

Introduction – Art and media-based forms of engagement

Remembrance of the mass crimes of the Nazis – the Shoah, the Pora-jmos, euthanasia, forced labor, persecution of homosexuals, communists and other stigmatized groups, ostracism and disenfranchisement – is currently in a period of upheaval. It is marked by at least three changes.

The first major change is the passing of the people who lived through these crimes, which means that the eyewitnesses will soon all be gone. This development has been discussed for many years now and is described as a threshold event. However, we still need to see what form remembrance will then take when it shifts entirely to secondary witnesses and the next generations.

Second, a presumed consensus about the culture of remembrance is under attack by right-wing populists, right-wing extremists and authoritarian influences. Prompted not least of all by this development, one must ask to what extent the culture of remembrance has ever been supported by society at large. Right-wing agents question remembrance work, including the historical events themselves, and threaten or attack memorial sites and their employees. Antisemitic, racist, sexist, anti-queer and social Darwinist violence is on the rise.

And third, digitization is bringing enormous changes that also apply to remembrance and the engagement with history. Communication, social relations and societal processes of negotiation and defense are developing new dynamics and interdependencies in conjunction with changing forms of media. New technologies, formats, applications and platforms are bringing new ways of narrating and communicating. They often elicit mixed responses. For some people they represent shining hopes for the future, yet for many others they threaten time-honored practices once considered established.

Whether or not such concerns are justified, we as artists, scientists, educators or members of government and civil society are called upon to shape this period of upheaval. It is essential to actively engage with new possibilities instead of opposing all changes in the name of conservation and claiming timeless validity for the achievements of

remembrance culture. It is important to keep an eye on both the past and the future, and to utilize the utopian potential of remembrance. Memories, and the images of who we were, not only help determine who we want to be as a society. The remembered past also serves as a guide for action in the present and the future. This is often reduced to the formulation “learning from history”, which has a schoolroom quality and suggests conscious and targeted action. These processes, however, are not only conscious and marked by cognitive learning. In fact, both emotional and moral conditioning play important roles. It is also important to forge connections with the past. And here we already see that art-based forms of remembrance – including their appeals to emotion, their plurality of interpretation, and their openness and aesthetic design – acquire a special form of potential.

It pays to view art’s plurality of interpretations not so much as a risk that recipients might draw purportedly incorrect conclusions but instead as a special opportunity for remembrance. In this plurality, one is called upon to place oneself in relation to history and to conduct oneself accordingly, or in other words to take an active stance. This is shown by educational approaches such as the *stolpern* theater project, whose young participants built bridges among the past, present and future. In developing their theater production, they used their own experiences of discrimination as material, engaged with the experiences of different marginalized groups, and researched the stories of those persecuted by the National Socialists. This “positioning of the self” acquires a corporeal dimension in augmented and virtual-reality formats, one that extends beyond linear narratives in many respects and opens spaces where new meaning is conveyed to the bodies of recipients who enter into the narratives and experience them in physical ways. They thereby assume an active stance vis-à-vis the medium and the remembered narrative(s).

The focus on new media in remembrance work does not mean, however, that old formats have served their time. Moreover, one should keep in mind that what are considered to be new media are often the latest exemplars of lengthy traditions. For example, people persecuted by the Nazis used not only texts to grapple in very immediate form with their situations. Individuals in concentration and death camps often also used small narrative sequences of images. These pictorial forms of witness can thus be viewed as precursors to iconic comics about the Shoah such as *Maus*, as shown by Emily Allegra Dreyfus. In addition, they might be apprehended in visual relation to films, which put similarly evocative, framed individual images on storyboards into motion. The multiplicity of meaning in audiovisual remembrance therefore arises not only from the respective medium or open quality of individual works. With single works standing in extended traditions

and relations to other works and thus reaching out past themselves, audiovisual remembrance moves beyond the pure transmission of historical facts.

Art-based and audiovisual remembrance projects can therefore be understood less as representations of history than as ethical and aesthetic practices of remembrance. Ideally they narrate, negotiate and explore the meaning and scope of what is remembered on into the present, while trying out new ideas and approaches. As such, new technologies and formats are not only connected with new questions, but also and especially with matters that have long been discussed: what can be shown and what cannot be shown, the limits of what can be shown and narrated in certain forms of media, what is appropriate, the relation between proximity and distance which is often linked with that between emotionalization and critical reflection, and not least of all, what counts as the present and how that always marks our view of the past and encodes itself into our media.

Stefan Börnchen uses the *Spirou* comics to show how child-oriented but also highly presentist narratives about the Nazis and the Shoah provide opportunities for identification on the one hand but can also reduce and distort historical complexity. For her part, Michaela Pnacek(ova) focuses on the potential and the challenges of virtual reality and artificial intelligence when transferring remembrance work into immersive and participative as well as ethically sensitive spaces of experience.

In their very different approaches, the following articles by Emily Allegra Dreyfus, Stefan Börnchen, Michaela Pnacek(ova), Mai-An Nguyen and Matthias Heine highlight the diversity of artistic, popular culture-based and technological approaches to the history of National Socialism. Together, they show that remembrance culture is not bound by a fixed repertoire of specific forms but rather is constantly inventing itself anew – also and especially in art – in the charged interplay of historical consciousness, aesthetic practice and the societal issues of today.

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