Body and Narrative: Mediated Memory

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When I recently moved into a new apartment I perused the old family photos, still on paper and kept in chronological order in albums. Those dating back from my own early childhood and from my parents' life before I was born are black and white, while photos of my own family life with my children are in color, but definitely not the right colors. Over the years they have taken on a reddish, brownish hue. It is not a problem; to complete my memory I can easily recall the right colors and project them on to the photos. But when I show them to my grandchildren, they react differently. Getting the colors right doesn't matter; old days just look odd anyway.

The same happens to me when I look at the old photos of my parents and the places they visited. I do not have a living memory of those places, or of my parents at that age. My dad looks like me, I think, although in reality it is the other way round. However, this is the logic of remembrance: the present of the memorial process and its memorizing subject is always

the point of departure. Moreover, I cannot control, let alone verify, the chromatic details I automatically add to the black-and-white photos, some of which are easy to apply to enliven the faded glossy pieces of paper, like the colors of sky, trees, water, and the sand on the beach. But my dad's hair before it turned grey and his pants and shoes? Or my mum's blouse, hat, and summer skirt – and the cottage behind them that belonged to friends I do not know and who are long dead? However, I cannot avoid supplementing the few colors I'm sure of with the full scale of colors for everything retained on paper. In front of a photographed scene the memorizing mind does not work in patches, but in colored 3D totalities, simply because that is the way 2D scenes emerge in our memory; we invest our own ordinary sense perceptions and they cannot avoid working in the mode of total 3D scenarios (cf. Schütz 1955). However, the relation of our sense experience to the past is still uncertain and largely imagined, as is the short narrative of the scene with my parents that I cannot help producing to make the photo come to life in my production of memory here and now. Sense experience, even in fragments, is always overdetermined by the present and the totalizing *modus operandi* of our sense perception.

I am not the only one to have made this reflection. In his essay "Imaginary Homelands" (1981) Salman Rushdie is sitting at his desk in London, looking at a small photo in black and white of his childhood home in Mumbai hanging on his wall. Returning later to Mumbai, walking up to the house, when faced with the actual colors he realizes that they had vanished, both in real life and in his recall – where the grey-toned photo has subconsciously shaped his memory in London as well as the expected sight of Mumbai revisited. When he also finds out that his father, long dead, still appears in the telephone directory alongside the old address and phone number, he has to come to terms with the fact that he

does not own or control the past, nor his own memory of it. Moreover, he also has to recognize that the present where he now lives and where his memories unfold is also not 'home' in any sense. That present memories take the shape of total scenarios does not mean they are referentially true.

It is the insurmountable abyss between past and present that releases the memorial process, not the past itself or our sense of its totality. Memory is not about total recall, but about bridging the abyss in such a way that some kind of past can cross it to be part of the present. Memory is therefore, first of all, an imaginary process with the aim of constructing not *a* or *the* past, but *my* past, different from the past of others. To make it *the* past of a culture, it takes the science of historians supported by sources and methods. However, they also come up with a construction in the present with a claim to collective validity as the right version of the past, more often than not spurring disagreements and even fights about interpretations of evidence or the rightful ownership of the past. Historians cannot do the whole job as acclaimed custodians of the past, simply because the past is not a ready-made totality stored somewhere and waiting to be called forth as evidence. It is a composition of scattered fragments from various times and places which, as fragments, are combined by a memorizing subject to co-exist in the same time and place, namely where Rushdie and I are here and now, engaged in the process of remembrance, he at his desk and I with my album. Memory is therefore always a phenomenon embodied in memorizing subjects, never disembodied or entirely absorbed by our consciousness or scholarly skills. Hence, the reliability of the reference of memory is never self-evident but always a contestable product of remembrance, making the construction of the individual or collective past a permanent battle ground for argumentation, negotiation, suppression, or censorship.

So far it is clear that remembrance as the process, memory

as the product, and the past as a constructed reference, true or not, are three interacting key terms for the understanding of memory. However, with the photos a fourth dimension is added, which plays a pivotal role in the memorial experience as an integral part of the embodied process of remembrance, both for Rushdie and myself. As a perceived reality, the photos release the memorial process and eventually force Rushdie physically to revisit Mumbai and later to write about it in his essay. It also offers some referential details which determine what the memorizing subject has to add to the tableau in the photo beyond colors: emotions, smell, and other sensorial details, bodily movements included. To use the term 'photographic memory' as the equivalent of total recall is grossly misleading. A photo, like a painting or a text, provides us with a highly selective representation of the past, shaped in accordance with the aesthetic principles and technologies of the medium in question. This media-specific process of selection and construction I will call *mediation*, in this case with the photo as one medium, language as another, and the body as a third. Mediation is never processed by one medium alone.

Mediation is not a passive, neutral, transparent process outside the objects to be mediated. In contrast, a medium understood in the classical sense of *organon* is part of the objects being mediated, and the mediation actively shapes the particularity of remembrance. A medium like Rushdie's photo is a material part both of the past to be transformed into something present by remembrance and, when pinned to his wall, also of the present. In this capacity it points to a future that is being determined by the concrete unfolding of remembrance, which in turn results in a construction of memory that triggers concrete actions mediated by the photo, in Rushdie's case his journey back to India and his future work as a migrant writer.

However, the necessarily embodied nature of the mediation

seems of no importance to Rushdie. Nevertheless, he looks at the photo, he sits at his desk, he moves to India, he points to the spatial materiality of being at home, etc. So his body is also part of the phenomena to be mediated; by this mediation his English life and his Indian background merge into Rushdie the Migrant. Most important to Rushdie himself is the language he uses in his essay to turn the imagined past, the embodied memorial process, and the present conditions of its reconstruction into a narrative that points to a future providing him with a particular identity as migrant writer. His actual practice shows remembrance to be a mediated process that involves a conglomerate of different media, most prominently body, images, and language (cf. Erll and Rigney 2009).

In the following I will discuss three authors to explore the tightly knit interconnection between media, body, and imagination in memorial processes, placing the role of mediation at the center: André Brink, Richard Flanagan, and Christos Tsiolkas, all of migrant stock like Rushdie. For them, as for Rushdie, memorial processes are not only challenged but also released by an unbridgeable gap between past and present that activates imagination before recall, and also triggers a need for memory before any actual memorial process unfolds as a particular memory, ready to be communicated to others. My readings will focus on the role of mediation, from body to language, in the threefold process of emergence of memory, construction of memory, and communication of memory.[1]

1 Memory studies have flourished over the last 20 years. Two works with a wide-ranging historical perspective are Casey 2000 and Ricœur 2000; see also the interdisciplinary anthology Erll and Nünning 2008.