

M.I.T. Student  
Radical Empathy and the Transferential Power of Mass Media  
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The creation and transfer of memory is an essential part of maintaining traditions and culture, but has been historically limited to contact with society and sacred sites. In contrast, mass media (represented by films and museums) is widely interacted with but does not offer significant affective content. Alison Landsberg's radical description of empathy generation via mass media seems to contradict the established definitions of memory transfer as represented by the works of Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs. However, the opposing definitions can be reconciled if one considers mass media as a social entity and a *lieux de memoire*. With these assumptions, Landsberg's theory is consistent with and complementary to the established understanding of memory and presents a new tool to create and secure memory practices.

Alison Landsberg describes popular films to demonstrate the affective power of mass media on the body. In her paper *Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner* she details how film can be used to create prosthetic memory. Landsberg begins with a definition of prosthetic memories: they are affective implants "which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense."<sup>i</sup> She reports that these memories—which are transferred—still exert control over our present and future actions although they may not be a part of our past. Landsberg's claim in this paper is that such prosthetic memories can be transmitted on a large scale via popular film, and remain in the viewer as permanent prostheses that modify identity. Landsberg references studies conducted regarding the affects of film on the viewer to conclude that "the memories that the cinema affords—despite the fact that the spectator did not live through them—might be as significant in constructing, or deconstructing, the spectator's identity as any experience that s/he actually lived through."<sup>ii</sup> But how can she claim such a strong statement about the impact of

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a film on a person's identity? Landsberg is convinced by the extremely visual and fully sensory physiological experience of the cinema. She argues "why then, does the sensual in the cinema—the experiential nature of the spectator's engagement with the image—differ from other aesthetic experiences which might also be the scene of the production of sensual memory?"<sup>iii</sup> She goes on to describe emotional possession of the viewer by the content of the film, how immersive identification with the film carries over into the identity of the viewer. She concludes by suggesting that the affective power of film comes from empathy between the viewer and the subject of the film. She details how the viewer of *Total Recall* still identifies with the original form of Quade, even once it is revealed that Quade is an implanted identity living in the body of another. She claims that the viewer's identification with Quade, even though he is a false identity created from prosthetic memory, is evidence that humans can identify with real and constructed memories equally well.<sup>iv</sup> From this argument, she derives her theory that radical empathy with external identities (whether real or imagined in film) can create substantial prosthetic memory which can impact the original identity of the viewer.<sup>v</sup>

While Landsberg claims that these transference film experiences create permanent prosthetic memory, Halbwachs claims that true social experience is required for memory transfer and storage. In his seminal work *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs establishes memory as a social interaction between an individual and a group. He argues that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories."<sup>vi</sup> He argues his case by presenting how defects in social interaction, represented by the dreamer and the aphasic, directly impact

the ability to form, retain and focus memories. To Halbwachs, the dream is the only action that takes place purely in absence of society. He notes that:

"Our dreams are composed of fragments of memory too mutilated and mixed up with others to allow us to recognize them... this is because, in order to remember, one must be capable of reasoning and comparing and of feeling in contact with a human society that can guarantee the integrity of our memory."<sup>vii</sup>

So then how can memory be transferred while watching a film? Halbwachs would argue that since the viewer is not interacting directly with a real society that no true memories are generated. Films, like dreams, are not bound to the rules and structure of society and in Halbwachs' opinion would be represented as "detached shreds of the scenes we have really experienced."<sup>viii</sup> But Landsberg claims that empathy can bridge the social distance and create prosthetic memory based off of events that we haven't experienced. Thus Halbwachs and Landsberg fundamentally disagree on the social content and experiential nature of film. But perhaps the viewer of a film is more closely related to Halbwach's description of the aphasic in society. Halbwach discriminates between the dreamer and aphasic by how they relate memory to society. The dreamer in any one scene can comprehend the scene and identify with the society represented, but each scene is separate and unrelated, lending no larger structure of memory.<sup>ix</sup> The aphasic on the other hand has context and temporal structure of memory, but is placed in a new society where they cannot interact and identify with others.<sup>x</sup> Where Halbwachs would argue that the new environment presented by the film renders the viewer aphasic, Landsberg would counter that the viewer still makes strong identifications with cinematic characters despite the societal distance. Clearly neither the aphasic nor dreamer are appropriate models of the role of the viewer in relation to the film, and Landsberg and Halbwachs seem at odds with eachother.

