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Exploring Text, media, and memory

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This publication URL:

<https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:120333>

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Text, Media, and Memory

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The present volume is the third publication stemming from the project “Text, Action and Space”.¹ It aspires to confirm the belief that texts in the general and inclusive sense of the term are rich objects. They comprise in themselves the possibility of exploring questions that are essential for the attempt to understand contemporary endeavors that have huge impacts on human life and culture. In our epoch media are everywhere, more and more powerfully provoking the acceleration of time, the shrinking of geographical distances, and questions about human memory. The haunting problem of the philosophy of media is whether or not advanced technology improves the human capability to remember, and thus to help form a communal life. To many thinkers of a pessimistic disposition it appears that the more media

¹ The first two volumes are *Exploring Textual Action* (2010) and *Exploring Text and Emotions* (2014), also published by Aarhus University Press.

can accumulate data and store so-called information, the less human beings can recollect their historical and personal past, while jubilations also abound on the extension of the human capacity to unite across cultures via enhanced mediated exchange. How can the study of the complexity of texts also contribute to a more complex view of the relation between media and memory beyond the bifurcated pattern of skepticism and celebration?

In line with seminal segments of recent research, the aim of this anthology is to approach that question by blending the study of media and that of memory articulation by way of analyses of and examples from literature, historiography, photography, film, and social media, in some instances *per se* and in others in their actively operative intermedial exchange. How do media represent or suggest the workings of memory? How can various forms of representation deal with the consequences of the excess of information we receive today? How is our intellectual and emotional capacity to remember affected by the plethora of media? What are the consequences on both a personal level and from a collective perspective? Can we really alledge that the impact of media dramatically changes the balance between remembering and forgetting?

The book's contributors are obviously concerned with problems of temporality – past, present, and future, and superimposed – as these are conveyed by concrete representations in various media and by different fields of textual research on memory and media. Theory and specific cases feed and challenge each other: a purely theoretical explanation of the intertwining of media and memory is impossible and also not desirable without being firmly rooted in the concrete reality of texts and cultures. In any event, after years of belief in more or less totalizing deductive research, criticism has become more and more oriented towards the

interplay of theoretical and textual elements, establishing by its own practice yet another jolt of intermediality in the field of literary and artistic analyses. The essays in this anthology navigate between close scrutiny of verbal and visual texts and their entanglement with theoretical issues posed by classical and contemporary studies in memory or in media.

Memory has been and is an object of study within several disciplines, in the social sciences, the humanities, and the sciences. It is not a single object, but manifests itself in a variety of forms and can be studied as the process of rescuing the past or as the faculty of acquiring knowledge, as well as a transformative act in the present in view of the future. Being a process, it is evident that memory as remembrance is embedded in processing through various media, both ancient and contemporary. For instance, although historical research necessarily tries to retrieve recollections of past facts, events, and ways of thinking and feeling, on the other hand historiography by itself makes use of powerfully written media to recall the past and, in doing so, it changes our view of the present and its future potentials. Moreover, historians continue to draw on various media: archival documents, chronicles, monuments, oral traditions, digital sources, visual media, and cultural artefacts – practical and artistic. Literature, journalism, theater, film, documentaries, videos, social and other digital media exploiting a cross-over of narrative, as well as lyrical and other genres, hybrid genres included, have in parallel and overlapping mediation articulated the same temporal complexity in individual and collective processes of memory.

The notion of collective memory marked a shift in historical and sociological research, also as regards notions of the unconscious: the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, inspired by Émile Durkheim, posed the problem of the relationship between memory and society in 1925 with his book

Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire,² showing the importance of collective inputs even in individual memory by underlining the intersubjective nature of remembrance. A contemporary of the first impact of Freudian psychoanalysis, which is also placed within the framework of intersubjectivity, Halbwachs put forward a vision of memory that nevertheless differs from Freud's: for the latter, memory implies repetition; for Halbwachs, precisely because memory depends on societal structures that are inevitably changing, repetition is not possible, and recollections are continually revised.³ Drawing a parallel between dreams and recollections, he stressed the importance of our daytime experiences as they are elaborated in our dreams – daily life inevitably being social. As in dreaming, in memory the social aspect matters.

