

Preface

In the summer of 2003, I bought myself a digital camera; not exactly an early adaptor, I had followed the advice of relatives and friends who lauded its creative potential, assuring it would give a new impulse to my sluggish career as a snapshot photographer. Within less than a month, I had taken a couple of hundred pictures, not counting the images I had already removed from the camera or those I had deleted from my hard disk. My acquisition sparked new enthusiasm, particularly when I started to sort out and scan some old laminated pictures that had been tucked away in unsorted batches in several shoeboxes. Photoshop software enabled me to doctor, scan, and recombine old pictures into surprising contexts and opened up new vistas for future camera use. In addition to photographs, hundreds of music files on my hard disk were testimony to a previous digital discovery—the file-sharing system Kazaa—that had unlaced a peculiar craving for old songs, which I then transferred to my MP3 player. These songs, in turn, led me to dig up my almost-forgotten boxes containing handwritten letters, diaries, and notes—a discovery that made me wonder whether I should scan these items into my computer before they were completely unreadable as a result of fading ink. And finally, I had to face the hundreds of old videotapes sitting on the shelves of a large closet, gathering dust after my VCR had broken down, which prompted me to switch to a DVD recorder. The prospect of having to select and transfer hundreds of old music albums, photos, (home) videos, and letters caused a mixture of excitement and weariness. Excitement stirred because of the potential for uninhibited, nostalgic yearning while sorting through these analog items and perhaps the chance to recycle some in the creation of new memorable insights and objects. Weariness set in because I realized that such a rescue-my-past-operation would not only be time consuming,

but it also would involve agonizing decisions about what items to store and what to throw away after digitization.

At first, I tackled the problem as a practical one: a mess of objects in need of systematic sorting and filing. When I sat down to think about it, the problem was not the mess in my shoebox and by extension on my desktop; these objects and technologies generated questions concerning memory and media that were far more intricate than I had initially thought. The contents of my shoebox indeed posed the challenge of fitting digital memories into analog frames for storage and retrieval, but beyond my idiosyncratic dilemmas, it raised poignant concerns about the relation between material objects and autobiographical memory, between media technologies and our habits and rituals of remembrance. My collection of personal items made me reflect on how we present and preserve images of ourselves to others; it caused me to speculate on how private collections tap into the much larger phenomenon of communal rites of storing and retrieving. I wondered whether my switch from analog to digital memory objects was the result of a general technological-commercial push or the desire to be more creatively engaged with my treasured artifacts. The microuniverse of my shoebox opened up a Pandora's box of unexpected philosophical questions pertaining to the nature, culture, and politics of what I dubbed "mediated memories." Why and how do we create and save mediated items for later reminiscence? What is the function of mediated memories in our personal lives? What is the role of media technologies and material objects in capturing both individual and collective memory? Are analog and digital objects interchangeable in the making, storing, and recalling of memories? Do digital objects change our inscription and remembrance of lived experience, and do they affect the memory process in our brains?

Articulating these questions was a first step toward acknowledging the complexity of the term I had casually coined. "Mediated memories" refers to both to the concrete objects in my shoebox and a mental concept—a concept that encompasses aspects of mind and body as well as of technology and culture. I also realized that memory and media both comprise vast and exhaustively mined research subjects, to the extent that the terms themselves are at risk of becoming empty signifiers. To say that human memory is a complex problem is an understatement; it is such a daunting, intricate object of research that generations of scholars can hardly be

expected to map its mechanisms. Academics from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, from the biomedical sciences to cultural theory, examine how and why we remember and which basic mechanisms scaffold our processes of recollection. Neurobiologists delve into the operational physiology of memory functions as they relate to *human nature*. Basic research into genetic, neurological, and cognitive aspects of the brain helps explain the effects of injuries and disease on different types of memory. A small portion of this research targets autobiographical memory and the role of emotion in personal reminiscing. Autobiographical memory historically has been the province of psychologists, who examine its working as an aspect of *human behavior*. Cognitive philosophers and social constructivists point at the importance of *materiality and technology*—particularly media technologies and objects—when addressing the issue of memory. Perspectives magnifying memory as a feature of *human culture* prevail in the humanities, most notably in history and cultural studies. In recent years, historians have frequently commented upon the role of media in interlinking our past and present, whereas cultural theorists have engaged with questions of identity and collective memory in the wake of major historical changes, such as exile, war, or diaspora.

In facing such a complex subject as human memory, it is helpful to break apart the components of nature, behavior, materiality, and culture and to scrutinize them in isolation. But it is equally useful, at some point, to put them back together again and acknowledge their conjunction. The question of memory ties together the intricacies of the brain with the dynamics of social behavior and the multilayered density of material and social culture. The concrete contents of my shoebox, caught in a limbo between analog and digital materialization, provides a window onto contemporary debates addressing the relation between self and others, material and virtual, private and public, individual and collective. *Mediated Memories* aims to theorize our personal shoeboxes by turning them into a prism—a conceptual tool through which we can understand larger transformations currently at work in our culture. These larger transformations include but are not restricted to the issue of digitization; digitization only partly reveals the complex interconnections between mind, technology, and culture.

