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Memory work – narrating media experiences

I will start with a few remarks about the theoretical background of the particular approach towards narrative that I am using, will then explain this approach called “memory work” and will illustrate the workings of it when used to explore the pleasures and meanings involved in watching the movie *Amelie*.

My paper is located at the intersection of narratives, memory and identity. It is based on poststructuralist theories that understand identity as a site of narrative constructions and reconstructions and approaches media as the most relevant producers of public narratives of individual or collective identities. However, my focus is not on the ways, formations of identity are being presented in particular media examples, I will rather talk about how media narratives are being worked through. My presumption is that it is that very mundane social practice of positioning oneself with regard to media programs that currently is the dominant cultural form of the narrative construction of one’s own temporary and provisional identity. I want to introduce “memory work” as a useful means to analyze and explore these constructions in the contemporary social, political and cultural context. Theoretically, there is a homology in the conceptualizations of memory, identity, and media experiences: all three of them are defined by provisional and continuous processes (see also King, 2000, 17), they are continuously negotiated and modified in the light of experiences of the present. At the same time, these three concepts are supplementing each other because of the different aspects being elaborated. Let’s for example, take memory and its characteristic of *Nachträglichkeit*, which means ‘deferred action’, as it was developed by Sigmund Freud. *Nachträglichkeit* stresses the fact, that experiences, impressions etc. are being ‘retranscribed’ and ‘revised’ by what Freud calls ‘fresh circumstances’; that is everything available ‘after the fact’ in one’s life that gives meaning to what had happened before. Exploring memories is a way to grasp “what wasn’t known then” (see Nicola King 2000, 1f) - in the case of memories of media experiences, this means for example, what wasn’t known of our engagement with and our involvement in media, when, for example, we are deeply touched by a film, drawn into it, or when we are offended or irritated by it. Analyzing media experiences can thus not only deepen our understanding of the complex and contradictory ways in which media are of relevance for our constructions of identity, it also brings aspects to our attention which would otherwise be overlooked.

What exactly is this “memory work”? Memory work is an autobiographical approach, originally developed by German sociologist Frigga Haug (Haug 1987, Haug/Hipfl 1995) to examine processes of identity formation. Memory work is based on some methodological devices like describing just one experience to prevent the composition of texts that we often find in autobiographies - full of confessional, narcissistic, and self-complacent narrations. Also, it is suggested to write in the “third person” because this form of distancing and historization paradoxically results in more accurateness and care in presenting one’s own experiences. These texts are then examined (ideally by the people who have written them, making them then both subjects and objects of their research) by using discourse analysis. The focus in the analysis is on the ways people are positioning themselves in regard to dominant discourses and ideologies- both in the media narratives as well as in their political and cultural contexts - and how their desires and fantasies are involved in them. (This can be seen as one possible approach towards the “up close and personal perspective” Henry Jenkins/Tara McPherson and Jane Shattuc (2002) are talking about in their manifesto for a new cultural studies, deepening our understanding of the role media play in people’s lives at particular historical moments.) In this respect, memory work is capable of capturing the ideological role of media, without the shortcomings of approaches which conceptualize reception as textual subject positions (as was the case for example in *Screen theory*). At the same time, the written accounts of having watched a movie or a TV program often contain unexpected aspects that do not easily fit into taken-for-granted theoretical concepts in audience research or reception theory which helps us to avoid simplified notions of active media users, negotiating meanings and identity positions. Instead, it confronts us with the complex and contradictory relationships being at work.

Memory work also opens up a space for students to explore for themselves the ways in which particular media appeal in specific ways to them. As part of a research seminar students were asked to write down personal memories of watching tv-programs or films they have been affected by. One of the movies chosen was *Amélie* (“Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain”, 2001, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France)

Amélie was celebrated by many film critics as one of the best movies of 2001. Most critics placed their emphasis on the heartwarming story of the young female character named Amélie, who leads a quite isolated life and has made it her task to make the life of ordinary

people around her extraordinary. The film's dominant reading is that of a modern day fairy tale or fable which appeals to the child in all of us. It points to what connects people rather than to what separates them. The film was acclaimed as the opposite of selfish individualism, illustrating how "imagination paired with compassion can make the world a better place" (Lybarger) resulting in an experience which made viewers leave the movie with a smile on their face.