Halbwachs' theory demonstrates that a split exists between memory and history, one having to do with time, the other with space. History cannot but be conceived in a temporal line, while memory is embodied in objects. In his posthumous *Mémoire Collective* (1950) Halbwachs argues that urban space is a tangible territory where collective memories are rooted. The city is in incessant transformation, yet paradoxically social groups perceive it as stable in spite of the fact that memories vary from one generation to the other and from one social group to the other. The seven volumes of *Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992)⁴ edited by Pierre Nora in the framework of New Historicism constitute a monumental work in line with Halbwachs' assumptions. Collective memories reside in space: topographical, symbolic, and functional places constitute the circumstances for collective and personal recollection. In approaches adopting the standpoint of New Historicist

² Halbwachs 1975.

³ See Hutton 1994.

⁴ Pierre Nora, ed. *Lieux de mémoire* 1-7. Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992.

research, archives – a powerful medium for documenting past data – are interesting not just for what they show but also and especially for the way in which they have been read and interpreted across generations.

In the humanities and social sciences, the emergent field of memory studies draws to a large extent on types of objects, images, texts, and perspectives promoted by New Historicism. This approach transforms the classical mode of historical research that deals with events we remember or seek to remember into the anthropological and psychological question of “how” we remember in the actual process of remembrance, focusing therefore on trauma narratives, commemorations, and place as sites of memory. Memory studies investigate problems of personal identity and collective feeling of belonging, emphasizing how the study of historical catastrophes on both global and local levels may charge the present of both the victims and their larger communities with a shareable historical awareness.⁵

Literature and memory

A brief survey of some questions posed by the vast literature on memory which has been developing for centuries shows that in philosophical and scientific research, too, the investigation of memory becomes increasingly important. Classical and recent psychology has dealt and is dealing with explanations and classifications of memory’s multiple types and functions.

Defining the characteristics of memory was already a concern for ancient philosophy. In the *Theaetetus* Plato described

5 See e.g. Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver, eds. *The Memory of Catastrophe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004; Owain Jones and Joanne Garde-Hansen, eds. *Geography and Memory. Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

memory as a wax tablet in our minds. Everything we perceive and think is engraved in our minds like images in the wax. We remember as long as the image lasts on the wax, but we often transfer wrong images onto it, images that are not the true imprint of our impressions when we felt them. Hence Plato considered memory as a passive and defective faculty, conveying illusions. In his *On Memory and Recollection* Aristotle used the Platonic allegory of the wax tablet, but gave it a positive value. The interpretation of his book on memory and of the meanings of the various Greek terms used in it is still puzzling for scholars. Like many contemporary philosophers and psychologists, Aristotle distinguished between short-term and long-term memory. His reflections also paved the way for some contemporary distinctions between what is today called “procedural memory” (remembering *how* – to ride a bicycle for instance) and “propositional memory” (remembering *that* – Napoleon was defeated in Waterloo). Some scholars believe that Aristotle sharply divided the ability to remember (dispositional memory) from the activity of remembering past events; others are convinced that the two overlap.⁶ In any event, for Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, memory is not passive; by referring to the past, the imagination deals with the present and opens up intuitions projecting us into the future. Aristotle is aware that, thanks to imagination, we can make conjectures about other people or about situations that differ from our own. In the same way, today’s researchers are assessing whether it is the same activity of the mind that allows us to recollect the past and to imagine the future. The link between memory and imagination proves to be important

⁶ See David Bloch. *Aristotle on Memory and Recollection: Text, Translation, Interpretation, and Reception in Western Scholasticism*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. 53–117.

for reflection on media and memory, as will be shown in the next few paragraphs.

The renewal of interest in the philosophy of mind led some philosophers to revise traditional interpretations of Descartes' conceptions of memory. Although sometimes expressing concern about the reliability of memory in the process of knowledge, he was convinced of the positive value of memory as the ability to remember if not the premises, at least the conclusions of our reasoning. He also believed that weak memory could be mediated by methods such as taking notes.⁷ In the last twenty years, with the development of cognitivist approaches to the study of emotions, Amélie Rorty and John Lyons have stressed the connection Descartes established between memory and imagination.⁸ Giving an active role to remembering and linking it to the faculty of imagining, he anticipated contemporary conceptions of the mind. These analytical philosophers claim that Descartes is not, as has often been believed, an opponent of the imagination. In spite of some hesitations, Descartes considered it an essential faculty of the intellect; he argued that memory and imagination combined allow for the elaboration, synthesis, and understanding of the data offered by sensorial perception.