Before taking on specific, concrete examples of shoebox contents, I will first sketch the theoretical and paradigmatic scope of this book. The first chapter interrogates the notion of cultural memory and the role of

media in its formation. Media are pivotal to the construction of individual and collective identity—creative acts and products through which people make sense of their lives and the lives of others and connect past to future. The integration of media in the construction of memory has urged social scientists and cultural theorists to define the “mediation of memory,” a concept that is useful but often proves to be inconsistent when deployed to explain the mutual shaping of individual and collective memory. “Mediated memories,” a modified version of the mediation concept, aims to mend its conceptual flaws.

Chapter 2 addresses the “matter” memory is made of. The genetic, cellular, and cognitive dimensions of human memory are favored subjects for neurobiologists and cognitive scientists; recent research has yielded groundbreaking insights in the mutability of autobiographical memory. Philosophers of mind and social constructivists emphasize the importance of memory’s material and technological dimensions in addition to its physiological strata. And cultural theorists concentrate on the significance of sociocultural practices in the manifestation of remembrance. In other words, mediated memories are concurrently embodied in the human brain or mind, enabled by technologies and objects, and embedded in social and cultural contexts of their use. Moving from a culture in which analog memory objects (photographs, diaries, home videos, etc.) prevail to a situation where digital objects become the norm, the questions of why and how memory matters become even more poignant. Dimensions of multidisciplinary and multimodality are etched into the model of mediated memories introduced in Chapter 1 and expanded in Chapter 2; this model enables us to analyze cultural memory in transition.

The next four chapters take on specific types of contents filling our contemporary shoeboxes, each concentrating on a particular sensory mode privileged by succinct analog media. Words, sounds, still images, and moving images constitute the dominant ingredients, respectively, of diaries, audiotapes, photographs, and home movies or videos—analog items that are presently complemented by digital multimedia forms. Chapter 3 focuses on diaries and lifelogs—a type of weblog considered the digital variant of paper diaries. Long regarded as a reflective and strictly private genre, paper diaries always also had a communicative and public function. These days, the vastly popular cultural practice of blogging and the numerous possibilities for publishing lifelogs online bolster the diary’s previously

understated communicative and public functions. The Internet, with its intrinsic propensity toward sharing and instant communication, seems to undercut and yet enhance traditional diary features. Seen in this light, we can trace how new digital technologies are actually transforming our notions of privacy and openness, but they also cast a different light on the relation between personal memory and lived experience.

The next chapter, “Record and Hold,” deals with the audio component of mediated memories. Recorded popular music is vital to the construction of personal memory and individual identity as well as to the formation of collective memory and musical heritage, a heritage that has grown over time and continues to evolve. Chapter 4 examines the role of popular music in the formation of individual remembering and collective heritage. Remembering through music is more than just an individual act: we need public spaces to share narratives and build a creative commons.

Chapters 5 and 6 attend to visual modes of perception, as embodied by instruments for capturing individual lives in still and moving images. Photography has probably been the favorite medium for arresting life in its formative moments—a vain attempt to freeze time as the future unfolds. Besides its traditional function to confine the past in pictures, digital cameras are now also deployed to communicate in the language of photography and transform the act of memory into an act of experience. The malleability of memory also forms the focus of Chapter 6, but whereas the previous chapter focuses on still images of individuals, this one highlights how family life is captured in moving images. Generations of instruments (8 mm movies, video, digital video, and webcams) have delivered moving pictures of changing mores in generations of families. While digital equipment allows the skewering of diverse historical home modes, it also divulges its inherent technological ability to shape and manipulate memory.

Finally, after reviewing four concrete instances of transforming mediated memories, I return to the problem of storing and retrieving items from the shoebox and desktop. The search for an all-encompassing, universal memory machine is not exactly new; Chapter 7 recounts how memory machines have been the focus of historical and contemporary endeavors to tackle the problem of information overload in the context of personal lives. Computer scientists and engineers have proposed a range of technological solutions and also embroider on historical utopias by designing new fantastic projects that supposedly meet our desire for a comprehensive

memory apparatus. I conclude by sketching how digitization, multimediaization, and “googlization” may redefine memory, the performance of which was once consigned to the brain or, in contrast, boarded out to the machine.

In these seven chapters, I hope to provide a better understanding of cultural memory, how and why it matters, and what it means in an era of technological, social, and cultural transformation. What started out as a practical problem—the reorganization of my private shoebox filled with memory objects—gradually turned into an academic investigation, sparking profound epistemological, ontological, and pragmatic questions and resulting in the design of a theoretical model that helps analyze concrete instances of cultural memory. I have no illusion that this book provides ultimate answers to all these questions, but it is a modest proposal to rearticulate the changing meaning of cultural memory at a time of transition and bring together a number of diverging disciplinary perspectives to open up new outlooks on this fascinating subject.