

Artefacts as a Memory Box

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The following section of the book discusses material artefacts¹ as memory boxes. Compared to personalities and especially to topoi, artefacts are something quite concrete. Because of their material nature, it is at first sight perhaps easier to understand the “memory boxness” of artefacts than the other two themes analysed in the previous articles. Artefacts are something you can touch, literally remove from one place and time to another and in some cases even open up like an actual box. These material features are not, however, all that is needed in order to be able to approach an artefact as a memory box.

As Jörg Rogge and Hannu Salmi mention in the general introduction to this book, the concept of the memory box is based on the idea of isolation. Something is separated from its surroundings, isolated from its original (cultural) context. This isolation creates the boxness and is essential in the process of an artefact becoming a memory box. This can happen in a twofold manner: On the one hand, particular cultural practices in the past isolate memories and make them transferable and, on the other, the opening or recognition of a memory box is a momentum of isolation.

Of course, all artefacts can, in one way or another, be seen as access points to the past; they are *Überreste*² (remains) of yesterday. The materiality of the artefacts needs to be pointed out here: Many of them last longer than human life, either on purpose or accidentally. However, memory box is a specific form of *Überrest*. It is a carrier and activator of memories from the times gone, not just a passive remain.

1 The concept *artefact* is defined here as something artificial, manufactured by man.

2 See for example OPGENOORTH/SCHULZ, 2010, pp. 49-55, 86-179.

An artefact that has become a memory box thus differs from other artefacts in a sense that it is filled with specific meanings. Displacement or transfer activates it and opens up new layers, new content that was not visible or did not even exist before. Artefacts must also have the potentiality of being culturally shared before one can refer to them as memory boxes; it is possible to identify certain interests around them.

One important and differentiating factor is the question of agency. All artefacts analysed in the following articles have an easily identifiable “agent” who originally produced the memory box in question – be it an author, a film maker, a diarist, a politician or a political activist. The point of view of the producers and/or users is known. As the articles by Juhana Saarelainen and Hannu Salmi convey, in some cases also the materiality itself can be seen as an agent.

To sum up, an artefact is not a memory box if it is not possible to assign it specific meanings or content. Memory box is a combination of content and form – in an artefact itself there is only a form that structures and carries the box. In order to be approached as a memory box, an artefact must have the potential of becoming culturally shared. It has to be in a specific form and, above all, it needs to become public.

However, this publicity does not necessarily have to be very wide. In some cases, the public can be just a few people somehow associated with the memory box and/or its maker. It is even possible that this audience is the maker her/himself, opening up her/his creation after some time, living in different circumstances compared to the time when the memory box in question was produced, and attaches new meanings, adds new layers to the box. Some memory boxes get their meaning from collective memory³ but some include more individual memories. Be it collective or individual, this memory has to become communicated somehow. To draw on Jan Assmann’s notions, memory boxes can be interpreted as vehicles between *communicative* and *cultural memory*.⁴

The authors of the articles in this section approach artefacts as memory boxes from various angles. The articles also vary in their time period and geographical context.

3 More about collective memory and construction of reality see BEREK, 2009. See also introduction.

4 See introduction for more discussion on these concepts.

Juhana Saarelainen centres on Finland in the nineteenth century. Saarelainen's topic is the Finnish national epic Kalevala as a memory box. In his article, he discusses the cultural historical context of transforming the Finnish oral culture into literary culture and its influence on national identity. Saarelainen focuses on Kalevala and its compiler Elias Lönnrot as an agent in this transfer.

Hannu Salmi also has a Finnish memory box as the theme of his article. Salmi's artefact of interest is the compilation film *Finland* from 1911. This compilation of 30 short Finnish travel films was produced for a travel fair in Germany. After the fair and a couple of showings in Helsinki, the film suddenly disappeared and was lost until several decades later. In Salmi's article, the isolation of the memory box from its original context is thus an especially important theme. Salmi focuses both on the spatial itinerary of this memory box between cultures (Finland and Germany in 1911) and on its travel through time from 1911 to the present day.

Anna-Leena Perämäki's article takes the reader from Finland to France during the Second World War. Perämäki discusses the idea of diary as a memory box. She especially focuses on two diaries from the 1940s kept by two young Jewish women, Hélène Berr and Elisabeth Kaufmann. The women lived and wrote their diaries in German-occupied Paris, Kaufmann also during her flight to the French countryside. Like Saarelainen, Perämäki concentrates on the moment of creating a memory box, a diary in this case. She opens up and analyses the many layers and places of cultural transfer encapsulated in this multi-faceted memory box at the time it was produced.

Books, films and diaries can have an ability to resist time, but Jörg Rogge has taken an even more durable and long-lasting artefact under his examination. Rogge's memory box is the coronation stone of the Scots. He points out how this stone has been transferred several times in different political and cultural contexts. The stone is a memory box that stores ideas about the political order on the British Isles over the time period of 700 years. Rogge analyses specific moments of opening this box in different phases of the history of English-Scot-relations, especially in the twentieth century.

The articles introduced above comprise a selection of unique artefacts and perspectives. However, in one way or another, all authors deal with the questions of agency, publicity and communicative and/or cultural memory. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, those three concepts are fundamental in the analysis of artefacts as memory boxes. Nevertheless, in addition to playing

with abstract concepts, each writer of the following articles has the concrete, material world of artificial objects as her/his starting point. More than any other section in this book, the materiality of the memory boxes analysed here brings this section closer to the original meaning of the word “memory box”⁵, an often wooden keepsake box used to store special mementos.

List of References

- BEREK, MATHIAS, Kollektives Gedächtnis und die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Erinnerungskulturen, Wiesbaden 2009.
- OPGENOORTH, ERNST/SCHULZ, GÜNTHER, Einführung in das Studium der Neueren Geschichte, Paderborn 2010.

5 See introduction.