Cultural memory

“The past is a different country. They do things differently there.” (L. P. Hartley)

“Those who fail to remember the past are doomed to relive it”. (George Santayana)
collective memory, power and the law

- Kiping’s story (‘How Fear Came’)
- Hathi: figure of power – figure of memory
- Piglet’s home – the meaning of the inscription
- common law as collective memory
“History is the always incomplete and problematic reconstruction of what is no longer there. Memory always belongs to our time and forms a lived bond with the eternal present; history is a representation of the past”. (Pierre Nora)

“History is St. George”. (Jeanette Winterson)
History – memory

For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life. For individual human beings this zone stretches from the point where living family traditions or memories begin - say, from the earliest family photo which the oldest living family member can identify or explicate - to the end of infancy, when public and private destinies are recognized as inseparable and as mutually defining one another ('I met him shortly before the end of the war'...). (Eric Hobsbawm: *The Age of Empire*, p. 3)
The memory boom in theory

► psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, cultural studies, politics, Holocaust studies, literary studies

► ‘memory studies’ & ‘trauma studies’: interdisciplinary fields
Monument of the German occupation of Hungary
reasons for the memory boom

► (1) crisis of narratives of progress
► (2) postmodern ideas of memory and history
► (3) memory as the key to identity
John Locke: memory as identity

► The self knows itself through its capacity to “repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first...; so far it is the same personal self.” (An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1689)

► sich erinnern, se souvenir/rappeler, recordar(se)
20th century: obsession with memory

► (1) modernity itself seen as a memory crisis
► (2) birth of the idea of collective/cultural memory
► (3) memory pervades politics, everyday life, popular culture
► (4) emphasis on malfunctionings, memory disorders (aphasia, amnesia, nostalgia, mourning, melancholia, trauma)
WW1 and modern memory

► (1) mourning; testing traditional languages of loss

► (2) testimony: trying to account for, record, archivise, testify to the slaughter

► (3) the contrary desire to forget the savagery (the price of resuming civilised existence)
WW1 and modern memory

(4) a catastrophe, a disaster → absolute separation from the past

(5) nostalgia for prelapsarian world (Edwardian England)

(6) trauma, amnesia - emblem: returning (shell-shocked) soldiers: ghosts

(7) politics of memory: memories and countermemories – spate of memorials
Hódmezővásárhely, Hungary
War memorials
Sacrario di Montegrappa
Käthe Kollwitz: *Grieving Parents* (Vladslo, Belgium)
Psychoanalysis as a discourse of memory

► Hysteria: “patients suffer from reminiscences”

► Psychoanalysis and the memory crisis

► (1) Conscious and unconscious memory

► (2) remembering as archaeological work; the sheer difficulty of remembering;

► Memory as a buried city

► alien internal images (dreams, symptoms)
Psychoanalysis as a discourse of memory

(3) the construction of the past
ongoing revision;
the past is changing

(4) trauma: the past invades the present
(remembering vs repetition)
Psychoanalysis as a discourse of memory

(5) the reinterpretation of forgetting
forgetting is not passive (‘sieve’ metaphor) but deliberate

Harald Weinrich: “With Freud, forgetting lost its innocence”

*Cui prodest?*
slips of the tongue, *déjà vu*
COLLECTIVE MEMORY

- The validity of the metaphor – who remembers?
- ‘culture of amnesia’
- ‘(post-)traumatic culture’
Maurice Halbwachs: *On Collective Memory*

- All memories are individual and collective at the same time.
- The individual mind: saturated with frameworks common to the community (dreams: fully individual memory).
- It is in the community that we acquire, recall, recognize and localize our memories.
Orwell: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

- no context or framework:

- historical past/memory: collective hallucination

- family memory: nonexistent

- “Nothing remained of his childhood except a series of bright-lit tableaux occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible”

- buying a diary, visiting the proles

- “The old man’s memory was nothing but a rubbish-heap of details”
Eperjesi Ágnes: *Family Album*

My brother and parents...
Eperjesi
Ritual as collective memory

Athens: birth of Athene’s half-human child Erichthonius

► daughters of Cecrops / disobedience

► ceremony: 2 little girls: Hersephoroi (bearers of dew) Arrhephoroi (bearers of the unspeakable)

► enactment of a mystery / of collective guilt
Ritual as collective memory

Jan Assmann - rituals: repetition and representation

appearance of writing:

imitation, performance → interpretation
collective memory

► rituals, bodily practices, performances (habits)
► places of memory; (Mary Douglas: the home as a “memory machine”)
► stories, images, texts, verbal practices (gossip)
► objects (e.g. museum collections)
► technologies of storage (archives, diaries, family photos)
Jan Assmann

communicative memory – cultural memory
Pierre Nora

- Lieu(x) de mémoire
- loss of organic remembering
Postmodern memory: nostalgia

- allure of the past - non-existent past
- technologies of reconstructing the past
- ‘Jurassic Park’ model
- Lot’s wife
- nostalgia: “history without guilt” (M. Kammen)
- “nostalgia is to memory as kitch is to art” (Charles Maier)
Postmodern memory

► Heritage culture

► Fredric Jameson: the past is reduced to a collection of styles – no genuine historicity

► Heritage: salvaging the past - staging it as a visitable experience. (Bella Dicks)

► „It is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move without bumping into a heritage site. Every legacy is cherished. From ethnic roots to history theme parks, Hollywood to the Holocaust, the whole world is busy lauding – and lamenting – some past, be it fact or fiction. (Lowenthal)
Postmodern memory/2

- Retro
- Entanglement of personal and collective pasts
- Nostalgia
- Material culture detached from the past
- Depoliticising memory
Postmodern memory/3

► Ethics and politics:
► (1) Holocaust memory as the prototype of historical memory – imperative to testify, to remember; historical memory as *trauma*
► (2) the reconstructed memory of silenced (ethnic, colonial etc) groups