

Art and Memory: The Role of Visual Culture in Remembrance

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the profound relationship between art, memory, and visual culture, investigating how artistic practices mediate remembrance and shape collective identity. Drawing on historical, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives, it examines how memory is preserved, challenged, and reimagined through visual representation from ancient art and Renaissance iconography to modernist war memorials and digital media. Through multidisciplinary lenses, including film, performance, architecture, and digital technology, the project highlights how art serves both as a repository and a reactivator of cultural memory, especially in the face of trauma, loss, and historical discontinuity. Key case studies, including post-Holocaust remembrance, Isabel Allende's narrative visuality, and the public representation of Salvador Allende, underscore the tensions between visibility and erasure, and personal versus collective memory. The research further evaluates the complexities of oral, tactile, and visual memory across different sensory experiences, emphasizing how image, matter, and space become active agents of remembrance. Ultimately, this work argues for a more inclusive and transdisciplinary understanding of memory, where visual culture not only commemorates but interrogates and transforms the way societies remember and engage with the past.

Keywords: Art and Memory, Visual Culture, Collective Remembrance, Holocaust Memory, Digital Remembrance, War Memorials, Memory Theory, Sensory Memory.

INTRODUCTION

Art as a methodological practice has long been a tool for investigating visual culture and memory. This project explores how visual cultures shape recollection in response to the Holocaust's unimaginable nature. It examines how practitioners from various disciplines engage with imagery, materiality, and performance as means to mediate memory, illuminating aspects of obligation and agency in grasping an incomprehensible past. The collective observation of contemporary memory performers seeks to show how visual cultures reinterpret the past, redistributing remembrance performances and highlighting art's role in fostering this responsibility. This process aims to articulate a provisional understanding of mediation, emphasizing diverse legacies of a past deemed irreproducible rather than simply reiterating a structured remembering ethic. The complexities of intertwining oral memory with geographical and cultural traditions will be explored, revealing overlooked perspectives. Questions of location and imagination arise, challenging the conventional observation of image-matter-text layering and prompting reflection on how visual artifacts represent memory. Ultimately, the project aspires to consider not just preservation of thought but the celebration of its evolving nature [1, 2].

Historical Perspectives on Visual Culture

Memory is deeply intertwined with vision, especially for those who see, making it habitual to connect the two. We recall memories vividly, sharing them or locking them away. The phrase 'the iron grip of memory' illustrates how time moves forward while memories dive deep. Photographs help refresh fading recollections, yet one struggles to visualize those absent; today's images seem cold and lifeless, a mere record lacking warmth. They become mere chemical impressions, observed by those whose memories remain silent. For the blind, memory relies on remaining senses, creating a rich tapestry of details; colors and textures hold significance through descriptions, even if such accounts may sometimes seem nonsensical. To the fully sighted, recollection remains incomplete without visual balance. Blind individuals, or those who lost sight early, possess a more tactile memory filled with sensations—touching wood, hearing sounds that define their recollections vividly. This sensory appropriation enriches their

experiences, while the absence of visual memory leaves a blank slate. Over time, thoughts fade into resentment or confusion, urging a painful search for clarity in a chaotic mental landscape. They navigate a world where the echoes of past pain confront them, leading to a complex interplay of memory, perception, and identity [3, 4].

Ancient Art and Memory

It has long been known that a direct connection exists between memory and writing, accounting for the extent to which the matter of memory has traditionally been regarded as a literary affair. Only some of the ways in which conceptions of visual art and art-objects have been connected to consider questions of memory have been much addressed. However, given that literature shares its role as a memorial form with other provides of visual culture, there is much potential and need for a more comprehensive understanding of how collective memory takes shape discursively across the boundaries of these disciplines. Such discussion, though, will then want to attend to how painting and photography, in particular, both embrace and counterpoint the word in such a transdisciplinary space composed of verbal and visible designations of the past. Conceptions regarding the role of visual art in collective memory can be grouped according to some fundamental questions. First is whether visual culture itself operates like an aid to memory: that is, does art (in the broadest sense) “plaque” the past in representations that amount to “pictures of remembrance”? Second is whether visual artworks have been/the role of visual art in memory, attention has mostly been literary or, more broadly, textual. Broader studies of collective memory have considered how visual culture matters either sympathetically or contestably, on the other, such text-image studies have tended to focus on the relation of images to verbal forms rather than considering discursive visual culture as such [5, 6].

