

## Memories and visions

### Introduction, by Owe Ronström

#### ***Memories...***

In recent years, memories have become a major theme in cultural research, paralleled by a massive popular interest in memories, in the form of trendy books and television series on history, the founding of local museums, enactments of episodes from local history. Of course, memories in different forms are what subjects like history, sociology, ethnology, anthropology and folklore have been studying all the way long. But while much early work on memories dealt with "source criticism", methods to sort out true from false, what really happened from what was believed to have happened, the new interest is more devoted to the production and construction of memories, and to their meanings and functions in society. As the Swedish folklorist Lotten Gustafsson has pointed out, ethnology has moved away from from the study of "folk memories" to the study of popular memory production, or "from seeing traditions as roots from the present down to the past, to seeing them in the light of symbolic processes by which the present is charged with values that are projected on the past." (Gustafsson 2001:20, my translation).

In 2003 a group of folklorists from Sweden, Finland and Estonia set out to discuss memory production and memory construction in this new vein. Later a colleague from Lithuania joined the group. As folklorists usually do, we began by looking for fields and topics that could raise interesting questions and illuminate important processes. We came up with a set of rather different studies on memory production. The articles presented in this volume deal with memories of the Finnish civil war; of political history of 20th century Estonia; of mythical Swedes in old Lithuania and the likewise mythical Sweden in today's Lithuania; of the return of the Middle Ages in Visby, Sweden, and Turku, Finland. They analyze memories in the form of artifacts, monuments and sites, pictures, diary notes, legends, proverbs and other forms of narrative.

What are memories? One answer is that they are products of social processes whereby the past is represented through culturally bounded expressive forms (after Robins 2002). In this definition the stress is on the processual, on representation, and on expressive forms, which

makes it a good starting point for us as folklorists. But in our discussions we soon felt a need for pushing things a bit further. A key to most understandings of memories is the notion of "a past". Memories are generally conceived of as being about things that have happened, of the past, from the past. But since there are also memories that have never happened, the past must be understood as a more abstract and general category than simply "yesterdays" or "times gone by". Much memory production is about presenting and representing not only the past, but the generally *absent*, in time or space or both. In a more general sense then, memory production is a form of *shift* (Ronström 1996), related to what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) has called "re-coding operations" and what Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (1992) has termed "decontextualisation", where something is actively shifted, moved, or brought, from one context to another.

Also, we soon found that the idea of "a past" too easily makes us focus upon the represented past, overlooking the representation in the present. Memories may be about the past, but they are not of the past, for the past, nor in the past. Central to our understanding is the simple idea that what we call memories have a direction, that they are made to move forward, not backwards. With this postulate in mind, we can now rephrase our working definition: "Memories are products of social processes by which the past or the otherwise absent is represented in the present, for purposes in the future, by the use of culturally bounded expressive forms".

### **...and visions**

This way of understanding memories brings us to memory production or memory construction. From there it is only a small step to 'visions', representations of what has still to come. Visions can be seen as memories that have not yet happened. Like memories, visions are loaded with emotion and moral, they are not only about what may happen, but about what should or even must happen. And like visions, memories open doors to the coming, pave the ways towards the future. You could say that both memories and visions are about directing the past and the future: there are memories not because there has been a past, but because there is a future to come - there are visions not because there is a future, but because there has been a past. If memories thus make us "move forward backwards", to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, then visions can be said to make us "move backwards forward". This fundamental

connection between memories and visions is underlined in all the articles in this volume. All are about things past that are (re-)produced in the present for reasons that in some sense are still to come.

In folklore studies today, this understanding of how the absent, past, future, and present are intertwined has become almost commonplace. At least since the 1980's a number of scholars have convincingly shown that a number of important notions in ethnology and folklore, such as tradition, heritage, ritual, and custom, should be understood as *interfaces* that bring the absent in connection with the present and vice versa. Take for example 'tradition'. In many European usages at least since the 19th century, 'tradition' implies the handing over from one generation to another of cultural or natural entities, such as abstract habits, norms, values or material objects and artefacts. 'Tradition' obviously *refers* to the past, but at the same time this past is continuously recreated in the present (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Because "continuity is constructed, it includes an element of discontinuity. To refer to the past, to take account of or to interpret it, implies that one is located in the present, that one is distanced or apart from the object reconstructed" (Handler & Linnekin 1984: 287)

As Handler and Linnekin points out in their seminal article 'Tradition, Genuine or Spurious' from 1984, what is important is that to "refer to", or "to be about", is not a natural but a *symbolical relationship*, without any "objective deposit" that is being handed over (Handler & Linnekin 1984: 275f). To summarize this way of reasoning in one catchphrase, you could say that memories, like tradition, heritage, custom and ritual, are made of the past, in the present, for the future.

