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The Dynamics of Postmemory

In much of her recent work, Ann Rigney has powerfully reconceptualized our understandings of cultural and collective memory as a dynamic practice, rather than a static storehouse and as a process of circulation, transmission, community building through "an exchange of memories," (Rigney 2005, 15) rather than a series of sites and monuments that unchangingly and continuously recall a memorable past. As a process and practice, it is shaped by structures of mediation and remediation: "To the extent that cultural memory is the product of representations and not of direct experience, it is by definition a matter of vicarious recollection" (Rigney 2005, 15). These are structures that in her single-authored and collaborative publications, Rigney has carefully analyzed through examples from public commemoration, literature, and art.

There are deep resonances here with my own work on postmemory, resonances I would like to explore by reflecting on the temporal dynamics of postmemory (Hirsch 2012). A distinctive feature of Ann Rigney's conception of memory dynamics is that, unlike so much of the work in the field, including my own, it does not specifically focus on trauma and what has come to seem as its inevitable haunting return. Thinking about time as a form of traumatic return has in large part displaced conceptions of time as linearity, progress, and futurity but, without denying the effects of traumatic histories, Rigney contests these conceptions of time from different and more future-oriented directions.

Postmemory is indeed a "vicarious" form of recollection, a product of transgenerational mnemonic transmission of powerful collective experiences – catastrophes such as war, genocide, and extreme violence, but also transformative political movements such as coups, revolutions, and uprisings. Descendants of survivors of these monumental events re-experience them not as memories, but as postmemories; they are belated, mediated, temporally and qualitatively removed.

Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before – to events that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these events were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation – by what Robert Jay Lifton has called "formulation" (Lifton 1979, 152).

In recent years, neuroscientists have substantiated these accounts by showing how trauma, specifically, can be transmitted across generations epigeneti-

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cally. Thus parental trauma can be encoded in children's DNA structures, making them more vulnerable to traumatic and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Although this research is in its very beginnings and not yet conclusive, it does corroborate the accounts of members of what the writer Eva Hoffman has called the "postgenerations."

And yet, I have argued, the family is not the exclusive site of this powerful form of transfer. Family life, even in its most intimate moments, is imbricated in a collective imaginary shaped by a shared archive of stories and images, by public fantasies and projections. These inflect the dynamics by which individual and familial memories are transmitted. And this archive is often framed as familial, even if it exceeds the family frame. And yet, the temporality of mnemonic transmission is not uni- but multi-directional.

As Rigney so rightly suggests, different cultural artifacts and practices, aesthetic and institutional structures, tropes and technologies, mediate the complex psychology of postmemory, as well as the continuities and discontinuities between proximate and more distant witnesses. Across the globe, contemporary writers, filmmakers, visual artists, memorial artists, and museologists have forged an aesthetic of postmemory. They have sought forms through which to express the gaps in knowledge, the fears and terrors, that ensue in the aftermath of trauma, the excitements and disappointments that follow revolutions. Some of these tropes and artistic strategies have been remarkably consistent, constructing a global memory and postmemory aesthetic that both bridges and occludes political and cultural divides. The wall of photos at the Museo de la Memoria in Santiago, Chile, recalls similar walls in memorial museums in Phnom Penh, Paris, Amsterdam, and New York. Lists of names recall victims of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the 11 September 2001 bombings, and more. Memorial artists like Horst Hoheisel have worked in Germany, Argentina, and Cambodia; Daniel Libeskind in Berlin, Stockholm, and New York. Their memorial sites are dominated by idioms of trauma, loss, and mourning, invoking tropes of absence and silence, unknowability, and emptiness. They tend to rely on archival images and documents, highlighting ghosts and shadows, gaps in knowledge and transmission. They use projection, reframings, recontextualization. They juxtapose or superimpose past and present, without allowing them to merge.

What are we to make of the remarkable aesthetic continuities in the arts of postmemory across the globe? The challenge of allowing connections between divergent histories and the structures of transmission they engender to emerge is to avoid obscuring important historical specificities and particularities. But there is another challenge as well, and that is, amid the aesthetics of loss and mourning, to make space for memories of resistance, activism and the anticipation of change – to mobilize memory and postmemory oriented not only to the past but also toward

a more hopeful future. To demand accountability and justice, as, for example, do the groups of mothers who walk or sit in squares from Buenos Aires to Istanbul, memorializing their disappeared children by holding photographs of them from a time before their violent disappearances or deaths. These photographs acquire new meanings every time they are held up counterintuitively to demand that their subjects, long dead, be brought back alive. In the words of the Argentinian madres: "Reaparición con vida."

In collaboration with Leo Spitzer, I have sought to define such a potentially reparative aesthetic through a notion of "liquid time" derived precisely from archival photographic images and the work of photo-based artists and my reflections here build on this earlier collaborative work (Hirsch and Spitzer 2019; 2023). Archival images are powerful media of postmemory both as remnants from a powerful past and as historical actors whose role in mobilizing what Rigney terms "memorability" also shifts as they circulate over time (Rigney 2016).

