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The Documentality of Memory in the Post-Truth Era

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Politics, the environment and the economy are all affected by the phenomenon of post-truth. So is history. Revisionism, politicized or racialized memories, and collective memories of small groups are opposed to the work of historians. The paradigm of truth, which historians of the 20th century have put at the center of historical knowledge, is weakening, and scientific institutions are no longer sufficient to impose their visions of the past.

Documentality, according to Bernd Frohmann (2012, p. 174), is a power or a force which is given to a thing by special arrangements with other things. According to Maurizio Ferraris (2013, p. 247), documentality is the form that social objects take when instituted with inscribed acts. Both are referring to a special agency which is given to objects by the documents.

Because the production of historical knowledge is directly concerned with documents (Buckland, 2017), I propose to analyze the documentality of memories. In order to analyze memory and history, the documentary nature of memories makes it possible to identify paradigms other than that of truth.

I will first present some of the main points of document theory. Then I will show that the relation of historians to the document since the 20th century is led by the paradigm of truth. I will quickly recall what the recent concept of post-truth is and how it undermines the role of historians as guarantors of truth. In a third part, I will refer to the work of Manuel Zacklad (2018) on the design of information. I will propose three regimes of the existence of memories (mediality, indiciality and auctoriality), and I will also propose to take them as criteria in order to evaluate the reliability of memories.

Memory and History in the Light of Document Theory

In the epistemology of history, authors apply the term of memory in various ways to evoke the past: museums of history, heritage, traditions, national commemorations, and oral history narratives. They share the fact of not being scientific productions and of rather addressing the general public.

In this work, I will try to encompass under the term *memory* both historians' scientific works and narratives produced by amateurs. But I admit this is heresy from the point of view of historical epistemology. The criteria proposed by historians of the 20th century in order to set the boundary between history and memory are deeply linked to the notion of historical sources, which are the documents on which this science is based. Therefore, document theory is very useful for us in order to understand the arguments of historians.

Niels Lund (2009) and Michael Buckland (2015, 2017) produced relevant syntheses of the emergence of document theory and the evolution of its concepts and issues. I will quickly recount them. Lund recalls the etymological definition of the document, which refers to its function. In Latin, *documentum*, and its root *doc*

are related to teaching, to examples, to demonstration. In French, we find a new meaning “evidence and information” linked to the birth of bureaucracy and written law. The functions of the documents are to carry and transmit knowledge or to produce a reliable trace of the reality of a fact. Lund suggests this definition of the term document: “written, true knowledge” (Lund, 2009, p. 3).

The document started with writing and remained for a long time synonymous of a book or bundles of paper. But in the 1930s, with photography and phonography as professional practices, Paul Otlet (1934, p. 43) proposed a simple definition of the document as signs on a medium. Robert Pagès (1948) and Suzanne Briet (1951) replaced the term “sign” with the term “evidence,” thus encompassing in the definition objects and living beings. It is no longer the shape which defines a document, but the function which is assigned to an object in order to represent a set of knowledge. The importance of use is reinforced by Jean Meyriat (1981, pp. 51–63) who made a difference between a *document by destination*, which is a document expressly produced to be the trace of a fact, and a *document by use*, produced with another intention but used as evidence of some fact.

In 1997, Michael Buckland renewed the question of “What is a document?” within the digital context. And a few years later, in the early 2000s, the collective project R. T. Pedauque, coordinated by Jean Michel Salaün (2012), proposed a global approach in three dimensions for the study of documents, their actors and their economy. These dimensions are:

- physical perception (SEEN = medium + inscription)
- intellectual effort (READ = decoding + representations)
- mediation (KNOWN = memory + transaction)

All these works led Michael Buckland (2017, p. 3) to identify three statuses of the document according to their origin:

- a conventional view that is a document *created as* a document, ordinarily producing an inscription on a flat surface
- a functional view that is objects *made into* or presented as documents
- a semiotic view that is objects *regarded as* documents by a perceiver, whether or not they were produced with this purpose

We will now consider the paradigm of truth.

Memory vs. History: The Paradigm of Truth

At different periods of the 20th and 21st centuries, many historians have presented their reluctance as concerns the memory and particularly the testimony. They often perceive memory as an instrument of power, manipulated by social groups, or states, in order to serve their struggles and interests (Le Goff, 1986, pp. 174–177). Memory, as a narrative of past facts, does not fit with the paradigm of history, which is the search for authenticity: authenticity of sources and the truth of facts.