My own approach to the film starts with the subject positions offered to the viewers. *Amélie* is first of all a narrative of self-transformation. What is being presented is the transformation of a childish adolescent into both an adult woman and a person who opens up her withdrawn existence to interactions and relationships with other people. In the beginning of the film we are confronted with Amélie's childhood which is determined by such contingent events such as her father's only contact with her through his monthly medical investigations where he interprets her increased heart rate as an indication of a heart-disease. As a result he would not allow her to attend school. Amélie was home-schooled by her mother. Another contingency was her mother's death, caused by a suicide-jumper who landed on her. Amélie copes with the loneliness and the isolated life that defines her childhood by focusing on the small and simple things which are available to her, enriching them through her imagination and sensuous experiences. This very self-sufficiency combined with a childish way of magical thinking also dominates the beginning of the next stage in Amélie's life. Here we find Amélie working as a waitress, leading a very isolated life until a marble changes her life and triggers her to start intervening in the lives of people to change what is being perceived by them as some painful mystery. This is Amélie's transformation from a childish, self-related world-view to a position where the lives and miseries of other people become the focus. Amélie's experiences with the contingencies of life, and her skills to see the most unobtrusive elements are then used by her to set up new forms of contingencies which are able to break some of the limitations of people's lives around her. There is, however, yet another transformation Amélie must undergo. She has to learn to concentrate on her own desires and wishes which are exemplified by her love for a young man equally eccentric, which finally results in a happy ending.

Amélie's narrative is presented in the film through the use of two opposite formal devices. On the one hand there is a voice-over which informs us in a blatant, observant/observatory-distanced way about events in Amélie's family and the people she is surrounded by. For example, the creation of Amélie is presented by this voice-over as a contingent event where a

sperm with one x chromosome belonging to Raphael Poulain makes a dash for an egg in his wife, Amandine at the same time as a man returning from a friend's funeral erases his friend's address from his address-book. By giving just pure facts without their meaning-constructions (which are usually done in symbolic representations), this can be read as representing life with all its absurdities, contingencies and coincidences. On the other hand, there is the world from the perspective of Amélie, a world full of the wonders and sensual experiences of life as well as of Amélie's imaginations and fantasies. This can be read as exemplary of the ways, human beings try to cope with life and reality when trying to make sense of it so as to give it meaning.

What makes *Amélie* such an interesting movie is the fact, that her life is strongly dominated by her imaginations, fantasies and dreams. It is as if this film illustrates psychoanalytic theory where the everyday-life understanding of fantasy as opposed to reality is inverted and severely questioned. Instead, fantasy is seen as the "precondition or psychic glue" of social reality (Rose 1996, 3). In this sense, fantasy supports and sustains reality. And it is also fantasy, which as Slavoj Žižek points out, plays a key role for ideology in the sense that „ideology has to rely on some phantasmatic background“ (Žižek 1997, 1). Žižek describes the relationship between fantasy and ideology as one in which fantasy at once masks and reproduces ideology (or one could also say conflict, antagonism, and contradiction). Fantasy also plays a constitutive role in subject –formation. One of the key insights of Freud was to consider fantasies no longer as sheer illusions in contrast to some real existing reality, but as core psychic processes in structuring subjectivity (de Lauretis 1999, 307). Žižek describes the way fantasy works as „the setting for desire“. Fantasy constitutes our desire, and it teaches us how to desire.

Freud's work is of particular relevance here since he uses the term fantasy to refer to both the imaginary scenes as well as to the psychic mechanisms which produce these scenes. Fantasies (may they be conscious or unconscious) are always related to wish-fulfilling. Fantasy is psychic work where material from the present is put together in the service of a scene which presents the fulfillment of a certain wish. Fantasies can also materialize themselves in the form of defense mechanisms which would change a wish into its opposite and the fantasy–scene would be then a way of enacting the denial of that wish (de Lauretis 1999, 306 and Cowie 1997, 135). Most of Amélie's fantasies can be read as different scenes in which her desire for overcoming her loneliness is being staged.

