

## Topoi as a Memory Box

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*Topoi* are collections of stereotypical textual and visual images pertaining to a place or time, or an idea. Referring to *topoi* can be a powerful rhetorical tool, especially because they unconsciously evoke emotions, connotations and pre-set images and ideas in the audience,<sup>1</sup> and are thus able to legitimate things without having to rely on elaborate arguments. A *topos* is a non-material, metaphorical place, often used as a rhetorical means to structure an argument through categorisation and classification.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the *topoi* discussed in the following articles – massacre, martyrdom, Golden Age and providence – already evoke certain expectations and ideas. Applying a familiar line of argument enables one to persuade the audience by using ideas and connotations associated with the *topos* without explicitly naming them. However, it can also transfer inherent implicit meanings without the speaker's intention. Relying on common knowledge in a specific community, *topoi* belong to culturally shared hermeneutic preconceptions – including prejudices – that guide and regulate the interpretation of texts or images in a specific culture.

Applying the general definition of memory box as elaborated in the introduction of this book, all *topoi* can be approached as memory boxes.

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1 See e.g. KOSELLECK, 1972, p. XVI.

2 The Greek word τόπος (*topos*, pl. *topoi*) means literally a place. The term *topos* is variously translated in English as commonplace, topic or line of argument. In classical rhetoric, *topos koinos* referred to commonplaces, which were used as a base for standardised arguments, see ARISTOTLE, *Rh.* 1358a. The Latin word for *topos* was *locus communis*. See further CICERO, 1983. See also CURTIUS, 1993 (1948), p. 79.

Compared with previous research on *topoi*, the methodological approach related to the concept of a memory box offers the possibility to approach *topoi* from a new angle. The concept of a memory box enables the often very abstract *topos* to be connected with concrete historical events and communities. Moreover, this approach allows to analyse the changes of meaning, respectively layers of meaning, of a certain *topos* by opening the memory box in a particular historical situation. It therefore focuses rather on a diachronic than a synchronic perspective. Nevertheless, *topoi* can also be transferred through space; however, they require shared cultural knowledge to be recognised as memory boxes.

Looking at *topos* as a memory box highlights two characteristics of *topoi*: inertia and movement. The history of *topoi* is typically studied by focusing on long-durational time levels, where meanings change relatively slowly. In contrast to this, *topos* as a memory box is always disclosed in a particular historical setting. In other words, all following four articles are going to study memory boxes as closed *packets* from the past that are opened in several past moments as well as in the present. Concentrating on certain carefully selected past moments instead of the development of long processes enables the historian to grasp the multiplicity of the past situation with an open future without a pre-determined end or some anachronistic *telos* projected to the past.

Concentrating on the moment(s) of opening the existing memory box, i.e. uses of the *topos* in certain historical situations, demands special attention to the interaction between the various agents and other factors in the communication process (e.g. author, speaker or painter; the chosen media; and the receiving audience). The aim, the function and the reception related to the public opening of the memory box can differ significantly. For instance, the speaker wants to imply a certain meaning with the usage of a specific *topos*, yet his audience may associate different things with this *topos*. *Topoi* may also have some media-specific traits or follow conventions of a specific (literary) genre. The person opening the memory box may aim to emphasise some aspects of the *topos*, but is not able to control completely the associated interpretative process.

*Topoi* as research objects are often approached by the principles taken from the *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history),<sup>3</sup> i.e. concentrating on the change of meaning over time and the relevance of *topoi* for the study of society and structures. Compared to this, the concept of memory box concentrates on

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3 See KOSELLECK, 1972, especially pp. XXIf.

selected moments of openings and their contexts, demanding a broader selection of sources than mere *Höhenkammliteratur*. The sources used in the following articles include images, material sources, not-so-well known texts or broadly circulated texts, which are almost forgotten today. The concept concentrates on very brief moments in time instead of developments of a *topos* from its beginning to the present. A more profound understanding is also reached by contextualising the moment of opening and making it thus comparable to other openings.

The separation of form (memory box) and content (assigned meanings) – or *signifié* and *significant* following Ferdinand de Saussure – relate the concept of *topoi* as a memory box also to semiotics.<sup>4</sup> As the sign is the unchangeable container, the denotations consist of a fixed core, but are mutable. While this belongs to the field of semantics, the relation between signs and agents using these is the subject of pragmatics. The receiving audience is part of a cultural system who shares a certain knowledge how those signs have to be understood which, however, does not prevent misunderstandings. Therefore, in both concepts the usage, its understanding and the actors are central aspects. Often, those signs are regarded as symptoms of something else, i.e. as indicators of the cultural context to which they belong. Therefore the local and temporal setting of the sign (or box) and how this influences the (change of assigned) meanings and connotations is part of this field of research, especially when the signs are read as indexes, instead of symbols or icons<sup>5</sup>.

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The following articles all look at certain *topoi* as memory boxes that are opened at various moments in the past.

Alexandra Schäfer focuses on the use of topical elements in the representation of massacres in the French Wars of Religion. What makes a massacre recognisable as such? She therefore closely examines the different layers of argumentation in the painting of the *St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre* by François Dubois, a French Reformed refugee in Geneva.

Kristina Müller-Bongard refers to martyrdom as a memory box and the martyr as its agent (of mediation) by using the characteristic practices of a memory box – conserving, collecting, transferring, producing – to test the

4 See KJØRUP, 2009, p. 14; also SAUSSURE, 1998.

5 See KJØRUP, 2009, pp. 7-9, 46; also PEIRCE, 2000.

concept by way of an iconic case study. Therefore, she looks closer at the sixteenth-century martyrdom cycle in the English Jesuit College in Rome and its different use of martyrdom to build religious, social and symbolic capital to shape a collective memory.

The article by Asko Nivala analyses Friedrich Schlegel's reception and usage of the *topos* of Golden Age (*goldenes Zeitalter*). Nivala studies this *topos* by focusing on four relevant moments during which this very famous memory box of Western civilisation was disclosed: Hesiod in ancient Greece, Roman Virgil, eighteenth-century neoclassicism and finally early nineteenth-century German Romanticism. This article researches Schlegel as a literary agent who both received many past features of this literary figure, but simultaneously revised this *topos* according to the needs of his time.

Cathleen Sarti concentrates on various openings of the memory box of providence from the sixteenth century until the twenty-first. She particularly focuses on the changes of meaning from a theological to a mostly political concept and the deeply intertwined mixture of religious, cultural and political meaning. The article shows the multiple re-fillings of this memory box and their consequences for later opening moments of this box.

The common denominator of all four articles in this section is their focus on the reception of *topos* rather than its production. Typically, the first creation of a *topos* is lost in a mythical past; nonetheless, almost all sharing the same cultural tradition understand its usage at least roughly. When studying the act of reception, the articles will analyse the displacements of the memory box in a diachronic perspective. Hence, the cognitive surplus of the concept of memory box is its provision of a tool to understand the simultaneous process of renewing old as well as adding new meanings based on a unique historical situation of disclosing a memory box.

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