

**Micha Edlich**

## **An Invitation to Memory Studies**

- Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*. Translated by Sara B. Young. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. 224 S. [Preis EUR 25,57] ISBN: 978-0-230-29745-6.

Contemporary culture has, as Astrid Erll convincingly shows in her recent monograph *Memory in Culture* (2011), become increasingly preoccupied with memory in its various forms and guises, and as, for instance, responses to the Holocaust, 9/11, and other highly mediated historical events indicate, »memory discourses and practices are increasingly linked across the globe« (4). To Erll, »Memory« has become a truly transnational phenomenon« that warrants sustained critical attention from scholars working in the field of memory studies (4). She argues that the seemingly ever-increasing visibility of memory studies in the academy must likewise be understood as a response as well as a contributing factor to what she describes as a global turn toward memory, a shift that also results from, in part, the emergence of new media such as the Internet. In light of these developments, it certainly comes as no surprise that there is an expanding international market for scholarly publications that aim to assess memory studies for a broad variety of receptive audiences and that seek to facilitate further critical engagement with this field. Despite minor shortcomings, *Memory in Culture* accomplishes all of these objectives.

Erll's monograph, which was initially published as *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung* in 2005 and elegantly translated into English by Sara B. Young for inclusion in Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies series, represents a thoroughly updated and concise introduction to memory studies and, as such, a welcome contribution to this »vast, heterogeneous, and constantly evolving research field, which has taken on a markedly international and interdisciplinary shape« over the past several years (viii). One of the primary purposes of Erll's book, which is partly built on her earlier contributions to the field, is to synthesize these recent developments and new directions in memory studies that occurred after the publication of *Kollektives Gedächtnis* and to lay the groundwork for further scholarship across disciplinary boundaries and national borders. In order to achieve these ambitious goals, the present volume attempts to »record its richness and, by charting the concepts developed in disciplines as far apart as cultural history and the neurosciences, enable dialogue among memory researchers and provide access for those who are new to the field« (viii). *Memory in Culture*, which clearly reflects Erll's situatedness in the German academy and in media studies (cf. 175), extends this broad invitation by presenting an ultimately persuasive argument in favor of a broad understanding of (cultural) memory studies.

Before she introduces her productive and inclusive proposal concerning the field, Erll briefly clarifies her terminology, succinctly summarizes the history of memory studies, and convincingly assesses the various contributions of various disciplines, for example literary studies, neurosciences, or anthropology. After offering a reasonable case for the significance of memory studies and providing a helpful preview to her effectively organized monograph in the introduction, Erll launches into a brisk but never superficial survey of the field in the second chapter. Her engagement with the seminal work from the 1920s by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (cf. Erll 14–18, 21–22) and by German art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg (19–22) is as nuanced as her evaluation of major contributions by the French historian Pierre Nora (cf. 22–27) as well as by the German Egyptologists and

cultural critics Aleida and Jan Assmann (cf. 27–37). While the publications of the last three scholars all contributed to the emergence of memory studies proper in the 1980s, Erll spends considerable time with the arguments put forth by Aleida and Jan Assmann, in part because these ideas considerably shape her own perspective on cultural memory as outlined in the second half of *Memory in Culture*.

In the third chapter, aptly entitled »The Disciplines of Memory Studies«, Erll addresses the numerous and sometimes conflicting perspectives on memory in fields as diverse as history, sociology, psychology, or literary and cultural studies, and she elucidates the connections between the term *memory* and related contested categories such as history, trauma, nostalgia, or the archive. Her survey of critical debates and developments is impressive for its breath, depth, and concision, but it is important to note that this chapter does not only deal with »the approaches to memory taken within specific disciplines« but also aims to assess »the possibilities of designing interdisciplinary and integrative models of memory in culture« (38). While she acknowledges that there are, and most likely always will be, insurmountable differences between many disciplines and their respective approaches to memory and that future critics are unlikely to develop a truly interdisciplinary »super theory« of memory« (94), Erll correctly points to considerable overlap between many of the fields discussed in this chapter and thus carefully prepares her readers for her subsequent argument for transnational memory studies predicated on an inclusive understanding of the term *memory*. In her nuanced engagement with global, postcolonial, or transnational memory studies (cf. 61–66), for example, she lists shared concerns and suggests a number of projects that differ considerably in terms of scope and difficulty. Some of the smaller projects proposed in this section (as well as elsewhere in her book) seem manageable enough for newcomers to the field; many of the challenging critical and theoretical problems identified by Erll will, however, certainly require consideration (and collaboration) by established scholars. In general, »The Disciplines of Memory Studies« and the preceding two chapters of *Memory in Culture*, which taken together represent more than fifty percent of the text, are exemplary in their perceptive engagement with the subject matter, as they are simultaneously accessible for newcomers, yet sophisticated enough for insiders, and, as intended, rich in terms of possibilities for the kind of scholarship Erll envisions for the future.