According to Paul Ricoeur (2003, p. 66) the *orthos logos* of memory is “*la requête de vérité*” (the search for truth). Something occurred, and someone tries to remember it as precisely as possible. But some characteristics of the memory-as-a-narrative, take away from the truth and pervert it. These characteristics are:

- *Orality*. The memory is oral; thus, it is moving. According to Ricoeur, the declared memory (that is the testimony) is reliable if stable, and if the witness is able to repeat it without modifying it. And it is all the more trustworthy that it can be subject to controversy and confronted to other testimonies.
- *Memory is embodied*. Thus, it is emotional. The testimony carries the emotion of its author and communicates it to others. According to Ricoeur the testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust are the most difficult to receive in the paradigm of authenticity, because the emotion we feel faced with the horror and the respect of the suffering of the witness do not make it possible to evaluate the reliability of the story.
- *Testimony is voluntary*. As said Marc Bloch (1949/2006), the witness is a prisoner of his own prejudices, and of the prejudices of his time, which lead him to misrepresent the truth.

For these reasons, declared memory cannot be history. But it can be a source, provided that some technologies are implemented. Such as:

- inscription, which set the declared memory in the shape of a verbatim, and “removes it from its narrator” (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 209)
- a critical method, practiced by professional historians, which is a mechanism to sort out “what people can believe to be true or false; or more exactly, to be probably true or probably false” (Bloch, 2006, p. 831)

We can say that the historians ask in their own way, and with their own conclusions, the same questions as do the theoreticians of the document.

The first question is: What is a document? The answers of the historians sometimes meet the answers of document theory. Like Briet and Pagès, Bloch accepted all types of evidence: object (such as remains), inscribed signs, and parts of the body, such as bones. (Bloch said nothing about living animals, but he did evoke the Plesiosaurus.) Ricoeur mentioned non-verbal and non-narrative evidence: fingerprints, photographic archives, or traces (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 220). But he advised us to use them in addition to a testimony and not as a single clue.

Can an oral source be a document? Marc Bloch considered that idiomatic expressions or linguistic traits can be evidence. But he didn’t specify whether these words should be written in a text or whether they would survive in language itself. In the same period Paul Otlet (1934, p. 366) included oral literatures and tradition within the global class of documents. But Paul Ricoeur firmly rejected the oral forms. He accepted them as evidence only once recorded on a medium (with a clear preference for writing) in order for them to become invariable and removed from

the emotion of the witness. But is a verbatim good evidence? The verbatim sets a reference version of a story, but is it truer than another version? A lie or a false testimony does not become true once it is transcribed.

Oral and written documents are not as different as they seem to be, for a testimony can only exist if it is delivered to somebody. A memory is always a sort of text, because it is always a sort of inscription, if only in the mind of its receivers. Pierre Nora (1984, p. 26) stated that there is no more memory, but only history, because there are no more traditional societies in which memory is embodied, in gestures and rituals. According to him, the contemporary memory is an archival-memory for it always puts the past into texts whether they are verbal or not. Therefore, in our “requête de vérité” the document no longer matters as a physical medium, but as a substitute of the tradition-memory.

The second question is about the document by destination and the document by use. The documents by use are “involuntary witnesses” (Ricoeur, 2003, 2015), like remains or written records produced for other purposes and diverted into historical sources, such as charters, minutes of a trial and administrative documents. The documents by destination are the voluntary testimonies (narratives) or memoirs. Bloch said that history should mostly trust sources by use (2006, p. 892). Ricoeur accepted voluntary testimonies only when they are officially registered as archives and used by readers other than those that they tried to convince first. Because this slightly turns them into a sort of document by use.

The third question refers to the three dimensions of the document: It is the question of the critical method of historians, as brought up by Marc Bloch. Bloch referred to *De re diplomatica*, which Jean Mabillon wrote at the end of the 17th century in order to expose his method to authenticate documents. Diplomatics studies analyze the shape of a document, its process of design and the way it is transmitted. Diplomatics is not concerned with the core of the discourse, but the shape and the layout of the writing and the chemical characteristics of the paper. It evaluates if the elements of presentation are consistent with the conventions of the time and the place in which the document is said to have been produced, and if the document is what it claims to be. All those points are about the SEEN.

But documentary authenticity is not the historical truth. Authentic documents can lie. And fake documents can tell the truth. The understanding of the text and the overlaps with other sources allow historians to detect the inconsistencies and contradictions that reveal a lie or an error. They have to cross the “intelligibility gap” and the “cultural readability” (Bachimont, 2017, p. 100) and deliver a story of the past as fairly as possible. This point is about the READ.

