

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London

Unit of Assessment: 28 Modern Languages and Linguistics

Title of case study: Mediating memory in the museum

1. Summary of the impact

Dr Silke Arnold-de Simine's research on mediating memory in the museum has influenced the development of permanent exhibitions on the German Democratic Republic (GDR) which have opened or been reworked in recent years. As part of two AHRC network projects (2009-10 and 2012-13) and as a member of the Raphael Samuel History Centre she has collaborated with museum practitioners to develop new curatorial and outreach practices including three German museums, the Imperial War Museum and a new east London heritage site. Drawing on her research she has advised several museums, which have taken on board a number of her suggestions when they modified their exhibitions.

2. Underpinning research

In recent decades, there has been a significant shift in the way many museums and heritage sites define their role in and for communities and hence their approach to exhibitions and object display. In order to foster inclusivity they present themselves not so much as places of history but of memory, catering for different memory communities. The key feature of these sites is that they deploy a variety of strategies revolving around theories of memory to invite emotional responses from visitors in an attempt to make them identify and empathize with individuals and their narratives. Dr Arnold-de Simine's research is situated in this emerging field at the interface of museum and memory studies. The underpinning research insights arise out of her adaptation and re-working of a wide range of memory theories from the English-, German- and French-speaking worlds. She engages critically with how collective memory reflects emotional and ideological investments in the past (Ref 1 and 2), but also investigates the ways museum practitioners have interpreted and adapted different theories around memory, trauma and empathy within the museum context.

In rethinking concepts and practices of memory transfer she reveals the ethical, political and aesthetic implications of emerging exhibition practices, associated with the transformation of traditional history and heritage museums into 'spaces of memory' (Ref 3). Her research examines how very different types of museums use the prism of memory to provide access to the past. She has pointed to the problematic ethical implications of these practices which have to do with who is represented and how. She has challenged the tendency for museums to accept simple oppositional categories – the political or the personal (Ref 4), the exceptional or the everyday, the nostalgic or the traumatic – which may undermine their ability to acknowledge more complex ways of relating to the past. In this context, she analyses how different media and art forms shape the way memories are presented to and perceived by museum visitors (Ref 5). She questions the assumption that traumatic memories can and should be passed on through processes of mediation and that these processes necessarily foster empathy and/or an increasingly ethically responsible behaviour outside the museum environment (Ref 6).

Arnold-de Simine's analysis has allowed her to engage and intervene critically in new developments in museological paradigms and in the practical implementation of memory theories in museums, drawing attention to the tensions and contradictions within them. In doing this she has established a new conceptual framework that challenges scholars and museum practitioners to

critically question the use of memory as a framework in exhibition practice.

In 2005 she was awarded a two month fully-funded Fellowship at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University (Canberra) which brought together academics and artists working in the field of Commemorations, Monuments and Public Memory which laid the foundation of her practice-led research. She was an active participant in two AHRC-funded Networking Projects (After the Wall, 2009-10; Silence, Memory and Empathy in Museums and at Historic Sites, 2012-13). These have provided a forum in which academics from different disciplines can work together with museum practitioners. As a member of the steering-committee for “After the Wall.

Representing and Remembering the GDR” (2009-2010), she convened the first workshop to foster a comparative approach to theoretical paradigms of collective memory. Museum practitioners in Germany and the UK, who have participated in these events or have become aware of her research as a result of these networks, have particularly valued her insights which helped them understand the complex ways in which museum visitors engage with exhibitions. For example, when exhibitions ask visitors to get emotionally invested in memories and stories which focus on the experiences of individuals, their responses may interpret these stories in unexpected ways.

In 2011 she was awarded a grant under the AHRC Fellowship scheme to complete her monograph *Mediating Memory in the Museum*, published with Palgrave Macmillan in their prestigious Memory Studies Series in October 2013. An AHRC assessor commented that Dr Arnold-de Simine’s research is ‘outstanding, original and highly significant [...] It promises to provide an important scholarly “pillar” for an emerging field [...] which is at the interface of a number of disciplines as well as the interface of scholarly discussion and practical importance in the museum landscape. It promises to develop a new conceptual framework [...] which is not only of academic interest but vital for the construction of a sustainable civil society which politicians so often refer to.’

