

Who is the Agent?

Power Constructs in Mediated Memory

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In de rubriek Masterclass wordt studenten de mogelijkheid geboden eigen onderzoek te publiceren. Deze keer: Kim van Kaam, oud-studente Literatuurwetenschap aan de Universiteit Utrecht.

Are memories for sale? In her book *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* Alison Landsberg seems to suggest so: “As products of a capitalist system, the images and narratives of the past made available by mass culture are themselves commodities [...]” (143). According to Landsberg mass media transform history and specific memories into universalities. These *prosthetic* memories become one’s own through watching television, going to the movies, surfing on the internet; in short, through mass culture, unavoidable in contemporary, modern Western society. Mass culture mediates memory in ready-to-eat chunks, available to every consumer. S/he can choose whatever memory s/he would like to incorporate. Landsberg sees this as a positive development, because it creates new, counter hegemonic (political) possibilities *within* capitalism (which she sees as a paradigm we cannot escape): “Rather than atomizing people,

prosthetic memories open up collective horizons of experience and pave the way for unexpected political alliances” (143).

In the process of selecting memories Landsberg allots agency to the consumer. But does this consumer really have anything to choose from in mass culture? Can this consumer choose his/her own exposure to trauma and his/her own prosthetic memories in a media regulated commodity culture? In this paper I am suggesting ‘no.’ Today, history reaches us through an overload of images; these images are, according to Landsberg’s theory, incorporated by us, consumers, and made into prosthetic memories: another one’s memory that feels like our own. Though consumers have a lot to choose from (plenty of channels that all have their own variety in news shows; movie theatres mostly show more than five movies at a time; et cetera), this choice is limited because a selection is already made beforehand. This assumption overthrows Landsberg’s theory that prosthetic memory, through its availability, can work as a counterforce against dominant memory. I would like to suggest that not the consumer, but the (mass) media and dominant powers – like the government, writers of (media) history, scholars, and (programmers of) popular TV channels – are the agent in deciding which memory is and which one is not available to us through commodification and mediatization, and thus becomes prosthetic.

I will illustrate this with the matter of the Abu Ghraib photographs, which were made at the end of 2003 and were made public spring 2004, a year after the US invasion of Iraq. These photographs were made by soldiers working as prison keepers in Abu Ghraib and were sent to colleagues, family, and friends. They caused heavy consternation, not only in the US, but also across Europe and the Middle-East. Although the US government imputed the pictures to a few bad apples within the US military, oppositional voices posted that the behavior of the soldiers on the photographs is inherent to US society and its attitude towards the ‘other.’ Still, the pictures did not initiate a strong antiwar movement (as photos of the war in Vietnam did) and though thousands of pictures were made, only a few dozen were published. Due to (I will suggest) smart spinning and refocusing attention in the media, the Abu Ghraib pictures were forgotten and did not have any effect on the US government policy in proceeding the war in Iraq.

The Marketplace of Memory

As written above, prosthetic memory is another one's memory that one incorporates and thereby makes one's own. This incorporation is possible through mass mediatization of memory. Landsberg states that the concept of prosthetic memory breaks down the natural ownership of memory, it universalizes memory, and makes possible a better connection to the 'other.' Prosthetic memory is "[m]ade possible by advanced capitalism and an emergent commodified mass culture capable of widely disseminating images and narratives about the past [...]" (26). Prosthetic memories are public property, but still experienced in the body; "[...] these memories are not 'natural' or 'authentic' and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on" (26).

Landsberg refers to Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson and their critique of contemporary mass mediated society as it, according to them, distances people from authentic experience and consequently from reality and history. According to Landsberg, this is not a result of today's mass culture: "People's relations to both the world and the past have always been mediated through representation and narrative" (33). She proposes a significant difference between 'experiencing the real' and 'having a real experience,' and states that new technologies (as mass media are) alter people's relation to reality. Their perception of 'real' experiences has changed; since these experiences do not have to be based in reality, people do not have to have actually lived through these experiences.