## **Production**

Our approach to the study of memories and visions has been from the point of view of production or construction. This is a perspective that leads us to see people as active agents, entrepreneurs, constructors, and to the products, the memories and visions, as active in their own sense. What interests us is not only meaning, what things say, but also *agency*, what things do. A central metaphor underlying our discussions is 'machinery'. Memories are produced in 'factories', where certain procedures and mechanisms are at work. The articles in this volume deal with museums, tourist bureaus, archives, and other institutions where the machinery metaphor seems especially apt. And, as Anne Heimo shows in her article, personal narratives too are produced in a way that can be approached as a 'machinery' of a kind.

Important is that these machineries not only produce memories, objects, destinations or sites, but also an imagery, an affective mode, an emotional set-up, and ways to approach, perceive and handle the memories. Precisely this is what Ene Kõressar shows in her article, how much memory production is about creating and shaping the sublime, and that what makes a memory worth remembering is not so much what it points at or refers to, but the "affecting presence" that is its result (Armstrong 1971, Svensson 2004).

Three modes seems to be of special importance to memory production – historization, authenticity and aesthetization. Historization is about attaching pastness, a quality that no memory can do without. When attached, we are made to look to what is represented, rather than to that what represents. Historization foregrounds the absent, and makes certain questions irrelevant, such as how the memory production was done, by whom, or for what purpose.

Authenticity is about attaching factuality, truth, and also affect. Authenticity structures both the ways memories are produced, distributed and "consumed". A way of slipping out from the true/false dichotomy, central to the idea of authenticity, is to perceive it as a 'key', a 'framing device' in Erving Goffman's sense (1975). In such a perspective authenticity can be understood as a way of approaching things, a *mode* that inserts certain understandings and induces certain meanings. Authenticity is about legitimation, but not so much founded in historical facts as in the emotions it brings about. When projecting objects as authentic, an affective presence is set up that induces values. Thus, to control issues of authenticity is to exercise power.

There are many authenticities. One is the authenticity of the producer. What is judged is how well the result matches the original intentions of the producer. This is the core of the classical western art myth. It is according to such an authenticity the performance of an expressionistic painter or a jazz musician is to be judged upon. Another is the authenticity of the product. When an object is produced as authentic, it is valued according to how well it represents the category it belongs to, how 'typical' it is. This is the authenticity of much folk art, valued for its authentic origins, also the type of authenticity that Anne Heimo and Ene Kõressar refer to in their articles. A third is the authenticity of the production. This is the authenticity of the performance. Neither the product nor the producer is focused, but instead the way things are

produced. Here authenticity is a question of the right materials, methods, and tools. A fourth is the authenticity of the consumer. The authentic is the experience, the taste, or the emotion. True is what feels true, a position much taken by the growing experience industry. Much of the authenticity debates around heritage sites such as the Turku Castle and the Hanseatic town of Visby (articles by Aarnipuu, Ronström and Johansson in this volume), revolve around this type of authenticity. A fifth is the authenticity of the model or archetype. When a physical object coincides with a mental model it can be perceived as more valuable and true than other objects of the same category. A way of understanding the success of Visby as a historical town, is that it fits the archetypal models of an “old town” better than many other old towns.

Aesthetization is about attaching values that transcend the here and now, and bring the products in connection with the eternally human and beautiful. In much heritage production, such as the cases discussed by Aarnipuu, Johansson and Ronström, “beauty” is treated as an undisputable and self-evident value. But at the same time aesthetization is one of the most important means to achieve and exercise power. By aesthetization central issues can be moved from politically defined spheres, to ‘non-political’ rooms, where matters of taste and style is decided upon by aesthetical expertise. Another effect of aesthetization is visuality, a central quality, and a key to much heritage production.