Recent works of psychology and neuroscience demonstrate that memory and imagination cannot be separated. It is given as a fact that there is no specific place in the brain where memory is located. There is no single molecular transformation that can be called memory; memory is divided into several systems, each differing one from the other. In the words of the experimental psychologist and neuroscientist Endel

7 See Harry G. Frankfurt. "Memory and the Cartesian Circle". *Philosophical Review* 71.4 (1962): 504-511. 12 December 2016 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183463>>.

8 John D. Lyons. "Descartes and Modern Imagination." *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 302-312.

Tulving, “[m]emory is a biological abstraction”.⁹ Neuroscientists talk about memory processes and neural mechanisms; it is clear today that the encoding, storage, and retrieval of memories occur in different areas of the brain according to the nature of the input, but there is no consensus on the structures or systems implied in those activities, nor on the type of input that is treated by the various brain regions (such as the limbic system, the hippocampus, and the frontal lobes). Technology today allows for close observation of living brains during cognitive tasks, but it is still difficult to identify which areas are involved in these tasks. The experimental research of Daniel L. Schacter recently revealed that a common brain network underlies both memory and imagination. Similar regions are activated when we think about the past and when we imagine and simulate the future. From the point of view of mediation it is thus clear that the particular mediation carried out by the body makes it a core medium for processes of remembrance,¹⁰ a point also made by Freud and later highlighted by phenomenology.

It is worth noticing that ongoing experimental inquiries focus on the question that fascinated writers and artists across Europe in the nineteenth century: the interdependence between memory and imagination. It would be enough among many possible examples to quote some lines by Charles Baudelaire, who in his *Salon de 1846* summarized the intuitions of E.T.A. Hoffmann:

9 Endel Tulving. “Introduction [to the section on Memory]”. Michael S. Gazzaniga, ed. *The Cognitive Neurosciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995. 751.

10 Daniel L. Schacter *et al.* “The Future of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, and the Brain”. *Neuron* 76.4 (2012). 26 December 2016 <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3815616>>.

True memory, considered from a philosophical point of view, consists, I think, in nothing else but a very lively and easily-roused imagination, which is consequently given to reinforcing each of its sensations by evoking scenes from the past, and endowing them, as if by magic, with the life and character which are proper to each of them [...]. (Baudelaire 1981: 94)¹¹

Mediation and memory

Romantic authors explored the nature of human memory and identified the repercussions of remembrances in themselves, in people's lives, and in artistic creations. The obsession with individual memories and the past of a person and of an epoch culminated with Marcel Proust's *œuvre* and the many readings of his perception of time and the past. For Proust, besides being the faculty of retrieving the past, memory constitutes the material from which writers draw their inspiration. Actually literature in general has always been concerned with memory. Past tenses, which are the most usual in narrations, inevitably hint at bygone events or people: they carry in themselves the halo of remembrance. Fictional characters often recall their actions and feelings and sometimes also stress the bond between narrating and remembering.

¹¹ Charles Baudelaire [Baudelaire Dufaÿs]. "The Salon of 1846". *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1965] 1981. 94. – "La véritable mémoire, considérée sous un point de vue philosophique, ne consiste, je pense, que dans une imagination très vive, facile à émouvoir, et par conséquent susceptible d'évoquer à l'appui de chaque sensation les scènes du passé, en les douant, comme par enchantement, de la vie et du caractère propres à chacune d'elles [...]. – Hoffmann." Baudelaire Dufaÿs [Charles Baudelaire]. "XI. De M. Horace Vernet." *Salon de 1846*. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1846. 86 (la note (2) en bas de page).

At the dawn of Western culture, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, quitting the sorceress Calypso, arrives at the Phaeacians' island; when, at the court of King Alcinous, he hears the poet singing the Trojan War, he sheds tears and then he tells the story of that war – which he knew all too well. Poetry is the medium prompting Odysseus' emotions in its forms and verbal expression, and his account starts with the avowal that remembering his past renews his sorrow and makes it an active part of his present. Poetry is rooted in memory and memory is not neutral; it revives the feelings and sufferings one went through – either as a first-person experience or through imaginative participation in other people's experiences via the figurative power of the poetic medium.