Furthermore, if these new encounters with the experiential can be imagined as an act of prosthesis, of prosthetically appropriating memories of a cultural or collective past, then they may make particular histories or pasts available for consumption across existing stratifications of race, class, and gender. Prosthetic memories, then, may become the grounds for political alliances and the production of new, potentially counterhegemonic public spheres. Because they are not essential, not the exclusive property of certain people – because everyone is equally alienated from them – they are available to all and therefore have democratizing potential [...] The pasts that people claim and 'use' are part of this identity-forming process. Perhaps even more important, when cultural memories are taken on individually and have an affective, individual component, they are more likely to motivate action. (34)

So because of its two-sidedness, being personal yet public at the same time, prosthetic memory opens up political possibilities, according to Landsberg. In her epilogue, she stresses that “at some basic level, politics has to be about the right to choose” (144). She argues that capitalist consumption is based on two choices: what to buy and how to use it, and that these choices also come forward in memory acquisition. First, the consumer chooses his/her memory. Landsberg acknowledges the limitations of this choice: “Of course, even this choice is not a completely free one: he must choose from [...] a repertoire of narratives produced within the prevailing hegemony” (145). But still some of the choices confirm, and some of them challenge the status quo, according to Landsberg. Secondly, the consumer chooses the application of the memory. This choice is limited as well, as commodities – though multivocal – cannot be interpreted infinitely. “Even in the complicated case of mass cultural commodities, reception is conditioned by and mediated through the cultural, political and social worlds of the consumers” (145). Yet, in my view, the consumers do not have the agency in these worlds. They are subject to media and established powers who make their choices for them. The fact that Landsberg acknowledges the limitations of the consumer’s agency, seems to deny her idea of the freedom of prosthetic memory within commodity culture. The fact that all choices have to be made within a “prevailing hegemony” of powers that preselect, transform the choice into a ‘non choice’ and puts a question mark at the very existence of counter hegemonic memory. As Landsberg writes: “There is not some pristine world of politics apart from the world of consumption. Instead, we must use these commodified memories toward politically progressive ends” (146). This suggests that there is no way of thinking outside the capitalist society we live in.

This is not the place to go into the latter problem, but what I want to make clear is that the agency in commodity culture is not with consumers who choose from by the establishment selected commodities. They are not free in making meaning out of these commodities, but will always be interpreting within hegemonic culture, in which meaning is imposed by dominant powers.

Where Landsberg’s theory seems very optimistic, Geoffrey H. Hartman gives a very pessimistic account of the effects of mass culture in his article “Public Memory and Its Discontents.” In opposition

to Landsberg, Hartman states that through mediatization public and personal memory are moving apart: “Can public memory still be called memory, when it is increasingly alienated from personal and active recall?” (73). He speaks of a trend of desensitization when it comes to the trauma that we encounter through mass media every day.

[A]s the media make us bystanders of every act of violence and violation, we glimpse and even find reasons for a terrible inertia in ourselves. No event is reported without a spin, without an explanatory or talky context that buffers the raw images; pictures on TV remain pictures; a sort of antibody builds up in our response system and prevents total mental disturbance. (74)

In Hartman’s point of view there is no talk of a prosthetic incorporation of mediated memories or trauma, but a distancing between the viewer’s reality and that of the trauma. The trauma is viewed with a sense of “matter-of-factness,” which does not initiate action, but rather a feeling of moral indifference.

Furthermore, the technologies of mass media raise questions on authenticity, according to Hartman. He opposes collective memory, which he sees as the ideal, individualized memory, to official history on the one hand and its revolutionary brother, politicized memory, on the other hand. Both lead to an “institutionalized, bogus recollection, a churlish denial of the history of others or an artificially inseminated perspective. A single authorized narrative then simplifies not just history but the only active communal memory we have [...]” (80). So Hartman stresses the point made above: that mass media culture does not provide choices but makes memory monolithic and its meaning pre-fixed by hegemonic forces.