## **Representations**

Memory production is fundamentally a question of *representation*, which is the process, and of *representations*, which are the results. A problem with ‘representation’ is the underlying dichotomisation into a primary and secondary level of existence. Representation are when some primary object, seen as true and real, is brought to a second life in a new context. If the secondary level fits the model well enough, we may call it ‘authentic’ (in the fifth sense, above), or else we may dismiss it as misrepresenting, false, inauthentic.

From our point of view this common understanding of representation is misleading. In line with the ideas presented above, the importance of representations is not so much with relations to what really happened there and then, but their meanings and functions here and now. To paraphrase William Thomas’ famous theoreme, you could say that what interests us is not if things are true or authentic, but when any such belief has true and authentic consequences. At the same time it is clear that there is a point where the differences between

these approaches to representations become especially highlighted, and the consequences of special importance. For the tourist industry, for example, it is of vital interest that the destinations produced are possible to present as authentic in one or another sense. Needless to say, this is especially important to heritage sites, where history is strongly foregrounded. Historization is necessary to make us focus on the represented, and to overlook the present, the producers, and the production as such. If a heritage site is not well enough historized and aesthetized, its authenticity may be questioned. When at a tourist site a tourist says in dismay: “This place is only for tourists!”, a crack in the modes of representation is brought to the surface, which creates irony and ambivalence towards both the representations and the represented. The heritage field is full of irony and ambivalence, tropes that point towards and underlines liminality. Much of this irony and ambivalence stems from the many dichotomies that are used by the heritage industry as rhetoric devices, such as true-false, modern-old, living-dead.

## **Dichotomies and tropes**

The main trope used in memory production, as in most representation, is without doubt *metonymy*, when parts stand for a larger whole. Metonymies can either stand alone, or work together in long intertwined chains, where every whole at the same time is a part that stands for another whole, at ever more abstract levels. What kind of mythical worlds are ultimately invoked by such metonymical chains? In the present studies we find mythical chronotopes and taleworlds such as a Lithuanian “Sweden”, a Swedish and Finnish “Middle Ages”, a Finnish “Civil War”, a pre-Soviet “Estonia”. Such mythical landscapes can be loaded with implicit meanings, and because of their polysemic quality they can be used as tools or weapons, by individuals and groups, to expand social and cultural space, to win and exercise power.

Metonymies have some interesting consequences. One is of course that when concrete bits and pieces are chosen to represent abstract and absent wholes, much effort has to be made to make us neglect and overlook the parts themselves, the holes between them, why they are chosen, by whom, and for what purposes. While some other tropes, like metaphores and ironies, tend to focus as much on the presented as on the represented, metonymies tend to foreground the represented, which, of course, is advantageous, if, as often is the case, there is no complete, authentic whole to show the visiting tourist. Another consequence is that since

the part is always smaller than the represented whole, metonymies produces a centre-periphery relation, such as for example when a small part of Visby comes to stand for the whole, placing 90% of the city and its inhabitants in the social, cultural and geographical periphery.

As Hayden White has pointed out in a series of works (White 1973, 1978, 1987), tropes are important because of the ways in which they organize our thinking. White claims that there are relatively simple and clearcut relations between tropes, modes of explanation, modes of emplotment and ideology. In his *Metahistory* (1973) we are left with a stipulation that such connections exist between form and content, forms of knowledge, aesthetics and politics. How far this line of thinking can be taken is of course still an open question. But what has become evident in the discussions underlying the studies presented here is that tropes, as other aspects of form, do matter. When memories are produced by the kind of machineries we have studied, they are given form, and form is not simply a container for content, as often taken for granted in the common 'form-and-content' dichotomy. On the contrary, form is what it is about. Form enters into complex, multilateral relationship to structure, function, meaning, aesthetic, values systems, and - content. But of course, this idea is not so much a result of the presented studies as their starting point, making up an important part of the ontological foundations of the worldview of folklorists and folkloristics.

### ***The articles***

Anne Heimo's article gives a profound illustration of several fundamental aspects of memories and memory narratives. By the key formula "I remember" a narrative is framed within this genre. Not all memories become the themes of narratives, and those that do have gone through an active process of selecting and editing. Not all memories are told orally, but are preserved in written form as letters or diaries. Heimo in her article makes use of the accumulated memories of a family in the form of a private archive and library. Furthermore, memories are never only private and internal, but are always inserted into larger cultural narratives. The aching memories of the Finnish civil war provide a clear illustration of the painful but necessary interplay between individual remembrances and collective interpretations, which, in their turn, change in focus along with the ongoing public debate.

