

Book Review: Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (eds), *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*

Red Chidgey

Media Culture Society 2014 36: 1221

DOI: 10.1177/0163443714555830a

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/36/8/1221>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Media, Culture & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 6, 2014

[What is This?](#)

cultures within film industries. Its value lies as much in its compelling argument as in this invitation.

Sangeet Kumar
Denison University, USA

Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (eds) *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013.

This collection of 12 essays from emerging and established international memory scholars explores the recent paradigm shift in cultural memory studies from linguistic approaches to a more dynamic, performative turn. Structured through four sections dedicated to 'staging memory', 'spectral memories', 'embodied memories' and 'mediating memories', this volume pursues a new line of research by focussing on *memory as performance*, asking in what ways art and popular culture 'do' cultural memory. As the editors Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik suggest in their introduction, this approach involves 'shifting attention from the memory trace to its act – the event of memory, its happening' (p. 6). As such, this volume asks, how do creative acts perform the past in the present? What is the relationship of the memory event to the archive? And in what ways do objects themselves act as memory agents?

Invocations of 'performance' and 'performing' take two main trajectories in this text. The first coalesces around a sense of *intentional embodied enactment* made in relation to an audience, and is thus concerned with the codes, strategies and mediations of memory. The second pursues a more post-structuralist engagement with *performativity* as a mode in which the very repetitions of subjectivity and corporeality are brought to the analytical fore. This approach privileges the nuances of reconciling memory discourses with specific performance of self and society. The dual focus of *performance* and *performativity* combine to produce what Plate and Smelik refer to as a 'hybrid notion of performing memory' (p. 6). At the heart of memory performance, then, is not just narratives and aesthetic techniques but also how the body is called forward and made to participate in the memory work of the artwork and cultural production.

The range of artistic and popular cultural forms analysed in this text is a major strength of the collection. Contributions cover the visual arts (Saltzman, Rothberg, Highmore), literature (Rothberg, Corporaal), drama (Tindemans), journalism and filmmaking (Munteán), costume dramas and television series (Tigges, Wortel and Smelik), history painting (Wolthers), contemporary dance (De Laet) and architecture (Pint). Yet, in some chapters, the idea that a text 'performs' memory verges on becoming a banal statement: one that could be easily substituted by the terms 'representing', 'constituting', 'enacting' or 'mediating' memory, with very little difference in conceptual weight. Engagements with how performance takes place, who for, under what conditions and with which effects remain at times under-acknowledged. On occasion, I found myself wishing for a more self-reflexive treatment of how memory performance can be said to work in wider feedback loops, including the role of the audience or spectator. For instance, in Timmy De Laft's otherwise fascinating chapter on the dancer's body as a physical archive, an

assumption is made that the memory strategies of an experimental choreographer – re-figuring established dance traditions – would be widely understood by its audiences. As De Laft suggests,

with even the faintest idea how classical ballet generally looks like and regardless of any detailed knowledge of Fokine's choreography, audience members will readily understand how Beutler re-addresses the dance in a contemporary jacket and lays bare some of ballet's grounding principles, such as viewing distance, concealment of labour and hierarchical ranking. (p. 143)

Arguably, such understandings cannot be assumed without a broader consideration of the workings of cultural and social capital, and how cultural memory intertwines with processes of cultural knowledge generation. Certain questions remain outside of the purview of the collection, including the following: if memory is performative, how are these performances and enactments negotiated by specific viewers and 'imagined communities'?

Facing such issues more directly, Michael Rothberg considers the 'archive of implication' in relation to literature and art gravitating around the 'memory knots' of South African mines. In this contribution, Rothberg considers how memory is performed by those who are not direct victims or perpetrators of atrocity, but who come later or adjacently: 'bystanders, latecomers of the post-memory generation and others connected "prosthethically" to pasts they did not directly experience' (p. 40). With a deft analysis of the work of Jewish South African artist William Kentridge, larger questions are raised in this work about the exploitation of African miners, of fleeing from the Holocaust, anti-Semitism within Afrikaner nationalism and Jewish complicity in the apartheid system. Rothberg argues that literature and artworks are performative when they draw attention to the conditions of remembrance, and cast new memory associations through their aesthetic techniques. Here, memory's performativity is also caught up with how multidirectional memory is

orientated less toward a historical referent or analogy than toward the problem of what it means to be a subject of remembrance in the face of historical responsibility or, in other words, what it means to 'do memory' in the face of a multivariant implication. (p. 56)

This concern is echoed in Klaas Tindeman's chapter about writing a play about Flemish collaboration with the Nazis, based on family histories.

Ben Highmore's analysis of artworks as 'thing-memory' also successfully engages with the conceptual implications of memory as performance. While arguing that artworks require an analysis of their historicity to understand their role as historical witness, Highmore offers an important disclaimer: 'while time is both materially and contextually connected to things, we cannot easily make the leap from historical times to memory in these objects' (p. 85). Drawing on the example of a fossil 'remembering' the petrified animal, he affirms that 'some objects take on the task of remembering', and the key to understanding this memory work is to understand thing-memory, which is different to an 'experiential, human subjectivity-centred purview' (p. 85). Consequently, technology and cultural artefacts have agency as they shape memory effects, but this isn't a humanist form of agency, but thing-agency, in line with thing-memory.

For Highmore, the idea that artworks mediate numerous temporalities and techniques of artistic tradition suggests, like Rothberg, that ‘reference is also remembrance within the realm of cultural history’ (p. 76). László Munteán explores this claim in his examination of journalistic and filmmaking narratives around the ‘falling man’ image of 9/11 – the photographic shot that became a viral image at the same time as being censored. In a particularly rich essay, Munteán explores the memories and controversies built up around this iconic image – creating a thing-biography of its production and circulation – as he maps the image’s performativity in discourses and affects negotiated by journalists, grieving family members and filmmakers trying to puzzle together who the ‘jumper’ of the image was.

In sum, *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture* offers a rich and beautifully expressed study of the various aesthetic, narrative and embodied strategies that artists, filmmakers, dancers, journalists, writers and architects carry out in encoding their productions with memory techniques. Alongside a clutch of essays examining cultural memory performances surrounding the Second World War, contributions also span the Irish famine, 9/11, New Brutalism and the arcades of Paris. It provides a welcome follow-up to the previous edited collection by Plate and Smelik, *Technology of Memory in the Arts* (2009), and is permeated by the themes of trauma, creativity, mnemonic labour and storytelling. More could have been made of methodological issues accompanying the notion of memory as performance, however. Ultimately thought-provoking and lively, this book offers a steady companion to anyone hoping to build a dynamic, multi-disciplinary understanding of how cultural artefacts and productions engage in memory work, across different time periods and cultural contexts, with a particularly strong introductory essay laying out the main concepts and theories of cultural memory in recent times.

Red Chidgey
King’s College London, UK

Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

In *Life after New Media*, Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska set out to change how we think about new media. They argue that much of our current understanding is based on thinking about new media in terms of objects, such as the computer or the iPod, and propose instead that media be understood in terms of processes of mediation.

They develop their argument over seven chapters by drawing upon a wide range of philosophical thinkers, including Bergson, Derrida, Deleuze and Barad, and an eclectic mix of case studies. In Chapter 1, they begin by clearing some ground: they argue that the majority of the debates that occupy scholars and other commentators on new media rest on a number of dualisms, including technophilia versus technophobia, analogue versus digital and mass versus participatory. These, they go on to say, are ‘false problems’ (in the Bergsonian sense) resulting from the premature imposition of categories on complex phenomena. In the remainder of the chapter, through a critique of Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation, and by drawing upon the thinkers introduced above