Memory Boxes

An Experimental Approach to Cultural Transfer in History, 1500–2000

JÖRG ROGGE AND HANNU SALMI

A memory box, or a keepsake box, is associated with romantic fiction and childhood culture. It has often been a wooden chest, made for storing mementos. As cultural artefacts memory boxes have their own long history; they can be interpreted as artefactual expressions of the self, as vehicles of memory as well as transmitters of material reminiscences of the past to the future.

In her book *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011, originally published as *Erinnerungsräume*, 1999) Aleida Assmann points out that the Latin word for box is *arca*, the ark, which, as in the case of Noah's Ark, can be interpreted as a safe refuge. The Israelites, in turn, took the Ark of the Covenant with them into the desert in order to be able to preserve the Ten Commandments.[1] The ark, like a memory box, is a portable container that can be used to transmit memories.

It seems that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the term memory box also gained allegorical layers and the human mind was often described as a box. In 1890, *The Leeds Mercury* reported on a strange recovery of memory. The editor wrote:

1 ASSMANN, 2011, pp. 101f.

> Physicians are, I believe, able to adduce many cases in which people whose minds have, owing to some sudden shock, become, so to speak, a total blank as regards events which happened before the blow fell which upset the balance on their memory box, have had their recollections all at once restored by some old familiar sight or sound supplying the key-note, as it were, of the long-forgotten tune.[2]

Here, the human brain is like a box of memories, a fragile chest that can be emptied by a sudden shock.

Despite the fact that the history of keepsake boxes would be fascinating in its own right, this book is based on the metaphorical use of the term. The major motive for this book is the fact that a memory box offers ample possibilities for experimentation. As already the concrete use of the word refers to something (memory) being isolated from its surroundings (box) in order to make it portable, it seems possible to apply the idea of memory box in the analysis of cultural transfer. Since a memory box is a container of memories, or includes material references to memory, it can be a means for cultural transfer not only between borders in a social and geographical sense but also for temporal shifts from the past to the present and from the present to the future. Cultural transfer is often viewed from the perspective of synchronic displacements, but the notion of a memory box would also set this synchronic movement into the context of diachronic transfer.

Aleida Assmann points out, that places of memory should not be studied merely on a temporal, vertical axis, as something that derive from the past and prove to be meaningful for the future: memories also have horizontal ramifications. It is important to question the kind of spatial and material manifestations memories have. Assmann considers memory boxes to be "objects in which important documents are preserved".[3] In the book *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe* (2007), the German historian Bernd Roeck also refers to these materialisations in arguing that "there are instances of *Erinnerungsschachteln* (packets or boxes of memories): every artefact was a container which already contained legacies from the past when it was being made".[4]

2 THE LEEDS MERCURY, 12 April 1890.
3 ASSMANN, 2011, p. 101.
4 ROECK, 2006, p. 11.

Before going further, it is important to relate these thoughts to recent debates on cultural interaction. It seems that there has been a gradual change in the key concepts employed by researchers of the field. Notions such as cultural diffusion, assimilation and acculturation have been replaced to a large extent by more interactive concepts, like cultural transfer, cultural translation, cultural interaction and cultural exchange.[5] The movements between cultures are, more often than not, seen as cases of two-way traffic than unidirectional influences. The historian Peter Burke has emphasised the notion of *transculturation,* which was originally coined by the Cuban sociologist and folklorist Fernando Ortiz. Burke stresses reciprocal interaction between cultures, intercultural traffic where influences transgress borders in a two-way manner.[6] The emphasis on trans*cultural* seems to be more flexible than the concept of trans*national* that has become increasingly popular during the last decades. As the historian of technology, Erik van der Vleuten, has pointed out there are different uses of the concept transnational, stressing such features as fluidity, circulation and flow as well as connections and relationships.[7] Still, transnationalism is obviously bound together by the notions of nation and nationality and therefore cannot be applied to older history without problems. Thus, the book at hand focuses on the transcultural rather than the transnational.

Burke further supported the idea of cultural hybridity in history, the fact that there have always been flows over borders. There are manifold examples of cultural artefacts that cannot be considered as products of one single culture: they are hybrids.[8] On other hand, in order to be able to argue that there can be such things as cultural hybrids in the first place, there has to be an assumption that cultures are entities with boundaries that can be deciphered. And, further, if there are boundaries, there must be various transfer processes between cultures.

Bernd Roeck made an effort to conceptualise transfer processes in cultural interactions. As Roeck defines, cultural transfer refers to "something that has been 'transferred' from one culture to another – a process with an active giver and a completely passive receiver", while cultural exchange implies a "more dynamic process involving an interaction between 'giver' and 'receiver'".[9] To

5 WENDLAND, 2012, pp. 51-55.
6 BURKE, 1997, p. 158.
7 VAN DER VLEUTEN, 2008, p. 978.
8 BURKE, 2009.
9 ROECK, 2007, pp. 3f.

be sure, the concept of cultural transfer can be separated from the notion of cultural exchange which covers the wide array of material and immaterial flows over borders. The essential feature is not the traffic itself but the fact that cultures are transformed, and continuously transform themselves, by and with these interactions.