Heimo also introduces the concept 'postmemories', meaning memories of other persons' memories, or rather a mixture of the knowledge of somebody else's memory of a first-hand experience and your own reactions, created by listening to the narratives accounting for this event.

Ene Kõresaar's article, too, demonstrates how individual life stories are moulded by already existing cultural templates (public discourses, oral traditions). Some narrative sequences fit in smoothly, others spill outside the forms, and still others are strong enough to manipulate the walls of the moulds. The two life histories used by Ene Kõresaar illustrate instances of flexible adaptation to existing templates as well as astonishing grades of what we would today term political incorrectness.

At still another, higher, level conflicting templates, connected to different world-views or political ideologies, enter into dialogues or compete openly with one another. Kõresaar's text illustrates how a group's, or even a nation's, grand narratives are constructed at the lowest possible level, that is the single individual's life history.

When such templates for thinking, talking, and acting are attached to specific places, symbolically loaded modes of experiencing emerge, encouraging us to center our attention upon certain aspects of a place, while at the same time actively disregarding others. Two complementary, or contesting, cultural templates are scrutinized in Owe Ronström's article, using the World Heritage Visby as an example. The template "tradition" seems to induce rurality, peasants, and immaterial phenomena, and, emphasizing the complementarity, "heritage" occupies fields related to the bourgeoisie, urbanity, and monuments. From an evolutionary point of view, it might look as if 'tradition', as a product of early modernity, simply was substituted by the late modern concept 'heritage'. Ronström's examination makes it obvious, however, that heritage is more than an empty form, waiting to be filled up with a suitable content. Instead, the mental image 'heritage' can be shown to possess immanent qualities that make it a potent tool for exercising political power. Maybe the "heritagization" of Visby transforms both the inhabitants and the tourists the role of audience to the grand feat of the heritage makers?

With Carina Johansson, we may speak of mindscapes in the meaning of cultural forms for advancing accepted ways of experiencing chosen sites, artifacts, or situations. The image production of the tourist industry visualizes these templates or mindscapes. In them we find a determination to envision ideas of an admirable history, open to explore and experience for anyone who in the future decides to visit the tourist sites of the postcards or the brochures. Carina Johansson's interviews with three non-tourists lay bare very clearly the discrepancies between the tourist industry's commercially adapted mindscapes and the practical, everyday understanding of the same places by the local inhabitants. They are already present in the world of the mindscapes, and their memories of the ruins or narrow alleys are probably more associated with childhood games than with medieval kings and knights.

Lina Bugiene's article demonstrates how one cultural template, the post-Soviet Lithuanian self-image, is outlined with the help of contrasting effects. Orally transmitted legends, travel reports, personal experience stories, as well as newspaper and magazine articles have contributed to a process of demonizing the Swedes of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as the *homo sovieticus* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The resulting stereotypical images, together with a complicated picture of today's Scandinavians, have been used to make up a negative imprint of a national character that is defined by what it is *not*.

In describing this process, Bugiene also shows how memories, by being retold many times gradually lose their individual flavor and factuality to instead become collective and fictitious. We could call this transformation folklorization.

Tellervo Aarnipuu in her article describes city planners' efforts to create a visionary self-image of Turku, plausible to the community itself and possible to exploit commercially by the city's tourist industry, and otherwise. These efforts fall inside the boundaries of one contemporary bureaucratic genre, the strategy document. Lately, we have heard the stereotypical catchphrases of such more or less innovative texts being repeated till exhaustion: growth center, regional cooperation, logistic position, and sustainable development. The practical applications of these strategy documents are not always clearly discernable in the cities, and perhaps they are supposed to exist in different worlds. In the fabulous narrative of the tourist brochures, two old edifices, the castle and the cathedral, together with the invisible, subterranean, remnants of medieval constructions proved to be productive as key scenes.

They could be used to constitute the link between history and future, necessary to produce authenticity.

Our investigations have made it possible to expand our working definition by adding “Memories appear in certain, recognizable, forms, contribute to the construction of cultural templates, and function as a driving force within such templates when they are used as tools for change.” Memories fuel visions, visions rely on memories

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