

Narrative and Memory: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics

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The study circle explores the complex intertwining of narrative and memory in processes of cultural self-understanding. It addresses the ethical, aesthetic, and political dimensions of the interaction between narrative practices of sense-making and the shaping of cultural memory. Particular emphasis is placed on Nordic and Baltic perspectives on how fictional and non-fictional storytelling practices enable diverse ways of coming to terms with the European memory of war, conflict, displacement, and political rupture. The originality of the project is that it shows, from the point of view of narrative practices, how the complex, conflicted, continuously renegotiated Nordic experience of war belongs to the broader European picture and, if rigorously investigated in that context, both adds new dimensions to how it is commemorated, represented, and understood, and opens up ethically and politically significant alternative perspectives to the concepts of Europe and European identity.

The study circle develops an interdisciplinary approach that investigates how different storytelling strategies of literature, audiovisual arts, social media, and oral testimonies address the legacy of twentieth-century European conflicts and how they travel across national borders. How do artistically produced and culturally mediated narrative models, such as those that shape the transcultural memory of the Holocaust and postwar migration, function as memorial forms that are used in reinterpreting other cultural experiences, such as the Stalinist repressions in the Baltic countries, Franco's crimes, the more recent wars in Kosovo and Ukraine, and the current refugee crisis? In examining the narrative memory that shapes European cultural self-understanding, we establish a dialogue between the Baltic memory of the Holocaust and the Soviet occupation, Nordic memories of the war that involve difficult issues of Nazi collaboration, the memory of German-Occupied Europe, the memory of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the memory and experience of the current refugee crisis.

The project explores the ethical and political questions related to the use and abuse of artistic, political, and intermedial storytelling practices that function as transcultural memorial forms. What dangers are involved in adopting the narrative memories of others? Our hypothesis is that in contrast to the competing political discourses on twentieth-century totalitarianisms, the arts have developed more productive comparative approaches that negotiate national and regional differences and address the ethical complexity of narrating traumatic experiences of war, conflict, displacement, and political rupture. Important to the ethical potential of the artistic narrative practices is also the way in which they link memory to imagination in such a way that allows us to envision a future-oriented ethics of memory. They suggest ways of narrating the suffering of past others so as to learn from their stories in constructing contemporary European identities and negotiating current political conflicts.

The study circle explores these questions through a series of symposia that further our understanding of how the Nordic and Baltic context participates in and potentially inflects ethical, aesthetic, and political issues surrounding the memory of conflict. The symposia examine, from a series of interrelated angles, the ethical and political consequences of the circulation of transcultural memorial forms, the ethical issues raised by writing and reading trauma narratives, the complex relationship between fictional and non-fictional narratives in understanding political rupture, different theoretical approaches to the intersections of ethics and aesthetics in conceptualizing narrative and memory, as well as imaginaries and memories of forced displacement from the perspective of gender and nonviolent struggle, and in relation to the current refugee crisis.

Impact, significance, and Nordic relevance

Studying how artistic storytelling practices have travelled across Europe and shaped the memory of war and displacement is of crucial importance for European cultural self-understanding, and the Nordic and Baltic perspectives can provide new insights to this ongoing memory and identity work. The study circle will enable sustained discussions leading to a fuller understanding of who we are as Europeans; how the past is used to justify actions, values, and beliefs in the present; and how it enables us to reimagine the European project for the future.

The interdisciplinary approach of the study circle makes possible both a theoretical, historical, and practical contribution. In theoretical terms, it contributes to topical debates in cultural memory and narrative studies on the ethical potential and risks of storytelling. It articulates how narrative models of sense-making underpin memory practices, how storytelling processes shape contemporary identities, and how they can open up new possibilities of experience, understanding, and imagination in the present. Discussions in narrative studies and cultural memory studies often remain lamentably separate, and we will bring them into a more intensive dialogue through reflection on how the interpretation, suppression, and negotiation of the memory of war, rupture, and nonviolent struggle across Europe are interwoven with processes of narrative identity construction and how they open up new possibilities for reshaping and reimagining the European project.

In terms of the historical contribution, we draw on and strengthen the Nordic tradition of cultural history that focuses on the experiential aspects of the lived past. Extensive work has already been done on the Nordic experience of the twentieth-century wars, but in an international context the significance of the Nordic experience has not been well understood or integrated into better-known European narratives which focus on Western and Eastern Europe. This project redresses the balance by examining the links and specific differences between the memory and representation of war in Nordic countries and Europe more generally. How is the European memory of Holocaust and postwar migration negotiated in the Nordic/Baltic countries in relation to their own local histories? What are the narrative strategies used to engage with the different historical legacies of other countries in the region?