There are, however, two remarks to be made. In contrast to Roeck's view, cultural transfer does not necessarily imply an "active sender" or a "passive recipient". Transfer can be seen as a general concept that refers to any kind of cultural displacement: something may be transferred without active impetus, but on the other hand it may entail two-way or perhaps even multi-centred flows. This is important from the perspective of memory box as a theoretical and methodological tool: in our view, the box is an agent of cultural displacement. Again, the very notions of cultural transfer and cultural exchange seem to suggest that cultures are not open by definition but entities with borders to be transgressed.

Usually, cultural exchange and transfer have been studied as synchronic processes on a horizontal level by concentrating on those cultural entities that exist simultaneously. Here, cultural negotiation can happen on multiple levels, as suggested by the recent discussion on *histoire croisée*.[10] The aim of this collection is, however, to expand the notion of cultural transfer so that it applies also to the traffic between past and present cultures or different layers of temporality in the past. If cultural transfer is seen as an event that has its spatial ramifications in history, it also has to have an itinerary and thus a dimension in time. It is crucial to acknowledge that exchange has always a temporal perspective and, thus, can be interpreted as diachronic, vertical transfer.

In the case of past and present cultures it may of course be argued that the traffic has to be unilateral by nature, the past being able to transfer things to the future, while the present phenomena cannot be transferred to the past. Still, it is intriguing to consider those situations when, through historical writing and historical imagination, the present transfers its own cultural features into the past where they are etched into the image of the past to such an extent that these cultural representations again are seen to influence what later came into being.

In order to be able to combine the analysis of both horizontal and vertical transfers, this book covers different geographical areas in Europe and North

10 WERNER/ZIMMERMANN, 2006, pp. 30-50.

America, from Scotland to Italy and Germany and from Finland and France to the transatlantic colonies. The time span of the book runs from the Early Modern Europe to the present day. The scope of the book is however not defined by its geographical and historical focus, but by the particular notion it attempts to emphasise: the *memory* box. To be able to elaborate the concept further, it is important to consider the topical discussions on the nature of memory, especially cultural memory, in greater detail. What are memories that ultimately become boxes? In popular imagination, memory boxes are linked with the intimate aspects of memory, while the debate on history and memory has often emphasised the collective side of remembering. Obviously, memory boxes are also used to trigger memory.

During recent decades, cultural historians have focused on the pre-requisites, manifestations, functions and effects of different forms of social memory and memories within particular social groups. They have been particularly interested in the part that texts, media and artefacts play and have played, in the construction of collective memory as well as the storage and circulation of their components of knowledge.[11]

The researchers of memory and remembrance have especially focused on the functions of memory for individuals, current social groups and societies. In this respect it is important to consider the difference between collective memory and cultural memory. The term collective memory was coined by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his book *La mémoire collective* (1950). Halbwachs argued that all memory is collective memory because memory depends on social environment. Individual recollections do not just combine and thus create something that can be called collective memory. It is the social environment that shapes individual memories into a coherent collective memory. Therefore, the individual and the social memories of groups determine each other. Halbwachs' idea was that individual memory emerges from the communication of social groups, because the individual can only remember what is jointly discussed in the communication between the members of a social formation. He applied this model of collective memory to enduring, cohesive communities such as families and social classes. An individual could, therefore, contribute and subscribe to multiple collective memories, each shaped by the groups to which he or she belonged.[12]

11 LANDWEHR, 2009, p. 52.
12 GREEN, 2008, pp. 104f.

Halbwachs' notion of the collective memory was later picked up by Jan Assmann who developed the notion of communicative memory which encompasses a variety of collective memories based on everyday communication. This form of memory is similar to the exchanges in oral culture or memories collected (and made collective) through oral history methods. This form of memory needs the active participation of the members of a generation or contemporaries. Therefore this form of collective memory ranges back a mere 80 or 100 years at the most.

Instead of communicative memory, Jan Assmann is interested in, what he calls cultural memory. He applies this form of memory to the stock of knowledge responsible for the internal cohesion of societies. Cultural memory works like a filter and determines which kind of knowledge is retained through the times. This cultural memory works in a synchronic way at a specific point in history as well as in diachronic way over a longer period.[13]

Cultural memory has a particular relevance for cultures as every culture develops a connective structure which unites its members. The connective structure manages the bond within a culture by providing its members with mutual rules and values on one hand and the remembrance of a shared past – invented or not – on the other.