In the mediated public spheres no collective memory is created; instead, an unstable public memory takes hold of trauma. This can be seen in the need for recording everything, making everything available to everyone, writes Hartman. Here again, I see a parallel to Landsberg’s theory. Her prosthetic memory seems to come to surface only through public memory because one of its most important features is availability, which is accomplished through mediatization. This public memory is not personal, nor individual or diverse, as collective memory is – the better memory according to Hartman. The collective memory can best

be represented through art and in particular literature. But this type of memory is weakening, while “political regions falsify the complexity of the past and cultivate an official story that seeks to reawaken ancient hatreds. This falsified memory, with its foundation, myths or fundamentalist notion of national destiny and ethnic purity, is the enemy” (90-91, my emphasis).

This, of course, is a very strong point of view which holds an idealized look on reality without working with today’s technological possibilities, as Landsberg does.¹ But where Landsberg dismissed the political forces that rule mass culture, Hartman sees their influence in the meaning making of history and memory.

The Shock Image

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag gives an account of what it means to live in a culture in which news reaches us mainly through images. Although she focuses primarily on war photography, the parallel with Landsberg and Hartman seems obvious.

For Sontag, war is inevitable, unavoidable. And so are images of war, as they are “a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus” (*RPO*, 6). But what is the aim of such pictures? “Who are the ‘we’ at whom such shock-pictures are aimed? [...] The photographs are a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore” (*RPO*, 7). Sontag’s argument is about how ‘we,’ as a public being exposed to horrific images of trauma and war through media every day, how ‘we’ deal with these pictures and if ‘we’ feel addressed. But the fact that ‘we’ are safe in our homes looking at mediated images, makes it difficult not to look away or be “desensitized”:

The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that had been communicated. If one feels that there

1 Hartman takes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as an example of how literature can work outside of public memory as a counterforce, using literary devices to give the lost history of slavery a voice within contemporary society. So for Hartman, Morrison is a representative of the collective memory. But Morrison also starred in Oprah Winfrey’s book club, that got millions of Americans reading. Morrison also gave Winfrey permission to adapt *Beloved* to the big screen, starring Winfrey herself. If I understand Hartman correctly, Winfrey is pre-eminently a representative of public memory. So the two oppose each other in Hartman’s argument, but coincide in reality.

is nothing “we” can do – but who is that “we”? – and nothing “they” can do either – but who are “they”? – then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic. (*RPO*, 101)

Hartman also referred to the issue of the recipient of these images: “[W]ho is the addressee of the new electronic writing, with its capacity for near-instantaneous reception and transmission? Every TV program is implicitly addressed ‘to whom it may concern,’ which begs the question of who *must* be concerned” (Hartman 89).

Sontag seems to stand at the side of Hartman in her concern about the desensitizing effects of shock photographs. This has everything to do with modern, visual society in which news travels fast and mainly in images. We already get to see ‘everything,’ and have seen ‘everything,’ so what is left to be shocked about? That is the ultimate challenge for today’s photographer. Sontag writes:

In a world in which photography is brilliantly at the service of consumerist manipulations, no effect of a photograph of a doleful scene can be taken for granted. As a consequence, morally alert photographers and ideologues of photography have become increasingly concerned with the issues of *exploitation* of sentiment [...] in war photography and of rote ways of provoking feeling. (*RPO*, 79-80, my emphasis)

Here we return to mass culture in which trauma has become a commodification. Photographers, or, for that matter, mass media, use the capitalist system to transcribe their images into society. In doing this, they manipulate the images’ content in order to be the better ‘buy’ as a prosthetic memory. “For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct,” Sontag writes, “they must shock” (*RPO*, 81). While we think we get to see ‘everything,’ we actually do not at all. The choice, as I wrote before, is not the consumer’s in this matter.