It might seem counter-intuitive that a still photograph would be open to multiple temporalities and possibilities, rather than immortalizing a single instant in time. In *Camera Lucida,* Roland Barthes famously wrote that "The photograph does not call up the past. [. . .] Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory [. . .] but it actually blocks memory, [and] quite quickly becomes a counter-memory" (Barthes 1981, 61). It does so through its power to occlude other forms of recollection. And yet, for Barthes, photography performs the inexorable passage of time. "By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist)," he writes, "the photograph tells me death in the future" (1981, 65). Indeed, Barthes sees time itself as a photographic punctum that confronts what he terms the "this will be" with the "ça a été," the "this has been." Photographic time is thus both sequential – the record of singular moments irrevocably past – and recursive, evolving in haunting returns and after-effects. These powerful "emanations" of the past in the photograph that Barthes discusses through the "punctum" open a way to see time's affective dimensions, available in photography as forms of nostalgic, melancholic memory. (Barthes 1981, 80, 82, 91). Indeed, for Barthes the photograph itself remains the same: static, unaltered, and unalterable. What changes is its effect on us, our response to it, what, dynamically, it brings forth from the past. But is the photograph static? Isn't it also contingent and, as such, malleable? If it is, then it would also allow us to re-envision the history from which it emerges, and to discover within it different possibilities and potentialities.

Walter Benjamin's notion of the "optical unconscious" presents photographs in this contingent way, evoking minute invisible elements in the photographed scene that the camera can bring to visibility. "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses," he writes (Benjamin 1969, 237). The camera can reveal what we see without realizing it, just as

psychoanalysis can uncover what we know without knowing that we do. The optical unconscious disturbs and expands conscious acts of looking and the smooth surfaces of photographic images. As images circulate, their unconscious does as well.

We can look at a photograph not only from the perspective of the photographer who controls the lens and shutter, or the institution that sponsors the photographic event, but also from that of the photographed persons at the time of the event and, perhaps, even from that of their descendants or correspondents, later, at different moments of retrospection. By unsettling the power and authority of the photographer over the image, a multiplicity of meanings can emerge from the encounter of different subjects, at the time of the image's making and subsequently. We might thus argue that the photograph anticipates a future viewer who will see in it what we could not detect at the time of its making. As Benjamin writes:

> No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the innocuous spot where the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (Benjamin 1931; 1999, 510)

It is this act of looking back that defines the "liquid" temporality of postmemory. The photographer Jeff Wall, in a 2007 essay on "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," bases his reflections about the "liquid intelligence" of the analog photograph on the darkroom process in which both the photographic film and the photosensitive paper onto which the film's negative image is subsequently projected is immersed in a liquid developing solution. There, each can change, often in subtle and unexpected ways, before being chemically "fixed" – again through immersion in liquid – into perpetuity. Wall wanted to complicate the pervasive view of photography as an inexorable apparatus and tool of ideological power and domination, a medium of representation which, when "fixed into permanence," embodies a "dry," and thus unalterable optical and technological "intelligence." Instead, in highlighting its "liquid intelligence" – its fluidity – he reveals the emanating connection of the photograph to nature and water: the contingencies, possibilities, potentials, and affective registers inherent in the process of image-making. In what we, therefore, want to think of as "liquid time," photographs continue "developing" when they are viewed and reviewed by different people in different presents. "Unfixed," remediated in the work of memorial artists, they remain open, active, dynamic, acquiring new meanings and associations in new circumstances, or returning to potential meanings they contained before they were immersed in the fixing solution.

How, when we look at photographs from places and times lost through violence and displacement, can we access those contingencies and potential alternative meanings? Such a fluid and multi-temporal reading displaces the retrospective gaze, shadowed by a known and predetermined outcome, that has dominated critical approaches to images of past violence, dislocation, war and genocide, as well as the canon of memory studies. It inspires us to think even further back: to the event itself and to the time before the shutter click that extracted the image. How would this dynamic rewinding alter the image and enlarge and multiply its temporalities? Might it mitigate the inevitable return of trauma? The liquid time of photography as a medium of memory and postmemory leaves space for what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has called "potential history" – not just what was, but what might have been, and what might potentially be.

Thus archival photographs show us not only the past in which they were taken, but, through liquid time, also the present and the futures contained in that past, futures that their diverse subjects may have envisioned when they stood facing the lens. Breaking out of entrenched memories and returns of traumatic pasts, we can attempt to recuperate the lost resistances, hopes and dreams that also shaped these images – hopes and dreams that were destroyed, but that can be made present again in the liquid time of dynamic memory. This, indeed, is the spirit of Ann Rigney's work on memories of activism and of memory activism oriented toward a future that is and has always been present.