Eastern and Western ancient literary works offer narrations of the past – historical, mythical, and individual. In the old Chinese tradition, Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* (started around 150-140 BCE by his father Sima Tan, Grand Astrologer to the imperial court, and completed by him in 94 BCE), is a complex story referring to the attempted murder on King Jing Ke in 227 BCE. At first it is told by the unnamed hero to King Jing Ke; yet immediately after, the King tells his own hypothetical version, unjustly accusing the nameless hero of trying to kill him. Film translates a written medium into a visual one, and, like so many stories about the past across the globe, the King Jing Ke story was adapted by Zhang Yimou in his spectacular 2002 movie *Hero* (classified as a *wuxia* film, a Chinese genre of films about martial heroes). In the cycle of media and memory, oral traditions can be mediated into written ones, and then into visual ones. This common phenomenon of multiple and interconnected adaptations belongs to what we today call intermediality, indicating the back and forth or the continuous exchange or communication among and through various media. In the era of advanced technical reproduction, the different media

are interdependent and yet interact as parts of a cultural environment in complex processes of mediation.

Through innumerable metamorphoses and radical changes, the legacy of the bond between literature, memory, and a medium can be found in today's artistic and literary productions. Over the last few years we have become more and more aware of the fact that our connection to history is essentially mediated by photography, press, television, film, and the internet. As already suggested, the text is a medium inscribed in the contemporary media world, sometimes an agent directly involved in the media process as the lines of actors or in texting, and sometimes reflexively representing it, as in novels and films that have the mediated reality as their theme.

Several essays in this anthology consider verbal, audible, tactile, and visual texts of various genres as configurations of remembrance; the focus is on modern and contemporary works since they express more or less acutely the consciousness of the double bind between memory and media. Contributors have investigated works in different media by Marcel Proust, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Roland Barthes, Djuna Barnes, André Brink, Renate Dorrestein, Daniel Eisenberg, John Akomfrah, Abdellatif Kechiche, Anne Carson, Mattis Øybø, and others. Literary and documentary works by these authors have often been vividly touched by the problem of remembering, oscillating between the weight of the unforgettable and the anxiety of forgetting in the attempt to bring out the depth of personal experiences, or what has been silenced by official reports. A whole literature has been developing since the 1980s in which apocalypse is already the archeology of the future, the frozen memory of destruction in action and to come, as in the novels of the Norwegian Johan Harstad. Sometimes the texts which are interpreted here present reflections on the medium through which reminiscence emerges; when they do not, an effort has been made by contributors

to make explicit the connection between concrete formats and the workings of memory.

This anthology shows that literature and the arts can carry out the work of sociology, history, and cultural studies – precisely those disciplines that cannot but analyze the impact of new media. Since the 1960s the proliferation of new media has fostered the research field of media studies, reconfiguring the traditional disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences.

The interrogation of the power of media emerged as early as the eighteenth century when writers ventured into periodical publications, with *The Spectator* (1711-1712) as the most important historical point of reference. The link between literature and journalism became so strong that the great majority of creative writers since the expansion of the press were also practising journalism in the political, ethical, and aesthetic spheres. The figure and the work of the journalist became the object of heated comments; the acknowledgement of the new instrument of discourse was sometimes expressed with enthusiasm, sometimes with mistrust. Samuel Johnson, who founded two periodicals, *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, warned against the dangers of the new business, which he saw as immediately related to history. As he wrote on April 8, 1758 in John Payne's journal *The Universal Chronicle, or, Weekly Gazette* (in which Johnson published his *Idler* pieces):

A Journalist is an Historian, not indeed of the highest Class, nor of the number of those whose works bestow immortality upon others or themselves; yet, like other Historians, he distributes for a time Reputation or Infamy, regulates the opinion of the week, raises hopes and terrors, inflames or allays the violence of the people. He ought therefore to consider himself as subject at least to the first law of History, the Obligation to tell Truth. (Johnson 8 April 1758; and Johnson 2003: 532)

The concern about the professional character of the journalist was accompanied by the awareness of the readers' role as an integral part of the medium's transmission.¹²

A vast quantity of historical research has been done in recent decades on the impact of magazines, reviews, and journals in various countries in terms of production, readership, and popular culture, and more recently also embracing digital platforms. The aim of this anthology is to open research on media to textual analysis. Methodologically, concrete and sensorial empirical-material elements, too – of history, literary history, sociology, philosophy, etc. – that in any way or fashion appear and/or figure in the weft of the textual complexities – are included and analytically employed in the acute close readings in order to explore and disentangle what can here literally be called textual density or thickness. All the contributors are convinced that texts in various media have a truly operative and incessant character of performativity and render textual actions which critics need to bring out according to the primary question leading their investigation. As suggested in the opening of this introduction, texts are rich: in texts one can find philosophy, ethics, politics, aesthetics, theories of emotions, creative textual-medial leaps extending across a variety of localized contexts, and, as this anthology proposes, reflections on, as well as the fostering of theories concerning memory and media.