So the more shocking the photograph, the bigger the effect. This is also what follows from Landsberg’s theory. When one is shocked, one incorporates the image, the memory, one makes it prosthetic which will induce one to (political) action. But while one sees repetition after repetition of shocking images one distances his/herself from them, feels safe in his/her not-violated home and gets desensitized to them. Can trauma still become prosthetic if one becomes insensitive to shock

and horror? Does the shock-effect of war images have a limit, or has one in the end really seen 'everything'? Sontag writes: "Shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off. Even if it doesn't, one can not look. [...] As one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images" (RPO, 82).

The arguments of Baudrillard and Jameson referred to by Landsberg seem plausible at this point. The value of mediated experience has become as high as that of reality, they are exchangeable. Sontag writes about the 'society of spectacle' in which we live today: "Reality has abdicated. There are only representations: media" (RPO, 109). But she immediately undermines this point of view by calling it provincialistic and patronizing:

It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment [...]. It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and massive injustice and terror. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality. (RPO, 110-111)

Both Landsberg's (in generalizing any trauma to something we can all experience) and Hartman's (in generalizing about the desensitizing effects of shock images) arguments are addressed here. They both (although Landsberg focuses explicitly on American society) do not look across the borders of Western modernity. But this does not mean that within this modernity trauma is not subjected to commodity culture and media manipulations, and that the effects of it should not be examined. Still, Sontag tones down her argument. According to her, there is just too much trauma in the world to be remembered completely (or to be incorporated as prosthetic memories, as Landsberg would put it). Sontag even writes that "it is probably not true that people are responding less" (RPO, 116). It is not the aim of shock images to induce action but to

raise attention and questions: “Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now to be challenged? All this, with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action” (*RPO*, 117).

Abu Ghraib and the Images of Torture

The year after Sontag published her book, the media got hold of a number of photographs of Iraqi prisoners in the Baghdad prison Abu Ghraib being abused and tortured by American soldiers who were also in the pictures. They were taken with average digital camera’s by other soldiers. The photos are shocking, horrific, and invite the viewer to ask all of the above questions. Sontag replied with an article in the *New York Times*, ironically titled “Regarding the Torture of Others.” She is obviously appalled by the pictures and asks what these pictures mean for American society: “So now the pictures will continue to ‘assault’ us – as many Americans are bound to feel. Will people get used to them?” (RTO) Sontag is convinced these photographs will not go away, more, other pictures will come, this seems an inevitable result of today’s digital American society: “[...] America has become a country in which the fantasies and the practice of violence are seen as good entertainment, fun” (RTO).

The most famous pictures made in Abu Ghraib are probably the one that shows a female soldier holding a crawling, naked prisoner on a leash and the one picturing a hooded prisoner on a pedestal with electrical wires attached to his fingers, toes, and penis (he was told to keep standing or otherwise he would be electrocuted). But there are many more, picturing piles of hooded naked prisoners with soldiers standing laughing next to them, giving the thumbs-up straight into the camera, naked prisoners forced to simulate sexual actions, and prisoners in physically stressful positions.² The photographs look like holiday pictures (“Look, mom, here I am standing next to...”), and were sent to friends and family. The father of one of the later accused soldiers took them to CBS, which aired them in the spring of 2004. The world was horrified and outraged. Immediately discussions arose about how

2 Some of the pictures are still available on the internet, for example on <http://www.rotten.com/library/crime/prison/abu-ghraib/>.

it was possible that soldiers would take pictures of these events and about what is pictured in these photographs.³ The latter was in the first place a discussion of linguistics. The US government would not call it torture, but spoke of ‘abuse’ and ‘humiliation.’ They also put the blame on ‘some bad apples’ within the US military (eventually some of the soldiers were indeed prosecuted for their actions in the pictures). Many intellectuals and scholars opposed, as they saw the photos as a direct consequence of community life in the Abu Ghraib prison, the US army, but also in American society. Mary Ann Tétreault writes:

Like harem postcards, lynching postcards, and the photos of mutilated Vietnamese corpses [...], the Abu Ghraib photos widened the scope of normalization as they circulated among select groups of colleagues and friends. They were “commodities” within the prison walls [...]. (40)

The parallel to lynching photographs is examined by many, among who Dora Apel.⁴ These photographs were taken in the 1930s, showing white men and women standing next to lynched bodies of black men and women. They were popular in the southern states of the US where they were made into postcards to be sent to friends and family. According to Apel, the lynching meant the confirmation of white supremacy and served as a “continuing of social control, extended tools of terror which ultimately justified the deeds they represent as protecting whiteness, which was code for America itself” (90). Apel continues:

After 9/11, “democracy” became code for America, and defending democracy meant arresting and imprisoning thousands of Middle Easterners in the United States, Guantanamo Bay, and Afghanistan, as well as Iraq, where the sense of community sanction was fundamental to the torture and atrocities. The community in question was most immediately the military and more broadly the white, conservative, Christian culture represented by the regime of George W. Bush, the commander-in-chief, and reinforced by his cabinet and their chains of command. (90)

3 The then minister of Defense Donald Rumsfeld immediately forbade soldiers to be in possession of camera’s.

4 See for example Sontag who refers to them in both *Regarding the Pain of Others* (here not in relation to the Abu Ghraib pictures) and “Regarding the Torture of Others,” and Dora Apel, “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib.”

The obvious power relations that the Abu Ghraib pictures depict seem to be a result of power relations within a specific American community, the dominant one at the time. And, as with the lynching pictures, Apel writes, they were not well received outside that community. But how can individuals be held accountable for actions permitted (or, as Tétreault puts it “sanctioned” (40)) by the community? This is not to say that the US government or the “white, conservative, Christian culture” would approve of torture, but its power relations do seem to have this behavior as its implication.

The other side of the discussion was about the fact that photographs were made of the torturing, as Haim Bresheeth writes: “The new ingredient was not the torture itself but that pictures existed of the procedures – hundreds and maybe thousands of them” (65). When it became clear how many pictures actually were made, the media decided to not show them all. Sontag asks herself if this was a political decision: “Will editors now debate whether showing more of them, or showing them uncropped [...], would be in ‘bad taste’ or too implicitly political?” (RTO) But censorship, she writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, is part of war photography since Vietnam.

[M]ainstream media are not in the business of making people feel queasy about the struggles for which they are being mobilized, much less of disseminating propaganda against waging war. Since then, censorship – the most extensive kind, self-censorship, as well as censorship by the military – has found a large and influential number of apologists. (65)

Andy Grunberg also points to the fact that photos are the real news in this matter, not the torture, as the photos

tell us that the codes of objectivity, professional ethics, and journalistic accountability we have long relied on to ensure the accuracy of the news [...] are now relics. In their place is a swirling mass of information, written as well as visual, journalistic as well as vernacular, competing to be taken as fact. (108)

The appearance of mass media, like the internet, that are available to anyone, does not necessarily undermine the authenticity of news facts such as these, Grundberg also acknowledges. But it does, according

to him, “reduce our ability to distinguish what is real from what is fabricated and what is important from what is irrelevant” (109). And that seems to be exactly the problem in the ‘community’ the soldiers in Abu Ghraib lived in. Bresheeth points to the parallels with violence in Hollywood blockbusters:

[The] contiguity between the world of fictional violence and that of real world violence is seemingly crucial for the operations of this American Dream empire which applies the simplifications of film narrative to the political hot spots encountered by the administration. (67)

So the two main discussions about Abu Ghraib mentioned before coincide here. Both the fact that Iraqi prisoners were tortured and the fact that photographs were taken of it has its origin in a certain community which was raised by the establishment and in which this behavior was – implicitly – permitted.