The fourth chapter represents a subtle shift in terms of purpose, a shift from introductory overview to critical intervention, as Erll introduces her distinct contribution with *Memory in Culture*, which is, as indicated above, meant to move memory studies forward. Her »heuristic model of cultural memory . . . is rooted in anthropological and semiotic approaches to culture, but at the same time it should leave room for as many points of contact with other approaches as possible« (95). Erll defines cultural memory as follows:

The umbrella term ›cultural memory‹ unites all possible expressions of the relationship of culture and memory—from *ars memoriae* to digital archives, from neural networks to intertextuality, from family talk to the public unveiling of a monument. Cultural memory can thus broadly be defined as the sum total of all the processes (biological, medial, social) which are involved in the interplay of past and present within sociocultural contexts. It finds its specific manifestation in memory culture. (101)

Erll spends the rest of the chapter clarifying many of the premises on which this very inclusive definition is based, for instance by developing her line of argument concerning the connection between the individual and cultural levels of memory. In general, her explanations in Chapter IV are nuanced, reasonable, and accessible even without the admittedly rather helpful figures and tables, and yet one cannot help but wonder whether the broad scope suggested by the term *cultural memory* may, at some point, become too inclusive, too fuzzy, and thus lose its vital function as a starting point for interdisciplinary work. Due to a very strong emphasis on categorization and definitions, this chapter of *Memory in Culture* also feels, at times,

somewhat repetitive, and several of the helpful albeit rather short examples could and possibly should be expanded to fully convey the possibilities of Erll's approach.

In »Media and Memory«, the fifth chapter of *Memory in Culture*, Erll convincingly draws on her background in media studies and demonstrates the intertwined histories of media and memory as well as of media studies and memory studies. While this kind of insight may seem, at first, self-evident, Erll's interrogation of the interfaces between these areas offers a veritable cornucopia of compelling insights along the way. For example, Erll complicates common conceptions concerning the processes of mediation, for instance through the medium of photography, by insisting on the importance of »the twin dynamics of premediation and remediation«, that is, »the medial preformation and re-shaping of mnemonic images and narratives . . . which links each individual representation of the past with the history of mediated cultural memory« (142–43). Erll illustrates this dynamic by referring to Richard Drew's photograph of a man falling from one of the towers of the WTC during the terrorist attacks on 9/11, an iconic image that has become part of contemporary cultural memory and related vocabularies through complex global processes of mediation and that draws on and evokes already available »schemata«, representations, and texts (142). In addition to illuminating examples such as this one, the fifth chapter of *Memory in Culture* also suggests a variety of projects that would, in one way or another, certainly involve interdisciplinary work in light of recent explorations of the postcolonial, the global, cosmopolitanism, or planetarity.

Moving from a general discussion of media and specific examples such as film or photography in Chapter V to the distinct features of »Literature as a Medium of Memory« in Chapter VI, Erll specifically addresses the likely concerns and questions by one major target audience for her book, namely students and scholars in the field of literary studies. While it may again seem obvious that there is a close connection between literature and memory, it is up to Erll to revisit several important key debates in literary studies concerning issues such as literariness, referentiality, or reception and to assess the distinct cultural work of literature in the general context of cultural memory. Drawing especially on the insights of Aleida and Jan Assmann as well as the contributions to narratology by Ansgar Nünning and returning to some of her theoretical observations in the preceding chapters, she highlights the »function of literature as a media framework and as a generator of cultural schemata« (170). As this phrase already indicates, Erll acknowledges the distinct contributions of literary studies to memory studies to date, but she also indicates that her understanding of cultural memory is likely to lead to a tremendous shift concerning the functions and status of both literature and literary studies:

Conceiving of ›literature as a medium of cultural memory‹ requires a rigorous conceptualization of literary works. It means envisioning literature as a part of memory culture, entangled in its social, medial, and mental dimensions. It also calls for a nuanced view, and to some extent entails a modification, of basic assumptions made by traditional literary theory, for example, regarding the clear separability between text and context, literature's (non-)referentiality, actual reading practices (which are in dire need of rigorous study), or the alleged stability and unchangeability of literary works. (171)

While one could well argue that the »traditional literary theory« evoked here by Erll has—due, in part, to the emergence of memory studies, but also due to several other developments in literary and cultural studies—already effectively ceased to exist, her point is nonetheless well taken, and it seems very likely that future scholarship on memory will continue to affect many of the debates in literary studies mentioned above. *Memory in Culture*, then, represents a timely critical intervention, and Erll's consideration of literature and/as memory does provide several valuable ideas as starting points for further investigations in this respect.

In »Afterword: Whither Memory Studies?«, the concluding chapter of her monograph, Erll again not only emphasizes the important contributions of memory studies to a variety of

disciplines, but she also repeats her call for further interdisciplinary work across national borders and for investigations that engage with the issue of memory with the help of post-national frameworks. While Erll's own contribution to the debate very much reflects her own critical and national location—and she most likely should not only acknowledge but also engage with her own situatedness to a greater extent than she does here—*Memory in Culture* nonetheless accomplishes what it sets out to do. It convincingly introduces new audiences to the field of memory studies and clearly facilitates discussion among those who have already grappled with categories such as memory, trauma, or the archive from their respective disciplinary and institutional positions in the academy. Erll's argument in favor of an inclusive understanding of cultural memory and memory studies, as developed particularly in the second half of *Memory in Culture*, is worthwhile, and it seems likely that many readers will take Erll up on her offer and join an increasingly interdisciplinary and international conversation about memory culture and cultural memory.

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