Renaissance and the Representation of Memory

In recent years, memory study has intensified, focusing on how vivid memories balance the fleeting nature of experience with the permanence of inscribed forms. Memory is both marginal and central; it is crucial to experience and representation, existing at the edge of subjectivity. It presents a paradox where experiencing and forgetting co-occur, heightening human fears of nothingness through lost cognitions and vanishing experiences. Memory archives past experiences in bodily forms that manage time and existence, serving as an interface that prolongs perception and encodes cultural significance. While generally seen as a cohesive agency for survival, memory also stems from the fear of dissolution. Archives, rituals, and commemorative objects emerge from this fear, driving humanity to recognize and record shared events, even as losses occur. Induced ethnography is essential for understanding how artistic representation engages with memory, influencing visual culture's ways of memorializing, interrogating, and creating memory. Memory lies at the core of art and memorialization, reflected through various representational modes such as presence, absent traces, and narratives that shape individual experiences through composition, color, and texture. Today's contemporary work reveals a growing interest in remembrance and the documentation of local histories, aiming to expand representation's cultural and geographic scope by spotlighting subdued gestures and subcultures within the global art scene. While memory studies began to gain prominence in the 8th century, previous fields also tackled aspects of memory. Understanding memory representation in art and transcending static archival concepts remains a critical and timely challenge [7, 8].

Modernism's Impact on Memory

Modernism's influence shapes the memorials of the Great War and the Australian landscape of war commemoration, showcasing how art and design convey the ANZAC spirit and ideals of sacrifice and mourning. This analysis focuses on works created during the interwar period, starting with Rayner Hoff's contributions to the Australian War Memorial, particularly the dioramas and the Wounded Soldier Holding His Dying Comrade at Taranaki and Talbot street entry gates. It discusses pre-World War I projects that informed Hoff's later designs, including the Anzac Square War Memorial in Brisbane and the King's Park War Memorial in Perth, along with the unbuilt Hall of Memory. These four projects highlight diverse, unfinished memorialization strategies that emerged after WWI, where public sentiment towards memorials became less urgent. The unfinished nature of the Taranaki and Talbot street gates, along with the main entrance to the Australian War Memorial, presented particular challenges. Notably, John McKechnie designed the ambitious "World's Greatest War Museum, Memorial Hall, and Viewing Gallery," in collaboration with architects like Ralph E. Heggaton and sculptor Rayner Hoff. Today's context reflects a state of mourning that contrasts memorialization with distraction, a phenomenon captured by the term 'memorial crisis' identified by memorial studies theorists [9, 10].

Theories of Memory in Art

Theories on memory in art explore how representations enable us to remember or forget. Philosophically, memory is examined in relation to architecture, revealing how physical spaces both locate and constrain

memory. Visual images, particularly photographs, play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of history, facilitating a connection between recollection and understanding the past through iconographic and symbolic analysis. Various writers highlight themes of overabundance, exile, and loss in how visual imagery captures and critiques memory. Some argue that memories can be inscribed in landscapes or objects, resisting erasure and urging reinterpretation. This visibility encourages a reevaluation of what is deemed visible in vernacular contexts. Discussions also address how memories can be negotiated or contested, with some narratives prioritized over others, creating tensions. Memory in art serves as a stable anchor within fluid recollection, manifesting in monuments or personal artifacts, allowing moments to be not just recalled but transformed over time through desire and impulse. These anchors afford an enduring comprehension of existence, where visual memory influences the perception of time, emphasizing that meanings and significances can shift over time [11, 12].