What about the KNEW? With the question of the post-truth, we are getting nearer to the paradigm of documentary truth in its socio-medial dimension, which is the KNEW approach. The recent concept of post-truth refers to a new relationship to the truth that is particularly observed around political debates in newspapers and

social networks. The term has recently emerged in the Anglophone press, but the origin of the concept is granted to the philosopher Harry Frankfurt, in his essay “On Bullshit” (1986, republished in 2005). He makes a difference between the lie, which is the opposite of the truth, and bullshit, which makes no reference to the truth. While the liar makes an audience believe his lie, the bullshitter tries to give a certain image of himself, whatever the truth of his words. Of course, debates of opinion and statements that cannot be checked particularly suit the bullshitter.

What moves bullshit from rhetoric to the social field is its generalization. The other initiator of the concept, Ralph Keyes (2004), points out the generalization of the “spin job.” It is a communication which aims at manipulating, and in which the effect matters more than the truth. Keyes identifies the root of the phenomenon in the practices of narrative psychology, in which the patient’s well-being overrules the sincerity of his story. Storytelling in corporate communication, postmodernism and the linguistic turn are also related to post-truth.

Post-truth is a “hyper-communication” (Tanquerel, 2017, p. 11). His paradigm is not the truth of the message, but the efficiency of the perlocution. It leads to two contradictory behaviors among the receivers: They trust those who comfort their beliefs, and they are suspicious of those who contradict them. Too much doubt here, not enough there...

Thus, who can guarantee truth in our society? According to Bloch, it is, without doubt, the professional—that is, the librarian, the historian, the teacher or the journalist. But in our post-modern society, they are suspected of manipulating the past according to their own beliefs and producing not a historical truth, but rather discourses on the past.

Antoine Prost (1996, p. 284) attributed what he called “the demystifying posture” to the aftermath of the events of May 1968 and the influence of Michel Foucault and the linguistic turn. The semiological approach, according to him, reduced historical narrative to a text, voiding its relation to the real. It is no more than a simple literary product, which no longer reflects the preliminary work of critical analysis of the sources. Ricoeur (2003) also wrote a few pages in *Memory, History, Forgetting* about his controversy over Roland Barthes’ *Discours de l’histoire* and Hayden White’s *Metahistory*. He considered these approaches as aporetic because historical knowledge cannot be reduced to only the discursive dimension. History must be analyzed through a “triple frame”: documentary evidence, causal explanation, and literary formatting (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 323).

We can see that Ricoeur admitted the communicative character of historiography. The historian’s narratives are not pure documents (as are the involuntary sources), but nor are they pure works of communication in the post-truth sense (as are the voluntary testimonies). They are communicative-documents, which prove *and* produce effects. We will examine Ricoeur’s “triple frame” with

respect to the three dimensions of R. T. Pedauque, coming from a more communicative perspective. For this we will refer to Manuel Zacklad's work.

Analyzing Memory in its Documentary and Communicative Dimensions

Social networks reinforce the post-modern phenomenon. If scientists only communicate among their peers, in their traditional publishing networks, they cannot reach the general public. But, publishing on the web in the same networks as the general public, they may lose their authority and have to face the "invasion of the idiots," to use the formulation of Umberto Eco (2015). However, Ulrich Beck (2003) noted that they are also confronted with the "enlightened citizen" because the difference between an amateur and an expert is blurry. Even worse, in order to be heard, scientists must play the game of hyper-communication. It is no longer sufficient for them to prove the relevance of a discovery, they now have to introduce themselves and be convincing (Beck, 2003, p. 368). As we cannot accept giving up *la requête de vérité*, what criteria should be used instead of authority? Traditional methods of authentication by the shape of the medium still exist, but methods of evaluating the intent of the author and the use of the receiver should be added. So we have to get into the communicative dimension of historical memory and study it, not isolated as a medium of knowledge, but in its social dimension as an interaction of productions and receptions. (Which makes memory be a cooperative transaction.)

Manuel Zacklad noted that information design is too often approached from the point of view of graphic processing or information architecture. He recommends we consider not only the final semiotic unit (a website, a newspaper, a poster...), i.e., the result of informational design, but that we consider also the impulses and devices which led to that result. These devices encompass heterogeneous elements: the actors who are involved in the process and their modes of coordination, the editing plans and the structures of the semiotic fragments, the tools and the mediums (which can be plural in the case of a transmedia communication). All these elements can be reduced to three main interdependent activities, which are the "*moteurs*" of the whole design of an information system: textualization, documentarization, and auctorialization (Zacklad, 2018, p. 18).

- *Textualization* aims at producing media content with a narrative or argumentative logic. It concerns the text in its rhetorical dimension.
- *Documentarization* (or editorialization, which is documentarization of digital content for the web) structures and makes content visible in its medium. In the digital context, it corresponds to a semiotic and technical arrangement of dispersed elements (code and files) which leads to an understandable element, like a web page.

