Visions of transnational memory

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Abstract
The paper is a short introduction to the “global turn” in memory studies and to transnational memory in particular. Both culturalist and normative positions are presented. After the conceptual overview, there follows an analysis of two films, Auf der anderen Seite (2007) and Cache (2005), with special focus on the two notions “translocal” and “inclusive distinction”, and on the theme of an ethics and morality of memory. This is in order to explicate the usefulness and importance of the notion of transnational memory. Finally, the concluding remark is made that research into transnational memory is significant due to its recognising of small-scale trajectories and memory practices beyond the framework of the nation, and because of the subtle dialectics between an ethics and morality of memory—thus leading to a persistent “transnational monitoring” of the national as well.

Keywords: transnational memory; global memory; memory studies; memory and migration; Auf der anderen Seite; Cache

There has been an increasing dissatisfaction with the strong focus on the nation and its past in memory studies. The founding fathers of the field, Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs, with their emphasis on place and sociality has promoted studies on the memory work of nations, although that is not a necessary outcome of Nora’s and Halbwach’s positions. However, scholars such as Henry Rousso and Jay Winter have pointed out how Nora’s concept of “sites of memory”, in particular, is an exponent of classical national(ist) historiography and, according to Winter, “both announces and hastens the death of the nation-state”.1 Other recent contributions to the emergent global turn in memory studies, like that of Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad in their introduction to Memory in a Global Age, or Julia Creet’s in her introduction to Memory and Migration, point to the apparent changes in contemporary culture that is challenging memory studies; especially the view that nation and place constitutes given points of departure for the research. The nation is, following Assmann and Conrad, no longer the “natural container of memory debates” and Creet asserts that in the age of cumulative mobility “migration rather than location is the condition of memory”.2

Scholars like Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznaider, being social theorists, does not emphasise only the recent changes in contemporary society, but promote a global turn because of normative reasons in particular. Levy and Sznaider places Holocaust as a model and symbol for global memory in their quest for a transnational or global solidarity. Hence, the point is not that the Holocaust as an event constitutes a global memory as such, but their attempt is to establish a framework for a wider shared morality, a way of identifying with “distant others”, as they put it.4 This does not imply that national memory is erased or transformed, as Levy and Sznaider reminds us* also the national is a remote category and, like the global, a way of connecting the local with other localities, creating a “multiverse of particularities”, to use John Tomlinson’s notion.5 Thus, there is a divergence between the social theorists and those who could be named “culturalists”, scholars who insist upon a necessary internal bond between

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a culture and its past. Anyhow, these positions should not be taken as exclusively to each other, but rather as reminders of how any study of the past, when its being communicated further in a present, shapes the future as well.

This tension between the descriptive/empirical and normative approaches to memory studies characterises the research on transnationalism as well. In such seminal contributions like Steven Vertovec's *Transnationalism* both conceptual mappings for empirical research and normative standpoints are introduced in order, “to contribute towards a globally shared, cosmopolitan future”.6

In studies like Vertovec’s the transnational is often defined in distinction to the international, the latter being a question of interaction between governments or relations between nation-states, whereas the former deals with non-governmental actions and trajectories across national borders. Most scholars stress in particular the importance of non-state, ordinary actors and the cultural practices of the diaspora, migrant groups, and particular professions (ranging from journalists to construction workers).7 However, I doubt if a clear-cut definition is the most productive choice and procedure, instead I would support a “soft heuristics”, a careful but open-minded application of the transnational in order to allow a dialectical play between theory and material.8 For example, one important emerging field for memory studies is the relation between local practices and international implementations of various resolutions by supra-state actors like the European Union.9 The EU-politics has both local and translocal effects when being negotiated and appropriated on a national and regional level. Another topical research subject that has been suppressed due to the focus on national, collective memory is memories of migrant communities.10

The global, the international, and the national imply transnational aspects too. When looking at primary conflicts such as wars, which have usually been used as material for powerful national cultures of commemoration, it often turns out that even these national sites are transnational memory sites. The Finnish wars during the years 1939–1945: The Winter War (1939–1940), The Continuation War (1941–1944), and the Lapland War (1944–1945), involved troops from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, as well as multilingual and multinational forces fighting on the German side along with Finland, not to mention the shifting borderlands due to the various periods of peace with the Soviet Union and the change of territory due to actual battle. The administration of the Finnish camps for prisoners-of-war estimated that they had people from 87 different ethnic groups among its Soviet prisoners.11