Some touchstones in the investigation of media deserve to be mentioned: for instance, the extraordinary intuition of Or-

12 As expressed by Johnson in one of the first issues of *The Rambler* (13 October 1750). See Samuel Johnson. *The Essays of Samuel Johnson. Selected from The Rambler, 1750-1752; The Adventurer, 1753; and The Idler, 1758-1760*. Biogr. introd. and notes Stuart J. Reid. London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 189? [sic]. 12 December 2016 <https://archive.org/stream/essaysselectedfrojohnuoft/essaysselectedfrojohnuoft_djvu.txt>.

son Welles who, in 1941, after a career in theater and broadcasting, posed the problem of media in political, existential, and formal terms. In his first film, *Citizen Kane*, the power of journalism and television is embodied in the fragmentation of the story and in the multiplication of points of view. From the beginning of the movie, viewers are informed that an investigation is being launched by journalists in order to reconstruct the life of the protagonist, the press tycoon Charles Foster Kane. Documentary and fiction blend; interpretations and facts collide in the recollections of the people who had been close to Kane when he was alive. *The New York Inquirer*, a library, personal journals, newsreels, photographs, interviews, and confessions elicited by the investigating journalist are all englobed by the new medium of film that Welles himself is displaying with acute awareness of both its filiation among the cohort of media and its specificity as an audiovisual medium.

Practices and theories share the effort to understand the media phenomenon. A movie is a document and an intellectual experiment, in line with a book on philosophy and sociology or a novel. The 1960s mark a turning point for research on media. While before the 1960s different media were studied separately, Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media* (1964), pioneered an investigation focused on several media at the same time, offering a comparative evaluation of their social and psychological effects. His surprising thesis was that, in all the new means of discursivity, the important message was not their content but the medium itself. Raymond Williams replied to McLuhan in his 1974 book *Television*, positing that the social investigation should be emphasized over the technological one. He insisted, in his materialist approach, on the idea that a true Marxist history of technology should include the history of its institutionalization, distribution, and effects on users. Williams, similar to

Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, had both negative and positive opinions about photography's and film's effects. On one hand he felt that the expansion of media expressed the supremacy of capitalism and its power to manipulate people's minds; on the other he envisaged that technology could have liberating consequences and pave the way for community participation and new forms of democracy.

The long revolution caused by the changes in and the development of media since the nineteenth century, with the popular press and the expansion of the reading public, might have a positive outcome. Williams observed the overwhelming reification and fragmentation of human life since the industrialization at the end of the eighteenth century, but was not keen to adopt a totally somber, pessimistic vision concerning the transformations in human life induced by high technology. This debate – which was seminal for the creation of the field of Cultural Studies in the UK and beyond – went on in several issues of *New Left Review*¹³ in the early 1960s, and produced an innovative slant on Marxist theory in politics and culture, influenced by the research of the Frankfurt School. The thoughts of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer were crucial for Williams and the directors of the *Review*, Stuart Hall and Perry Anderson. After more than half a century, Cultural Studies and their ramifications not only constitute an important field of research in various countries, but confirm the need to conduct investigations within the humanities, where politics and aesthetics cannot be separated and must be creatively (re)contextualized in radically novel fashions in the contemporary world.

¹³ *New Left Review* was created in January 1960 as the merger of two important journals, *The New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*. Stuart Hall was the first editor-in-chief, followed in 1962 by Perry Anderson.

In the 1960s, the most pessimistic vision of the modern condition of existence, everyday life, and feeling of time was probably developed by Guy Debord who, in his *La Société du spectacle* (1967),¹⁴ contrasted traditional societies and their relationship to reality with the present-day technological society, where reality is substituted by its representations. The proliferation of media in the era of digital media has continued this discussion of power and freedom, opportunities and inequalities, with new dimensions in the globalization of communication, trade, and economy and the intensified cultural exchange of beliefs, values, and negotiations of memories.