Visual Art as a Medium of Remembrance

Visual art is used by both ruling and marginal groups to shape narratives, preserve memory, and reaffirm group identities. Memorials, including monuments, paintings, tapestries, music, and parks, commemorate pivotal moments in a group's history, fostering reflection and storytelling. Specifically, memorialization encompasses public forms of remembrance such as monuments, festivals, and ceremonies, allowing communities to engage with their past and practice public grieving. These representations provide discursive spaces for dialogue on unresolved emotions, exploring themes of trauma and loss while inviting audiences to consider diverse past narratives. Memorials celebrate the deceased and facilitate collective mourning, enabling meditative discussions about history within contemporary contexts. They connect disparate discourses about suffering and foster a universal mourning based on shared humanity, transforming collective memory into powerful symbols of identity. While memorialization can silence aspects of the past, it also enables groups to seek meaning in loss and anger. In confronting collective trauma, memorials navigate the complexities of remembrance and forgetting, helping societies manage grief while promoting collective sharing and reconciliation. They can represent acts of sacrifice or vengeance as well as grief and loss [13, 14].

Film and Memory

How do we remember and how are we remembered by others? What occurs when memories are activated, and how do verbal and pictorial forms intersect? In contemporary culture, various media explore memory, remembrance, and forgetting, yet these forms can be misused, particularly by generations distanced from trauma. Representation plays a crucial role in how we remember past injustices and affirm responsibility. Art and Memory examines memory in modern visual media, from documentaries to architectural memorials. Two case studies focus on the Second World War and Belgium's colonial past, exploring art's ability to convey memory. These representations evoke emotional responses in viewers, fostering engagement with complex narratives surrounding trauma. Mass trauma weighs heavily, linked to grief and psychic dislocation, yet confronting the past is essential for healing. In peace, histories may vanish into silence, overshadowed by overwhelming imagery. The tension between visibility and absence reveals deeper truths about experiences. This interplay creates layers of perception where representation, while sometimes seemingly celebratory, can also evoke haunting memories. The ephemeral nature of memory challenges us, prompting reflection on how personal and collective trauma shape identity. The paradox of remembrance unfolds through art's capacity to connect the present with the complexities of the past, navigating between seduction and repulsion in cultural memory [15, 16].

Digital Media and Memory

The growing use of digital technology is reshaping remembrance practices, blurring the lines between new media and online culture. Instead of being tied to physical locations like monuments and museums, memories can now be inscribed in digital spaces that transcend the physical realm, becoming fluid and variable. This shift raises challenges to standardization and accuracy, while fostering new forms of memory and remembrance. Online memories highlight the contrast between past photographs and present digital inscriptions, raising questions about what it means to remember events happening now. Social networks and user-generated content enhance the remembrance of the immediate present, challenging the idea that such recollection is impossible. However, there are concerns about technological memory erasing traditional remembrance, leading to fears of a memory crisis. Historians and archaeologists express worry over the overwhelming information and computational logic affecting cultural memory and hierarchy. The current focus on immediate memory prompts a critique of internet cultures, often seen as neglecting such discussions. Furthermore, pre-internet and material aspects of memory have been overlooked. The debate also encompasses issues like monumentalization, forgetting, and the importance of commemoration. There is a call to engage with the physical qualities of the

emerging digital landscape, emphasizing the need for tangible experiences that connect corporeal forms to remembrance, previously deemed less relevant [17, 18].

Case Studies of Art and Memory

The role of visual culture in collective remembrance is explored through two interdependent case studies. One analyzes Isabel Allende's work to consider pictorial representation of personal trauma, while the other reviews visual culture and public art in various national contexts. Both contribute to understanding collective remembrance beyond individual trauma narratives. In negotiating personal histories of remembrance, methods of representing personal memories are evolving. Allende's writings navigate the intersection of personal memory and social history, especially within two countries, leading to a discussion on the politics of personal narrative. The article's first half critiques her efforts to visually represent trauma and the conflict over memory's portrayal. It suggests her uncertainty about these images results in a dialogue about pictoriality and feminism over personal loss, revealing complexities in writing personal memory and public history across cultures. This aspect is illustrated through a close reading of "The House of the Spirits." The second half focuses on Salvador Allende's image and its public representation, examining its role in shaping collective memory. A thorough historical analysis of a digital archive of commemorative art in Santiago, Chile, investigates how Allende's visual representation influences public imagination. Plaza de la Constitución is scrutinized for the varied pictorial representations of Allende, analyzing their creators and intentions. This study also reviews national memorial imagery in Australia, Britain, China, Germany, and the U.S., probing the tensions between iconography and its significance in Western cultures of remembrance, with emphasis on sites like Gaudí's Casa Batlló and muralism in Paris [19, 20].