- *Auctorialization* concerns the signature, the intellectual property, the rights of access to a platform and everything which makes it possible to guarantee the identity of the producers and the beneficiaries of the information.

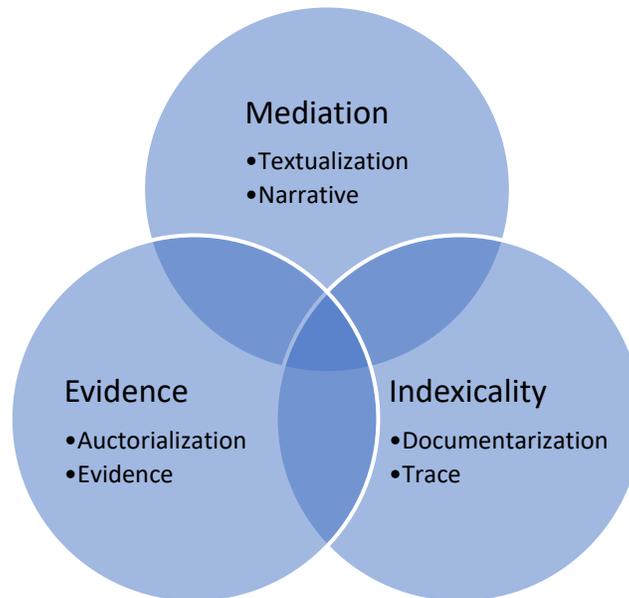
Since history is textual and documentary, and has a communicative logic, we can apply this dispositive approach to all memory productions, whether or not they are scientific. It is possible to forget the paradigm of authenticity, which separates memory from history, and to consider memory from the point of view of its dynamics of production. The question of the truth will not be left aside but will be integrated into all the documentary characteristics. The three impulses of information design allow us to propose a grid which can be applied to the analysis of all types of memory productions and to classify them according to the results of this analysis. All memorial productions, whatever the status of their authors, are made of these three components, but the intensity of their investment in each regime makes it possible to sort out and classify them.

The *regime of mediation* is the way in which memory productions are invested in perlocution, that is in its capability to produce an effect on the receivers. This is textualization because it is about the processes of argumentation which makes it possible to convince an audience, to move them and to capture their attention. The work of the mediators in museums and memorials, historical performances in heritage sites, national celebrations, historical programs and films and, in general, productions aimed at a general public, are examples of memorial activities which mainly invest in mediation. Minority memories and militant memories are other examples. They are performative because they build up the identity of a social group and make it exist in the eyes of others. The devices of the regime of mediation are live storytelling, testimonies, pictures, and artistic practices such as theatre or contemporary installations.

The *regime of indexicality* is the way in which the memorial productions mobilize techniques to make a fact of the past exist in the present. On the one hand, there are the processes of inscription on a medium, which give a permanence to the past and grant us access to traces. On the other hand, indexicality is also all the processes of documentarization, the designations, the classifications, the sortings which allow the receiver to refer to a specific moment of the past (as an index refers to a specific page of a book) and to have mental representations of it. Oral archives collections, and all the memories registered in archival collections, heritage lists, chronologies, maps and timelines, Wikipedia pages and Wikimedia collections are some examples of the devices of the regime of indexicality.

The *regime of evidence* is the way in which memorial productions try to guarantee the reliability of a trace of the past and the truthfulness of a story. We find here, of course, diplomatics, bibliographies, the reference of sources, and signatures. When the productions are collective, or participatory, the regime of evidence is shown by the rules which are fixed to the participants (for example how

they are identified). Evidence is an important part of the work of historians, archivists, or heritage institutions, but collaborative platforms also show many processes of authorship. The fact that crowds can react and report errors or can participate in collective authentication is an emerging process of the regime of evidence.



So, no memory is true or dubious in itself. Each memory has three dimensions. The works of historians always have an important regime of auctoriality, for it is the basis of their method. But some historians aim to have an effect on their readers, because their research is based on a militant or political investment (mediality). The work of amateur historians is not synonymous with questionable practices. Some are very anxious to provide all the elements in order to verify their statements. And professional historians and amateurs both give to memory an agency by the arrangements they make (documentarization). Here, we are in the core of documentality, according to Frohmann (2012). It is the case-by-case analysis of productions that makes us evaluate their degree of reliability. The post-truth era is not an era of chaos, but it marks a shift in the processes of the guaranteeing of truth. Institutions are no longer the guarantee of the reliability of a production at its source. From now on, it is the attitude of the receptor and his analysis of the context which matters.

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