Freezing the moment

Human beings have struggled to preserve the memory of past events and cherished the hope of grasping the fleeting present in new ways thanks to the invention of technical supports: via innumerable cunning strategies they have tried to capture what is lost or could be lost. Perhaps the puzzling connection between media and memory takes place already in the very tiny discrepancy between an event and its recording, even when the latter, as in much contemporary technology, is simultaneous with the event: the switching on of a device or the touching of a personal digital assistant might be the thin temporal jump separating reality and its re-presentation. This phenomenon is possibly not temporal but figurative, deeply anchored in media's power to represent, to give images, and to express in texts. Walter Benjamin never ceased to examine the relationships between media, memory, and history. In his 1935 article "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", he initiated an investiga-

¹⁴ Guy Debord. *La Société du spectacle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967.

tion in which history, sociology, philosophy, literature and the arts are deeply interrelated, with the role of the media at the center of his cultural criticism. He anticipated a great change in human life because of the growth of more and more differentiated technological means, the consequences of which were not simply material and social yet also spiritual, resulting in different modes of artistic creation and a different understanding of the notions of art and beauty.

In one of his sophisticated reflections in his posthumously edited notebooks *Das Passagenwerk*,¹⁵ Benjamin suggested that images, whether visual or verbal, were not just indicative of an epoch but particularly of its historical readability. Correcting the idea that the past can clarify the present, and vice-versa, he saw the “image” as the place where “once” and “now” meet and shape “a constellation” which is dialectical and not based solely on historical reference. To signify that constellation Benjamin uses a cinematic term: the image offers a “freeze” of the dialectical process. While the relationship between past and present is merely temporal, that connection between “once” and “now” is figurative, combining the visual and the linguistic orders. The relationship between memory and media, or history and media, consists of this ‘freeze’.

Now, almost half a century after the early burning debates on culture, technology, and society, the essays in this volume aim to continue in a new media landscape the exploration of how media affect the essential human faculty of remembering, an exploration that questions how literary, historical, and artistic productions respond to and interpret the way our entangled individual and collective lives are being shaped today – to ‘freeze’ the essential components of mediation and remembrance.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Acknowledgements

Our acknowledgements and thanks go to the institutions and persons that have kindly supported our work and granted us the necessary funding for the present publication, our workshops in Paris, and our editorial group meetings, all part of a project that otherwise has been conducted as networking between senior, junior, postdoc, and PhD scholars as well as MA students: the University of Bergen, the Faculty of Humanities and the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen, Aarhus University and its School of Communication and Culture as well as the Aarhus University Research Foundation, and in Paris: the Centre Universitaire de Norvège à Paris (CUNP), the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH), La Maison Suger, and La Maison de Norvège. We also wish to thank the TAS participants for their personal contributions to covering travel costs.

Particular thanks go to colleagues and administrative staff in Bergen, Aarhus, and Paris: Johan Myking, Tor Bastiansen, Anne Beate Maurseth, Siri Fredrikson, Liv Mørch, Håvard Peersen, and Steinar Sælebakke (UiB); Niels Lehmann and Per Stounbjerg (AU); Bjarne Rogan, Johs. Hjellbrekke, and Kirstin Skjelstad (CUNP); Jean-Luc Lory and Nadia Cheniour (Maison Suger); and Svein Hullstein (Maison de Norvège).

For their valuable scholarly input and co-operation as guests during our workshops we also express our warm gratitude to Lis Møller (AU) and Martine Beugnet (Paris VII-Diderot), and to our participating candidates: Sofie Marhaug (Bergen), Teresa Carbayo López de Pablo (Zaragoza/Sorbonne), and Gui Xuejiao (China/Geneva).

Our appreciation is deep-felt for the Endorsement of the TAS project by Academia Europaea, Section for Literary and Theatrical Studies, London, conferred in August 2014.

As editors we extend our warmest thanks for their invaluable work to the members of our project's extended editorial group, our TAS colleagues Svend Erik Larsen (AU), Ragnhild Evang Reinton (UiO), and Anders M. Gullestad (UiB). For their friendly assistance with logistics, housing, and practical services during our workshops and editorial group meetings we nourish appreciative thanks to the staff at Hôtel de Senlis and not least to CUNP's senior executive officer, Kirstin Skjelstad, whose efficient and cheerful support has been an invaluable asset.

Finally, we are sincerely grateful for the productive cooperation and the sustained scholarly inputs rendered by our TAS colleagues in Bergen, Geneva, Aarhus, Copenhagen, Oslo, Tromsø, Leuven, Zaragoza, and Ann Arbor.

Bergen/Geneva/Aarhus, March 2017
Lars Sætre, Patrizia Lombardo, Sara Tanderup