Challenges in Representing Memory

Representing and commemorating memory involves revealing the complex nature of both collective and individual memories, which often manifest through various forms such as narratives, art, and multimedia. This layered process is deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and political contexts—like the fall of communism and the wars in former Yugoslavia, as well as migration and natural disasters. Memories are created and expressed through documentary photography, art installations, memoirs, oral histories, and performances. A key question is how to effectively represent memory within these layers, leading to discussions about the power of photography in recalling the past and its potential for manipulation. Despite wars occurring decades ago, public remembrance events remain underreported, while private memorials are active. This results in fragmented recollections, echoing through different communities without meaningful connection. In the context of public protests and mass movements, current imagery parallels historical narratives written by the victors. The relationship between public and personal spheres becomes complex and intertwined, raising questions about authenticity versus representation and how to document movements—what captures the true essence in "frozen" moments? Engaging with staged events prompts inquiries about voyeurism and how others interpret personal acts of engagement versus passive observation. Context significantly alters the implications of similar visuals; an art piece may represent a protest or riot depending on location. The repetitive nature of embodied memory highlights time as both a record and a form of suffering, influencing the legacy of these memories. Images reflecting familiar experiences can become either ubiquitous or transparent, blurring the lines of witnessing. Ultimately, the politics of imagery can evoke a range of emotions, impacting the potential for public unrest and dialogue [21, 22].

The Future of Art and Memory

Memory is a creative "production" influenced by specific public, social, or intimate spheres, with places shaping its articulation. History and memory coexist closely; each informs the other, yet their relationship is fraught with tension. While history documents the past, it cannot fully encapsulate the complexities surrounding events. Memory often transcends historical venues, becoming convoluted and elusive. Displaced stories can cluster in "non-places," reaching unforeseen audiences. Observers may find extraordinary meaning in the mundane, seeing absent places as imaginative sites. This artistry transforms memory, prompting questions about how art evokes emotions, alters narratives, or conceptualizes remembrance. Furthermore, the historical and social dimensions of art-remembrance reveal symptoms of petrified spaces, either obscured by false neutrality or celebrated in commercialism. Locations like New York's Ground Zero and Beirut reflect stark realities of memory and commemoration influenced by political and economic undercurrents. Art can examine these symptoms, bringing them to life without erasing their past. It creates riddles that intertwine present experiences with uncertain fates, allowing for a nuanced exploration of memory. The dialogue around art and its context can induce positive or negative responses, potentially transforming spectators into engaged participants in a shared narrative [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Art is more than an aesthetic expression; it is a dynamic force in shaping memory and mediating cultural identity. Across time and media, visual culture has evolved from static monuments and sacred images into participatory and fluid platforms of remembrance, especially in response to collective trauma and social transformation. The interplay between art and memory reveals how societies process loss, confront historical injustice, and reimagine identity. Whether through sculpture, photography, digital media, or narrative visually, art remains a critical instrument in negotiating the past not merely to preserve it, but to challenge, reinterpret, and transmit its meanings across generations. As visual technologies evolve and global cultures become more interconnected, the role of art in remembrance must be continuously reevaluated, ensuring that acts of remembering are inclusive, dialogical, and reflective of diverse histories and perspectives.

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CITE AS: Asuma Mariita Nchaga: The Role of Visual Culture in Remembrance. IDOSR JOURNAL OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES 11(3):13-18.
<https://doi.org/10.59298/IDOSRJAH/2025/1131318>