Landsberg proposes that empathic memory transfer can be used to restore or reinvigorate ailing memory practices. In her paper *America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy*, Landsberg argues that mass media transference spaces can be used to create memory practices that maintain stories of the Holocaust. She studies the affect of the American Holocaust Museum on its viewers as a site of empathy and prosthetic memory transfer. After describing the chilling contents of the Holocaust museum, she writes:

"In the museum, we have on the one hand a proliferation of objects and an eerie lack of bodies, and on the other, a pronounced sense of our own bodies. By engaging an individual's mimetic faculty, the museum makes empathy possible... In other words, these spaces might actually install in us 'symptoms' or prosthetic memories through which we didn't actually live, but to which we now, after a museum experience or a filmic experience, have a kind of experiential relationship."<sup>xi</sup>

She argues that this kind of experience helps keep memory of the Holocaust alive in new generations as survivors and their stories disappear over time. Landsberg claims that the transference induced by the museum is related to the distance between the viewer and the object at hand. Very few people can have sympathy with the objects on display because there are very few Holocaust survivors living today. However a large and diverse audience visiting the museum can share empathy with victims separated in time and space. The absence of bodies in the museum forces the viewer to imagine and then identify with victims they have only seen traces of. Landsberg pays particular attention to the piles of shoes in the museum, commenting that: "Standing amid this room of shoes at the Holocaust museum one is struck... by their worn, lived individuality: a sandal, a cracked leather work shoe, a boot. Each shoe bears the trace of the absent body that lived and marked it."<sup>xii</sup> She argues that the purpose of such an experiential interaction with memory is to meaningfully

implant these memories into generations to come and safeguard the history of the Holocaust by grounding it in lived memory. <sup>xiii</sup> Ultimately she has a political goal to protect Holocaust memory from the advancing tides of revisionism and apathy, and she sees empathic memory transfer as a means to fight back.

Landsberg's argument for museums stands in sharp contrast with Pierre Nora's understanding of how memory is stored. Pierre Nora announces the "End of Memory-History" in his piece *Between Memory and History*. Nora fundamentally believes that we currently live in a post-memory society and are struggling to hold onto the last vestiges of true memory before they slip over the edge, obliterated by history. <sup>xiv</sup> He claims that, "Societies based on memory are no more: the institutions that once transmitted values from generation to generation—churches, schools, families, governments—have ceased to function as they once did." <sup>xv</sup> He states that history has killed memory by replacing the lived experience with a dead and academic analysis. Specifically, the construction of history based on objects has damaged the memory of the individuals involved. In contrast to Landsberg, Nora argues that:

"With the appearance of 'the trace,' of distance and mediation, however, we leave the realm of true memory and enter that of history. Think of the Jews faithfully observing their traditional ritual: as the 'people of memory,' history was no concern of theirs until exposure to the modern world obliged them to discover a need for historians." <sup>xvi</sup>

While Landsberg claims that objects, shoes, and the absence of the individual can create an empathic transferential space, Nora challenges that collecting of objects destroys the original memory of the Holocaust outright. Nora argues that museums and other sources of history attempt to supplant memory, not create it. Nora believes that "If we still dwelled among our memories, there would be no need to consecrate sites embodying them." <sup>xvii</sup> Put

simply, Nora thinks the mere existence of the Holocaust museum is confirmation that society has *already lost* the memory of the Holocaust and it is too late to recall it. Landsberg readily admits that there is a dearth of memory practices surrounding the Holocaust, but sees the museum as a way of recovering practices that were lost or never existed.<sup>xviii</sup> Nora sees this sort of recording and archiving as the antithesis to proper memory practices. He challenges that such archives and collections of objects are "no longer a more or less intentional record of actual memory but a deliberate and calculated compilation of a vanished memory. It adds a secondary or prosthetic memory to actual experience."<sup>xix</sup> Nora is concerned that the recent trend to collection and preservation has done more harm to memory than good, and would disagree with Landsberg's assessment of the Holocaust Museum as a way to restore memory. In fact Landsberg spends a long time in her paper describing the exact ways the museum was constructed to transfer as much emotion as possible, something Nora would dismiss as "deliberate and calculated". Nora also dismisses prosthetic memory as an addition to true memory and experience, and would characterize it as historicized memory. At the highest level Nora views the experiential museum as another thrust by history to kill memory through collection and analysis.

Halbwachs disagrees with Landsberg's theory of memory transfer, but if we consider the media as a social entity then the authors agree that prosthetic memory can be imparted by film. The root of Halbwach's theory is the notion of the social framework for memory. The social framework is what the dreamer lacks, an interaction with a social group that provokes creation, recollection and storage of memory. If a viewer reacting to a film or museum imagines or identifies a society within that media, than it can transfer

memory as a social framework. Halbwachs writes that "One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories."<sup>xx</sup> If we consider the film as a group which the viewer identifies with, through the means of empathy, than Halbwachs would agree that the viewer could be affected by the interaction. This is in agreement with Landsberg's reference to Blumer that "while witnessing a picture one not infrequently projects oneself into the role of hero or heroine".<sup>xxi</sup> While a viewer projects themselves onto a main character, they immerse themselves in the society represented in the film and are thus governed by Halbwach's original definition of memory transfer through a social framework. With the hypothesis that empathic identification to an imagined character occurs, Halbwachs and Landsberg both agree on the transferential power of film. Likewise, the experiential quality of an immersive museum could also cause the viewer to imagine and identify with a society separated temporally, spatially, and culturally, and engage with the society not as an aphasic, but as a functioning member.