The practical contribution of the study circle is twofold. First, the circle allows us to establish a strong Nordic-Baltic-British network for the research of narrative and memory. It forms the foundation for future Nordic and EU funding applications. In the Nordic and Baltic countries, there is strong expertise in the field of interdisciplinary narrative studies, but it is relatively dispersed, and literary narratologists often work separately from narrative scholars working in the social sciences. There is much potential in bringing literary scholars and social scientists into a more intense dialogue on the interrelations between narrative and cultural memory. Secondly, this dialogue contributes to the public discussion on issues of memory, war, and the future of Europe in the current political situation marked by the refugee crisis. The project's results provide the opportunity for making policy recommendations to the educational sector and museums on how to utilize various artistic and digital storytelling practices in engaging with the European history of war, political rupture, and displacement.

The project's publications, including a major collaborative volume that systematizes the project's findings in an ambitious, synthetic account, will make a significant contribution to the understanding of the intersecting ethical, aesthetic, and political dimensions of narrative and memory. It aspires to further contemporary Nordic, Baltic, and European self-understanding and cross-cultural dialogue in the joint endeavour to rethink the place and task of Europe today, in what is simultaneously an age of terrorism and conflict and an age of unprecedented transcultural exchange and interaction.

Plan of symposia

The winter meetings will be organised in collaboration with the hosting institutions and in relation to MA- and/or PhD-courses. We are committed to collaboration with the other study circles in NSU, several of which have connections to the proposed circle – particularly in relation to its political and human rights dimension.

Winter 2017, Tallinn, Estonia

Narrative Strategies and Memorial Forms

This symposium will explore the ways in which the narrative strategies and memorial forms developed in the context of remembering the Holocaust and postwar migration have contributed to the articulation of other histories of war and political conflict in the Nordic region and across Europe and how they have currently been used to make sense of contemporary experiences of war and displacement. We shall discuss the ethical and political consequences of the circulation of transcultural memorial forms that may facilitate but also hamper the articulation of regional differences and historical specificity of different conflicts.

Summer 2017

Trauma Narratives and Ethics of Reading

This symposium will discuss the specific ethical and aesthetic issues raised by writing and reading trauma narratives in the Nordic/Baltic context. Trauma narratives attempt to communicate suffering which is sometimes at the edge of representability and barely comprehensible to those who have not lived through it. We shall examine the aesthetic means which have been adopted to confront this problem and the ethical challenge which trauma narratives pose, as they radically bring into question our responsibility as readers, scholars, subjects, and citizens.

Winter 2018, Kristiansand, Norway

Cultural Memory: Fictional and Non-Fictional Political Narratives

Constructing narratives is a common enterprise for authors of fiction and informants who offer their lived experience in oral or written accounts. Both fictional and non-fictional narratives rely on conventions and patterns which they imitate, reconstruct, or destabilize. This symposium explores how historical events are recounted in witness accounts and literary narratives. The complex relation between these different types of political narratives calls for a critical reflection on the relationship between fact and fiction, which will be a key issue of the symposium.

Summer 2018

Imaginarities and Memories of Forced Migration: Gender and Nonviolent Struggle

This symposium explores imaginaries and memories of forced migration by focusing on issues of gender and non-violent struggle. Gender is regularly mobilised in stories from the powerful masculinity of the male patriarch leading his people to safety to mass media focus on the imaginary dangers of unaccompanied young male refugees, to the particular vulnerabilities and forgotten stories of women forced to flee with children. How does gender feature in imaginaries and memories of forced migration? We address this question in the context of a broader discussion of how agency and nonviolent struggle are perceived in cultural memories of forced migration.

Winter 2019, Turku, Finland

Intersections of Ethics and Aesthetics in Theorizing Narrative and Memory

This symposium will focus on different theoretical approaches to the intersections of ethics and aesthetics in conceptualizing narrative and memory. Aesthetic commitments – which may emphasise, for example, narra-

tive coherence or incoherence, the ineffability or communicability of traumatic experiences – are never ethically neutral. The symposium explores the complex ways in which the aesthetic and the ethical are intertwined in processes and practices of narrating the past in Nordic, Baltic, and broader European contexts.

Summer 2019

Fragmented Memory: War, Refugee Crisis, and Narratives of Displacement

This symposium will explore memory within the context of forced displacement, asking how traumatic or incomplete narratives are woven, shared, or at times silenced. We examine the immediate constructions of narratives of absence and loss during displacement, and the consequences of subsequent narrative gaps or (re)negotiations. We also investigate the possibilities for enabling the voicing of such narratives within and across communities – the physical connections and disconnections, the digital technologies, and the multi-sensory interactions that might be opened up through storytelling and listening practices.

List of the people behind the proposal

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