added to the debate by suggesting that landscape is not exempt from the politics of memory as it is 'the work of the mind'; that 'scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock'. In stating this, Schama (1995, p.11) suggests that the world around us is built upon 'associations and sentiments' and thus meaning is placed upon a landscape by the social group who is viewing it. Schama (1995, p.12) extends his argument to the representation of landscape in painting, that by framing a landscape the social unit which views the work are able to understand it. This is particularly interesting in relation to the RAF, as Gerhard Richter produced a cycle of paintings entitled *October 18, 1977* (the date three of the RAF members were found dead at Stammheim Prison). Confino (1997, p.1391) points out the level of caution which must be applied to seeing art as 'the transparent expressions of political and social values'.

Danchev (2010, p.99), however, states plainly that the '*October* cycle is among other things a cycle of memory: tenebrous memory made manifest'. Richter's revival of interest in how to paint that which he termed the 'unpaintable' (the confluence between the inability to forget and the want to remember) coincided with the German *Historikerstreit*: the quarrel amongst German historians about how best to represent the German (specifically National Socialist) past (Danchev 2010, p.99). The paintings themselves are recreated from police photographs and television stills. Schama's theory would state that once framed by the camera the scene becomes imbued with meaning. The second 'de-painting' almost to the point of unintelligibility by Richter implies another layer of memory which, ten years later, essentially equates to obscurity. As Hell and von Moltke (2005, p.75) state, 'Richter presents an afterimage of history as one that resonates with the viewer's own visual memories'. Thus the blurring of police photographs prompts the viewer to place their own memories into the artwork as a mirror which reflects events back onto the audience.

Death (*Tote*) is used by Richter as a title and Danchev (2010, p.101) equates the cycle to 'a kind of mourning'. In representing the four RAF members dead in their cells, Richter instigates a different method of contemplation and remembrance than if the members were portrayed alive; a sense of martyrdom and of 'victims of history' (Saltzman 2005, p.38). The knowledge of the identity of the deceased is caused by knowledge of the events and a 'visual memory of their source, the German media' (Saltzman 2005, p.29). As Ricoeur (2004, p.359) states 'the deceased...constitutes a genuine amputation of oneself to the extent that the relation with the one who has disappeared forms an integral part of one's self-identity'. This is of particular interest when assessing the way in which many affiliate themselves as part of the 1968 generation. Richter himself said in an interview in 1989 that 'these paintings are "to do with us, our hopes and failures, our death"' (Danchev 2010, p.102). The motif of the constant returning of the dead is particularly poignant in the current climate with the spectre of terrorism that 'haunts our imagination' (Danchev 2010, p.104). The memory of the past is now viewed through the current post-9/11 collective consciousness of a 'global war on terror', creating a layer of memory which was not present in the German idiom at the time. As Halbwachs (1992, p.51) states; 'the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society', and there are as many histories as there are social groups and frameworks. The new global framework creates an immediately apparent method of manipulating the social frameworks of previous generations. This also relates to the death of an ideology and a century of utopian politics which is another filter through which 1968 is viewed.

Nora's work *Between Memory and History* (1989, p.9) built upon previous theories by placing it in opposition to history, stating that 'history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it'. Though this might be seen as an extreme view it does successfully illustrate the conflict between history as representation and memory as a subjective and transitional recollection. Nora (1989, p.7) stated that 'there are *lieux de memoire*...because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory'. By stating this, Nora (1989, p.12) postulates that meaning is attached to locations and memory is made historical instantaneously by erecting memorials to a particular history that the social unit are unable to re-live in memory. In placing memory in monuments, museums and archives, Nora believes the social group creates external rather than internal memories, thus solidifying meaning and capturing a particular view of the past, not open to interpretation (Crane, 1997, p.1379). The mass funeral parade depicted in Richter's painting *Beerdigung* is a literal representation of the rituals of memory discussed by Winter and Sivan

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(1999, p.15) who state that 'rituals help to produce 'extrinsic contexts' which enhance the recall of memories at given moments and places'. The paintings allow the 'German public to experience [the] deaths, with something of the belated temporality of the traumatic' (Saltzman 2005, p.43). Interestingly, the building in which Richter's cycle was first exhibited, Haus Esters (1928-30), was designed by Mies van der Rohe as a monument to the memory of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht who were murdered by Berlin police in 1919 as socialist political dissidents (Storr 2000, p.31). The linking of separate political memories identifies a pattern of civilian repression, victimisation and overzealous state control, and combines as a collective memory. Hell and von Moltke (2005, p.75) state that 'Richter's paintings visually implicate the viewer in the production of historical memory'. It could be argued that the role of Haus Esters is in the re-use of a symbol to relate to a known memory, thus making a statement about the connection between two culturally significant events.

Other *lieux de mémoire* relating to the RAF are notable in their absence; the three activists are buried in a common grave in Stuttgart and Meinhof is similarly buried in a simple grave in Berlin. This lack of commemoration is most likely due to the need for memorials to be sanctioned by the State, thus the only physical embodiment of the actions of the RAF is the Stammheim Prison built specifically to house the activists. This is indicative of the State's attitude to the period in question, but also highlights the controversy and conflict inherent in agreeing with the principles of the RAF but not with their means of achieving them. Stammheim itself was proposed for demolition in 2007, which raises questions about state-control of memory but also the significance of forgetting. The use of Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* is useful in assessing the physical manifestation of the past in the minds and localities of the social unit it affects, however it does remove the actual cognitive process of memory from the forefront of analysis.

The application of memory studies to the discipline of history can be seen to qualify many more possibilities when looking at the historical record. Crane (1997, p.1385) believes that history and memory can be recombined by giving the historians 'active participation in remembering and forgetting within collective memory...can become characteristic of historical consciousness'. The dissemination of memory studies in recent decades poses questions about its longevity. I would argue that memory will always be intrinsic within history: once one deviates from a mere reporting of facts, the historian is immediately within the realms of collective memory, whether social, political or otherwise. In this way it can be

seen that the adoption of memory to the practice of history has had a profound impact upon the discipline which will be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. There is now an interest in the multiplicity of interpretation and experience which can only help to make history more representative of lived history. Specific to memory studies, rather than other approaches to history, is the ability to infiltrate history with the interpretations of many social groups providing a greater understanding of the cultural impact of the events in question. In terms of the activities of the RAF, memory will continue to be paramount in assessing the impacts of the period. As the events are still in living memory, many of the issues highlighted by memory theory such as , transmission between generations, are yet to be fully demonstrated. As we live in a world proliferated with film, media and literature, the representation of the period in the arts provides a uniquely contemporary insight into the impact of the German Autumn on German cultural identity in demonstrating the conflict between vernacular and official memory. The significance in the methodology of memory studies is in its assessment of the fluid nature inherent in cultural perceptions of the past as well as providing a more critically analytical approach for assessing the role of artistic production in questioning cultural perception of historical events.

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