Nora's concerns about the "historicized" content of experiential museums can also be allayed if we consider such media to be a *lieux de memoire* and thus a collection of true rather than prosthetic memory. Nora describes the role of *lieux de memoire* as a reservoir of memory, a sacred place that safeguards memory against historicization. Specifically he writes that:

"Places, *lieux de memoire*, become important even as the vast fund of memories among which we used to live on terms of intimacy has been depleted, only to be replaced by a reconstructed history... When certain minorities create protected enclaves as preserves of memory to be jealously safeguarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de memoire*: that without the commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away."<sup>xxii</sup>

Landsberg would argue that the significance of the Holocaust Museum gives it status as a *lieux de memoire* and is thus capable and worthy of storing true memory. If we consider these forms of mass media as *lieux de memoire* than both Nora and Landsberg can attest to their ability to defend and preserve memory from history. Nora's detestation of historicized memory would not apply to the Holocaust Museum if it was considered a *lieux de memoire*. Nora describes *lieux de memoire* as having "washed up from a sea of memory in which we no longer dwell: they are partly official and institutional, partly affective and sentimental."<sup>xxiii</sup> Experiential museums fit this definition quite well, they are the result of an institutional effort at preservation, and operate on an emotional and affective mode. In fact, Landsberg describes at length how the Holocaust Museum presents itself as an affective rather than academic installation. She writes:

"Perhaps the hostility, mostly on the part of academics and middle-brow journalists, toward the experiential mode reflects an anxiety about the threat posed by an experiential mode of knowledge to the hegemony of the cognitive. The experiential mode complements the cognitive with affect, sensuousness, and tactility. In the case of the Holocaust museum—in the case of Holocaust in general—the cognitive model is woefully inadequate."<sup>xxiv</sup>

In light of Landsberg's argument for the affective nature of the museum, it is difficult to consider such a collection as anything but a *lieux de memoire*. Landsberg—like Nora—seeks to defend memory against history and the present (represented by "academics and middle-brow journalists") and considers the museum as an experiential rather than cognitive institution. Landsberg demonstrates her devotion to preserving memory when she explains that the "cognitive model is woefully inadequate" to understand the true horror of the Holocaust. She rejects the historical and academic connotation of museums and reaffirms that the Holocaust museum represents a thriving *lieux de memoire*.

Upon reflection, the traditional definitions of memory and memory transfer seem to accept Landsberg's radical theory of empathy when we make a few key assumptions. For Halbwachs to be consistent with Landsberg, the mass media in question has to present itself as a social framework of memory. For this to occur, the viewer must identify with the society represented in the media and "place oneself in the perspective of the group."<sup>xxv</sup> If Landsberg's description of empathic identification is correct, then the requisite perspective can be created. Nora's main objections to the experiential museum are based off of his larger argument that history sets out to analyze, archive, and thereby destroy memory. Landsberg makes it very clear that the Holocaust museum serves the opposite purpose. She describes the affective and emotional nature of the museum which lends it credibility as a reservoir of true memory a *lieux de memoire*. With the contradictions satisfied, it is clear that the mass media does have the capability to become an empathic transferential space that cultivates, stores and imparts prosthetic memories that are just as powerful as true memories. Landsberg describes this development as a "radical politics of empathy" and posits that this new form of memory transfer can be used to make real memories of other traumas and enable discussion and consideration of problems usually restricted by temporal and spatial distance.<sup>xxvi</sup> But does that mean that Nora is wrong? With such a powerful tool, is memory still under attack? Landsberg presents this new tool as a means to fight revisionism, apathy, and decaying memories of the Holocaust, implying that it is needed to keep memory safe from history. Landsberg also leaves us with a word of caution and optimism. Prosthetic memory may be able to unify separate identities for a political purpose<sup>xxvii</sup>, but can also be used to promote historical revisionism through massive and mindless consumption.<sup>xxviii</sup>

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- <sup>i</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". *Body and Society* 1 (1995): 175-189. Web... pg. 175
- <sup>ii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". pg 180
- <sup>iii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". pg 179
- <sup>iv</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". pg 182
- <sup>v</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". pg 186
- <sup>vi</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". (1992): pg. 3
- <sup>vii</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". pg. 41
- <sup>viii</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". pg. 41
- <sup>ix</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". pg. 44
- <sup>x</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". pg. 43
- <sup>xi</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy". *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 63-86. Web... pg. 82
- <sup>xii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory". pg. 80
- <sup>xiii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory". pg. 86
- <sup>xiv</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" (1989): Web... pg. 2
- <sup>xv</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" pg. 2
- <sup>xvi</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" pg. 2
- <sup>xvii</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History", pg. 2
- <sup>xviii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory". pg. 64
- <sup>xix</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" pg. 9
- <sup>xx</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". pg. 40
- <sup>xxi</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". pg 179
- <sup>xxii</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" pg. 6-7
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" pg. 7
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory". pg. 76
- <sup>xxv</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. "On Collective Memory". pg. 40
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory". pg. 86
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". pg 178
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Landsberg, Alison. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory". pg. 67

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