One important question is how cultures manage to remember over long periods of time and in which way they do so. Important means are external memories (*Speicher*) which function as carriers of cultural sense, values and traditions and can be used by contemporaries if needed. Of course, the most important of these carriers is scripture, but rituals, pictures, music, narratives and artefacts are also important because they too preserve everything that is fundamental for the identity and orientation of a community independent of its individual members.

The cultural memory is the storage location (*Speicherort*) which helps – by the use of diverse media – to produce meaning and sense from a shared history, in order to enable social action on the principle of overlapping experiences and expectations.[14]

Communicative memory and cultural memory are the two main concepts of collective memory, which are used by historians and other researchers interested in how the past was or is used by individuals, social groups, political parties, societies and so forth. In both concepts memory is a social issue, which

13 ASSMANN, 1992; ASSMANN, 2008, pp. 111-118.
14 LANDWEHR, 2009, p. 54.

helps to create meaning or interpret the world people live in. Every member of a given social group or society takes part in the communicative memory of his/her generation or family, and they use the storage locations of cultural memory which are transferred to them over the centuries.

It is obvious that cultural memory is not a unified entity controlled only by a few powerful interpreters. In principle all members of a society can take part in the dynamic process which does not refer to a simple and known past, but creates different memory cultures. There is no one dominating memory but a heterogeneity of cultural memories; they "are sites of conflicts in which the mnemonic interests of different cultural groups and their interpretations of the past are publicly negotiated and discussed in regard to their legitimate validity."[15]

Storage locations have played and are still playing a crucial role in this dynamic process and the disputes between different cultural groups about the interpretations of the past. However, in the last decade the focus on the artefacts has shifted from the cultural artefact as a product to an interest in the way those artefacts circulate and influence their environment. Ann Rigney has stressed that the dynamics of cultural memory, the process how this kind of memory has been and is created, is now more important than the products of memory.[16]

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In this book, we understand memory boxes as cultural constructions that are involved in the process of making and disputing memory but which, simultaneously, are important agents for cultural transfer over space and time. This book emphasises memory box as an idea that allows us to study the cultural processes of transfer in conjunction with cultural memory.

In our view, a memory box is based on the idea of isolation: it is applicable with cultural processes that isolate specific objects from their original context and, thus, give them a mobile nature. It is important to note that the question of isolation is something that is seen in the past, that happens as a cultural practice or through random changes in circumstances but our approach as cultural historians is strongly contextualising by nature. The question of

15 NEUMANN/ZIEROLD, 2012, pp. 225-248, quote 237.
16 RIGNEY, 2008, pp. 345-353.

isolation also involves the idea that there are breaks and ruptures in the history of remembering. Here, we see a difference to reception history or *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Instead of focussing on the layered, cumulative receptions of the particular object, the emphasis on memory boxes, or memory-box-ness, is on the ruptures of reception and concentrates on, for example, a particular moment in history when the memories about the past are revitalised or reinterpreted.

A memory box is a carrier or a container of cultural meanings, symbols, emotions and memories. It involves a particular kind of inertia in a sense that the social construction of a memory box can be seen as a set of practices that separate a group of objects from their surroundings and give them a different temporal rhythm. Memory box encapsulates cultural features for later, potential activation. In our use of the term, a memory box needs to be perceived and opened in order to be conceived as a chest of memories from the past. Its very nature as a container of "important documents", to draw on Assmann, or symbols and meanings is actualised only when it has moved forward in time and become an effective transmitter between the past and the present.

The aim of this book is to study those cultural practices that produce those isolated, accumulated and layered receptions about the past that can be called memory boxes. This aim has two edges: on one hand, we can study those practices in the past that produce memory boxes by isolating and layering memories, but on the other hand we have to first identify those memory boxes from the flow of history. How people of the past constructed memory boxes to make sense of their past and to move their interpretations and representations over to the next generations? What features do we have to find from the past in order to identify a memory box?

In the subsequent part of the book, the articles can be seen as experiments that have different focal points. It contains articles on the intentional creation (Anna-Leena Perämäki, Juhana Saarelainen, Matthias Schnettger) and the accidental creation (Hannu Salmi) of memory boxes. The book also includes cases where a particular moment in reception creates the memory-box-ness by giving a strong interpretation of its contents (Heta Aali, Kristina Müller-Bongard, Asko Nivala, Cathleen Sarti, Alexandra Schäfer). There are also articles that concentrate on the material, on the carrier of memories (Jörg Rogge, Hannu Salmi).

In our approach, memory boxes are cultural constructions of intersubjective quality. They are not personal inventions but culturally shared. This book aims to be an experiment in history, and we have tested the fruitfulness of the concept of memory box in three different settings; naturally, several other approaches may also have been possible. We aim at interpreting *topoi*, material artefacts and representations of historical figures, personalities as memory boxes. Thus, the book is divided into three sections, and each section has a separate introduction on how to approach *topoi*, artefacts and personalities as agents of diachronic and synchronic cultural transfer.

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