The Establishment’s Free Choice

Eventually, no independent inquiry was done and the matter ‘Abu Ghraib’ went into history as “Animal House in the night shift” (Hamm 278). As Apel writes: “the only accident at Abu Ghraib was the release of the pictures into the world. The torture and abuse of prisoners was mandated and justified at the top” (100). The US government shifted responsibility to a few bad apples within the military, thereby saving its own skin and credibility. Apel asks:

How, then, do photographs of torture produce their own undoing? When is the power of an image turned against itself, transforming it into a picture that opposes the very thing the photograph means to uphold? [...] [W]e must also recognize that torture images do not inherently produce their own undoing – it depends on us. (100)

The photos taken in Abu Ghraib did not launch a large antiwar campaign, and the fact that there was another ‘Abu Ghraib’ in the British Camp Breadbasket confirmed the argument that this was not a specifically American phenomenon.⁵ Sontag even writes that someone who believes

⁵ For me this does not at all break down the argument. As Sontag already pointed

that “war can become inevitable, and even just, might reply that the photographs supply no evidence [...] for renouncing war” (RPO, 12). This seems especially true for the Abu Ghraib photos as they are not part of journalistic war photography as we know it. Sontag writes that photography does not make a war self-evidently unpopular, and initiate antiwar movements:

Absent such a protest, the same antiwar photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or defeat. The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it. (RPO, 38-39)

It seems exactly this happened with the Abu Ghraib pictures. Although detested by other communities than the hegemonic one, the dominant political powers succeeded in giving a meaning to the pictures that was adopted by the media and thus the media’s consumers. These consumers did not have a choice in this matter, as Grundberg also argues:

Instead of offering us freedom, the uncontrolled flow of pictures distracts us from the task of determining for ourselves what might be real enough to really matter. We face the prospect of being reduced to the status of consumers who, given a hyper-abundance of choices, lack the ability to choose. Those in power benefit from this abandonment of discernment; they get to make the choices for us. (109)

So consumers do not have a free choice in what they prosthetically incorporate and how these prosthetic memories are interpreted. This choice is with the establishment. It may not exactly pre-fix or pre-select these choices and meanings, as I wrote in the above, but acts on the consumers detachment from media and their images as there are too many. As Sontag writes: “Awareness of the suffering that accumulates in a select number of wars happening elsewhere is something *constructed*” (RPO, 20, my emphasis). The consumer is not totally helpless, or

out, we are talking about the whole rich, privileged part of the world. This is not limited to the US, but includes the whole of North America and Europe as well. In short: it is rather a *Western* phenomenon.

innocent, as also Apel argued (quoted above). They can acknowledge the consequences of their (non-) choices and thus become their own agent.

In the case of Abu Ghraib the eventual limited amount of pictures consumers got to see and their meaning were subject to the government's spin doctors who produced a meaning in their benefit and refocused attention. Following Hartman's argument, this is the case in every mediated trauma. So, in what manner did the history of Abu Ghraib become prosthetic to Western society?

I would suggest that it became prosthetic in a way that was not in favor of the Iraqi prisoners. The pictures did not establish a better connection to the 'other,' and consequently no new, counter hegemonic political alliances were the result. The photos were interpreted within the hegemonic culture, which created a chance for the dominant powers to go on the same way they started off.

If history and memory are produced within this framework of the establishment without being able to go beyond it – at least within mass mediated commodity culture, as Hartman suggests – this would result in a falsified, fictional, maybe even mythical cultural memory. In a society that depends more and more on the world's visual input whose meaning, I hope I have made clear, is highly constructed by hegemonic powers, the idea of having a useful (or better: real) cultural memory begins to stagger. Sontag writes:

Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas "memories," and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory [...]. But there is collective instruction. (RTO, 85)

Yet if we accept that we live in a society in which, as Sontag wrote, awareness is constructed, and in which the speed and amount of images and news facts is so high we become paralyzed by it and unable to make choices let alone react adequately to those impulses, would it then make a difference if we would acknowledge the paralysis and the non-choices we make? In the end, the question remains: who is the agent?

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