In Finland of today, sites of war and battle have turned into mutual transnational sites—due to the post-Cold War situation—and are being visited by groups of veterans who now may share their memories of the places without the ballast of a politics of heroic national(ist) narratives. It is apparent how often it is a relief for the war veterans to be able to remember such places on their own terms, without having to frame the place and the memory of the past events according to an established cultural memory or national historiography, thus sharing the place with other witnesses, also those who were the enemies at the time. Wars are, of course, contested events; filled with memory sites to which each country lays national claims, but also local actors and a broad range of different NGOs reclaim the places. This interplay between the local and the national/inter-national is another important research area.

The social theorist Ulrich Beck has pointed out that the benefits with the transnational perspective is that “[t]ransnationality signifies forms of life and practice that replace the national either/or with a co-national both/and”.12 Thus, the transnational perspective is not anti-national, but non-national and ambivalent, taking into account the increasing mobility due to immigration/migration, dual citizenship, circulation of labour force, not to mention all those numerous historical events that have shaped new nations and altered state boundaries. Therefore it might be more productive to sort out some of those sub-areas that are of key interest for transnational memory studies. In this context I will concentrate on the “translocal”, “inclusive distinction”, and on the theme of an ethics and morality of memory.13 These notions will be exemplified by a brief reading of the German-Turkish film *Auf der anderen Seite* (dir. Fatih Akin, 2007) and the French-Austrian film *Caché* (dir. Michael Haneke, 2005).

*Auf der anderen Seite* (distributed internationally under the title *The Edge of Heaven*; the literal translation is more evocative: “on the other side”) tells the story of three broken families: the father
Ali and his son Nejat from Turkey, the mother Yeter and her daughter Ayten, and the mother Susanne and her daughter Lotte. Nejat has climbed the social ladder and teaches at the University in Hamburg whereas his retired gastarbeiter-father still lives in Bremen. Yeter earns her living as a prostitute in Bremen, disguising her Turkish background by wearing a blond wig while working; she has no contact whatsoever with her daughter who is a political activist living in Istanbul. Lotte is a student of English and Spanish at the University in Bremen, still living at home in a well-to-do suburban area in Bremen. Throughout the film these three families are set in motion, forming a complicated pattern of trajectories and encounters switching between Germany and Turkey due to political reasons (Ayten fleeing the Turkish police, Ali being deported after having unintentionally killed Yeter), due to economical reasons (which is the motive for both Ali and Yeter to move to Germany in the first place), due to encounters with each other (Lotte and Yeter meeting each other and falling in love), and due to existential reasons (Nejat leaving for Turkey in order to look for Ayten and later to repay for what his father has done; Susanne travelling to Turkey in order to mourn her daughter Lotte who has been accidentally killed).

_Auf der anderen Seite_ does not address memory directly, but implicitly through its depiction of a transnational situation and the making of a memory site due to Lotte’s death in Turkey. The father and mother of Turkish origin are marked by their past and they are longing for what they have left. This longing is not a longing for a place, but for “specific particulars” such as food, or relations of caring and closeness. Yeter longs for her daughter, whereas Ali and Nejat have grown apart, due to Nejat’s social climbing and assimilation into Germany as a University professor in Germanistik. However, Nejat’s position is that of being in-between, living on his own, unable to relate to the institutional cultural memory available (we are shown a scene in which he is indifferently teaching Goethe, while the homeless Ayten is sleeping in the lecture hall). As Nejat leaves for Turkey in order to look for Ayten, he runs into a German bookshop in Istanbul that is for sale and decides to buy it. A most suitable metaphor for his current situation or as the seller puts it: “It would be funny if a Turkish professor of German from Germany ends up in a German bookstore in Turkey”. Thus, Nejat establishes a translocal space for himself, in much the same way as Susanne and Ayten are reconciled by sharing the room in Istanbul that Lotte has rented from Nejat (Ayten is partly responsible for the death of Lotte).

