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Book Review: On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age

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Flusser's essayistic, even paradoxical, way of asking questions by making bold proclamations is in itself a means of establishing a dialogue with the reader, inviting debate, critical reflection, seeing the structure of the production and distribution of information as central to the way we live and understand the world. In his final chapter, "Chamber Music"—the only title not an infinitive, but a noun—Flusser proposes a scenario:

People will sit in separate cells, playing with their fingertips on keyboards, starting at tiny screens, receiving, changing, and sending images . . . People will be in contact with one another through their fingertips and so form a dialogical net, a global superbrain, whose function will be to calculate and compute improbable situations into pictures. (p. 161)

Here, Flusser makes a very prescient statement regarding the future of technical images—or what was the future when he wrote this work in 1985, but is today our present. He focuses, too, on the technological shrinking of our information structures, forecasting that the "telematic superbrain will be enormous because it will be a mosaic composed entirely of tiny stones" (p. 132).

With the accuracy of such portents and the magnitude of the questions posed throughout each essay, media scholars would benefit from a close reading of *Into the World of Technical Images*. Though Flusser himself acknowledges the theoretical complexity of the subject matter, he nevertheless encourages readers to make the intellectual journey. In a world where such structurally complex systems are often functionally simple—think how easy it is to turn on your computer or TV—Flusser has provided a series of essays with functional complexity, essays that press scholars toward a close examination of transcendent issues of media ecology, created by the ever expanding presence of technical images in culture.

Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg. (Eds.). (2011). *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*. New York, NY: Macmillan. 300 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-23851-0 (hardbound), 978-0-230-23852-7 (paperback).

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At a most basic articulation, collective memory is a way of remembering, a type of remembrance that is shared within a community—shared memories of a people, places, or things constructed within and by culture and communication. However, collective memory is not so simple, especially in today's media-saturated daily experience. What happens, for instance, when media influence how we remember the past?

What about when media are the go-to for discussions—and assigned meanings—of a region's or nation's current events or recent history? Or how about when entertainment media select the casts, scenes, and dialogues for films that are set in the future? How does that shape *how* we imagine tomorrow?

Collective memory studies may, at its root, deal with how people remember the past, but this edited volume recommends we consider the concept of “media memory” and how media shape ideology through emerging mediums. Media memory, then, explores the media's ability to remind us about our world by asking—among other things: Who has the “right” (p. 10) to do the remembering for a people? How does daily experience with media shape individual versus community remembering? What media outlets should be explored to understand media remembrance?

On Media Memory is separated into several sections, with writings on the concept itself, the ethical dimensions of memory studies, and memory within today's popular culture and journalism. Nicely woven throughout this volume, collective memory's seminal work connects with contemporary times, events, scholarship, and changes in media. The editors also provide a diverse range of articles that draw on international and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Ben-Amos and Bourdon's piece on Israel's *Such a Life* TV program that ran from 1972 to 2001, for example, examines the narrative structure of a program that—on the surface—told the story of the nation's news and entertainment makers. Similar to America's *This is Your Life*, the Israeli version constructed a life history of its guests. The authors argue that in addition to forming the storyline of its guests as adults, Israelis, and professionals, the show's storytelling and use of visuals, such as news-reels and home videos, formed a national narrative.

Tapping into a common cultural memory of the nation-state through lived experiences and interjections of visual storytelling, *Such a Life* constructed its audiences as being one that had similar experiences, histories, and goals for the future. In addition, most important to the authors, is the process by which the medium and the producers' use of video, audio, and interaction with interviewees revealed the notion of “media memory” as forming national identity.

On Media Memory's use of cultural theory in today's mediascape solidifies collective memory as a mature function within media studies and moves the scholarship beyond any notions of newness. In this volume, media anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird writes about a war that entered into a portion of Niger in 1967 and how traditional media at the time “silenced” the voices of the oppressed. The muted voices, Bird argues, were given rise some 40 years later by the local adoption of new media, such as online forums, to spread story, reshape the national narrative, reclaim a shared history and memory of the war.

However, *On Media Memory* is about more than just emerging new media and the Internet. This volume is, thankfully, a collection of new media studies that involve exploring the everyday media experiences of audiences. Indeed, this is a look at how advancements in media technologies and techniques initiate an interaction between the reader/viewer/user and the news/issue/history. For instance, Irit Dekel uses the

modern day history museum—specifically the technologically advanced Holocaust Museum in Berlin—to interpret how media advancements over the past decades shape collective understandings of the Holocaust.

Electronic databases, archives, audio, and video testimonials, Dekel argues, stretch across a history of information that had once been hidden from the public. Today, Holocaust histories span the Internet, fill days of television footage, and appear in discussions among widening audiences who connect through electronic communication. Furthermore, those hidden histories of the past—suppressed and buried by politics, shame, fear, and logistics—have become more accessible. Now, one can dig through a high-tech history machine (the museum itself) to experience and construct (or reconstruct) a personal connection to Holocaust history.

A truly disappointing element of this work, however, is in the lack of methodological roadmaps in many of the analyses. Some pieces—including, perhaps, Carolyn Kitch's article on institutional authority in keepsake journalism—reveal to the reader ways in which the scholar marries scholarship with particular cases and methods to make meaning. Yet other sections of the book are highly theoretical with loose connections to how young scholars (or others new to the concept of collective memory) can contribute to the field.

A notable exception to this critique, however, is Bourdon's piece on life story methodology that reveals two problems to collective memory research that memory media attempts to address. First, some memories exist within "certain narratives which have been told many times over, are 'stratified,' and are less prone to change" (p. 64). These static revisits of memory over time give way to a persistent and consistent retelling of a certain kind of history from certain vantage points.

Second, Bourdon suggests, memory is often believed as true, real, and accurate to the one remembering, that memories people believe in are rarely "false" interpretations of the past and its meanings. Life story relies on narratives constructed by participant that explore their everyday experiences with media, story, experience, and interpretation. This approach, Bourdon argues, helps the media scholar understand how media "accompany" the media user and how media characters (i.e., politicians, celebrities) are integrated into everyday life.

In addition, though Bourdon does not conduct a traditional research study in his article, he does suggest tangible means by which media researchers can explore the complexities of how audience interact and remember what they see in the media. Also, because humans forget and/or reinterpret past events through life experiences between the event and their articulation of their experience—a common challenge to media reception and memory studies—Bourdon suggests scholars balance traditional reception methodologies with life story methodologies.

On the whole, *On Media Memory* is an attractive contribution to the field by connecting cultural studies to everyday media experiences, but leaves the reader to search further for a more comprehensive work that shows how to implement the concept of media memory in practical ways.