Freud (1994) also offered an explanation for the ways public fantasies, in the case of literary fiction, appeal to the readers. He points out that most adults are ashamed of their fantasies and tend to conceal them out of a fear that they could be perceived by others as socially unacceptable. Good writing appeals to the readers through its form in the sense that the readers are lured in and bribed by the aesthetic pleasure being offered. One effect then is the release of some deeper pleasure where the readers then are able to enjoy their own fantasies.

Memory work on *Amélie*

What follows is a short analysis, based on four descriptions of watching *Amélie* by two female and two male Austrian students. Quite surprising are the differences in the narratives of the female and the male authors. In both of the female texts a direct linking between certain aspects of Amélie's life and the lives of the two authors is constructed. In both cases it is something that is perceived as a deficit in Amélie and which resonates in the author's own lives. In one text the female viewer describes the parallels she sees between her and Amélie as the tension between an orientation towards the needs of other people and the orientation towards one's own needs and happiness. Two subject positions which are of relevance for contemporary young women are opposed here. The first one is a position which is traditionally understood as feminine – always being open to the problems and needs of other people. This is the position of the “ideal mother”, who is spending all her energy to help the others so that there is not much left for dealing with her own needs and problems. At the same time, this is a very rewarding position, since helping others also lifts up one's own self-esteem and worth. The second position is the neo-liberal subject position where everybody is responsible for her/his own destiny. Where one is forced to concentrate on herself/himself to be flexible enough to take the chances and opportunities when they emerge. In this memory text the author presents the second position as the norm which is not questioned, although there are no positive elements connected with it. What needs to be done to reach this position is strenuous and includes things like “learning to say no” or “to be tougher”.

In the second memory text of a female viewer it is the scene where Amélie's father diagnoses her as suffering from a heart condition which becomes the key scene for the viewer. This is the place where she becomes emotionally involved in the film. This scene symbolizes for the author the unequal power-relationship between parents and children. The children are

portrayed as being at the mercy of their parents, their own thoughts and ideas are not taken notice of. In this text the author presents this unequal relationship as the cause for the fact that kids like Amélie and herself turn out not to take themselves seriously enough and who suffer from feelings of inferiority.

The film experiences of the two male viewers are quite different from the ones of the female viewers. In both of the male texts Amélie represents the other. In one case it is the strange other and in the other case it is the author's own other that he does not display publicly. In one of the texts the author takes an observational perspective regarding Amélie which leaves him with a combination of astonishment and fascination. He describes Amélie as the other whose actions are irrational, confusing and light-hearted, signalling a certain naivety. Amélie's way of dealing with life is opposed to the more direct, goal-oriented actions of "normal" people. Surprisingly, for the author, the unusual and imaginative ways Amélie chooses turn out to be successful. The author explicitly refers to the danger that Amélie's behaviour could be branded as insane, and is at the same time fascinated by her courage to confront herself with that possibility.

In the second male text Amélie functions as the representation of the author's own other, namely his own fantasy-world, where he acts out things which would be devalued as nonsense. This side of him, which he only shares with close friends when making fun of things, is mirrored back to him by *Amélie* in whimsical ways. For this author watching *Amélie* gave him a sense of déjà vu, confronting him with his own dreams and fantasies.

Conclusion:

How the potential of memory work materializes depends on the commitment of the people using it. But all in all, memory work does offer an answer to the question, why certain media products are being so well liked at particular historical moments. The 4 narratives regarding *Amélie* can be read as different versions of the struggle with some of the dominant cultural narratives young people are confronted with – like the neo-liberal story of individually controlling and mastering one's own life and the failure of the patriarchal symbolic order represented by the father in supporting to cope with this demand. The memory work examples I was talking about dwell on the gendered narrative answer the film offers to this. For the two males Amélie represents what is excluded and devalued in neo-liberalism – on the one hand, this is playful, non-goal-directed, irrational behavior. On the other hand, it is an instance looking after you like the angel-like figure Amélie magically re-installing justice and peace in

other people's lives. In the case of the female narratives, the focus is clearly on the even more difficult situation of women facing the androcentric logic of neo-liberalism, where what is being traditionally labeled feminine – the care for others – has lost its value.

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