Accordingly, what the director Fatih Akin does with his film is to show how translocal people find a momentary place and identity and, therefore, a memory practice by relating to each other and not to some national or cultural narrative that would transcend the intra-subjective. One of the most telling parts of this position is when Susanne and Nejat are recounting the Christian and Muslim story of Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice his son and Nejat suddenly remembers how frightened he had been for the story until his father Ali assured that in such a situation he would defy God. This relational position, which deterritorialises culture and memory from the grand narratives, is equivalent with Ulrich Beck’s notion of “inclusive distinction”. Beck asserts that identity in the transnational situation is not so much a dialectics between oppositional terms (Germany vs. Turkey for example) as one of a fundamental ambivalence, of being able to have different affinities and identities, being persistently reconstructed during one’s personal trajectories. This ambivalence—and displacement—allows that different loyalties are possible simultaneously. This mode of inclusive distinction is not beyond boundaries in any utopian way, it is not a third way either, a synthesis or imaginary solution to a contradiction, but a question of a fundamental ambivalence that also creates new boundaries. Hence, what characterises inclusive distinction is that it is both localised (and therefore able to create new meanings and demarcations) and delocalised (due to its momentary and inclusive character); thus what characterises global and transnational locality is its “translocal” quality. This is represented in _Auf der anderen Seite_ by Lotte’s rented room in Nejat’s flat, which Susanne and Ayten will share in a mutual memory of Lotte.

Michael Haneke’s film *Caché* (Hidden, 2005) is more uncompromising than Akin’s personal and existential _Auf der anderen Seite_ and it poses the classical moral question of what that ought to be remembered. Here Akin’s internal perspective, in which a group of people construct a mutual
memory, is complemented with a tale that points to the necessity of acknowledging the “other”. The film tells about Georges Laurent, a successful and admired host of a highbrow literary programme on a national TV channel, who receives anonymous videocassettes containing footage of his house. Piece by piece the video-material reveals Georges’s hidden past: when being a child his parents had adopted a boy, Majid, whose Algerian parents had been killed during the so-called Paris massacre in 1961; Georges’s jealousy and refusal to share his family causes him to set a trap in order to get Majid evicted and sent to an orphanage. As the anonymous footage is unfolding and revealing the story of Georges’s past, his own relationships begin to wither. Soon Majid’s son confronts Georges, leading to two encounters between Majid and Georges. During the second one, Majid commits suicide. The last shot of the film show both Majid’s and Georges’s sons talking to each other, but what they say is never revealed. It is unclear if this is a new beginning of the conflict or an end to the one that has been.

The most original device in the film is the videocassettes that are being sent to Georges and his family. The footage of the cassettes is often introduced in such a manner that the viewer does not know at first if what is being shown is belonging to the actual diegesis of Georges, or constituting “documentary” footage of Georges’s world. It also remains unconfirmed who is the sender. It is, for example, impossible to explain from a diegetic point of view how Majid’s suicide (that is committed in front of Georges) could be taped.

Accordingly, whereas Fatih Akin shows how his protagonists create their own memory practice out of their actual life situation, ignoring national boundaries and established patterns of cultural memory, Haneke addresses the question of international human rights (the French government did not acknowledge the massacre until 1998 and would not have done so without the emerging transnational discourse of human rights that has questioned many nationalist narratives). Thus, Caché is not only about the post-colonial past of France. Haneke’s monitoring camera, which never becomes placed in a subject, in someone’s point of view, is turned into a translocal and transnational “impossible” eye and agent that challenge local or national(ist) positions. The videocassettes are the result of a registering “other” being placed outside the diegesis of the film.

The ethics of Auf der anderen Seite consists in defying God, enabling the caring for your nearest, whereas Caché establishes a moral point of view in order to challenge indigenous narratives. In that way both films show the importance of acknowledging transnational memory, of recognising small-scale trajectories and memory practices beyond the framework of the nation and of the subtle dialectics between an ethics and morality of memory, as well as the need for a persistent “transnational monitoring” of the national.

NOTES

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11. Oula Silvennoinen, ‘Still under Examination: Coming to Terms with Finland’s Alliance with Nazi Germany’, *Yad Vashem Studies* 37, (2009): 32.


13. This distinction is made by Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and I have elaborated on it in ‘The Cultural Trauma Process or, the Ethics and Mobility of Memory’, in *Memory and Migration*, 120–34.