3. References to the research

- 1) Silke Arnold-de Simine (ed.), *Memory Traces: 1989 and the Question of German Cultural Identity* Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005; Cultural History and Literary Imagination Series
- 2) Silke Arnold-de Simine, ‘Themepark GDR? The Aestheticisation of Memory in post-Wende Museums, Literature and Films’. In: *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World since 1500*. Papers from the Conference ‘The Fragile Tradition’, Cambridge 2002. Vol. 1. Ed. by Christian Emden and David Midgley. Oxford: Peter Lang 2004, pp.253-280.
- 3) Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum. Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* Palgrave Macmillan: Houndsmill 2013; Memory Studies Series.
- 4) Silke Arnold-de Simine, “The spirit of an epoch is not just reflected in pictures and books, but also in pots and frying pans.” GDR Museums and Memories of Everyday Life’. In: *The GDR Remembered. Representations of the East German State since 1989*. Ed. by Caroline Pearce and Nick Hodgkin. Rochester: Camden House 2011, pp.95-111.
- 5) Silke Arnold-de Simine, ‘[Memory Museum and Museum Text](#)’: Intermediality in Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum and W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, in *Theory, Culture & Society* 29/1 (2012), Special Section: ‘Memory, Community and the New Museum’, ed. by Silke Arnold-de Simine and Jens Andermann: 14-35.
- 6) Silke Arnold-de Simine, ‘[The “Moving” Image: Empathy and Projection in the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool](#)’, Special issue of *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 4/2 (2012), ed. by Silke Arnold-de Simine and Jens Andermann: 23-40.

Grants

April – December 2012: Arnold-de Simine gained an AHRC Fellowship Grant (£73,914) to finish

her book *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*

July – September 2005: HRC Visiting Fellow at the ANU (Canberra, Australia)

4. Details of the impact

Dr Arnold-de Simone's research is becoming increasingly widely recognised within the museums and heritage sectors in the UK, Germany and elsewhere (Sources 1 & 2). As a result of her involvement in two AHRC networks 'After the Wall' (2009-10) and 'Silence, Memory and Empathy in Museums and at Historic Sites' (2012-2013), which brought together academics, museum directors, curators and guides from Germany and the UK (sources 3 & 4), she has contributed to the development of new exhibitions in three German museums, the Imperial War Museum and a new London cultural heritage site by providing advice on how to connect in more complex and nuanced ways with visitor responses.

The head of research at the GDR Museum, Berlin, informally consulted her in March 2009 while the museum was in the process of major refurbishment and extension. With reference to her research on the deep divide in GDR remembrance culture (refs 1, 2 and 4) she was able to draw attention to the reception of the museum's earlier exhibitions, pointing to the need to embed its focus on everyday life in the context of political oppression in the GDR. This observation was influential in revising and doubling the size of the exhibition when they reopened in October 2010. The museum's head of research writes, 'There has been a long standing co-operation between Dr Arnold-de Simone and the GDR Museum Berlin. ... A major change was that apart from the everyday we now also provide more information on the political structures and the economy of the GDR as well as the oppression by the state and opposition to it. ...' (Source 5)

With the director of Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt, (Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture of the GDR) in July 2009, she discussed solutions to reaching different memory communities. Based on her research that showed the unresolved tensions in GDR remembrance culture (ref 4) she encouraged the Centre to explore ways of making communicative memory more accessible to younger audiences and suggested that it showcase personal stories representing different memory communities and portraying the different effects of historical forces on individuals. These suggestions were reflected in the new exhibition, which opened in March 2012 and now includes recordings of eyewitness accounts and their object stories. The director writes: 'The international and interdisciplinary framework opened to us by Dr. Arnold-de Simone and the "After the Wall" network has definitely proven to be extremely helpful for the conceptualization of a permanent exhibition.' (Source 6)

In discussions with the director of the Bernauer Strasse Wall Memorial in Berlin, which was still a work in progress in 2010, when they met, Dr Arnold-de Simone was able to address the problems which arise when a memorial museum has to serve memory communities with different interests and investment in the past and combine different forms of remembrance. Drawing on her research on conflicting demands on memorial museums (refs 3, 5 and 6) she facilitated a discussion that fed into design decisions. Dr Klausmeier writes: 'The [...] exchange with Silke was extremely fruitful, since we were still experimenting with the site and its innovative design. We were still testing new means and ways in the field of commemorative landscapes, since we were dealing with an historic and authentic "Berlin Wall-Site" and simultaneously introducing a completely innovative language of design for commemorative cityscapes. ... She analysed in great detail the problems which arise when a memorial museum has to serve memory communities with different interests and investment in the past and combine different forms of remembrance.' (Source 7)

Within the UK, Dr Arnold-de Simone has worked to encourage dialogue between memory studies and museum studies and between museum practitioners, educators and academics in the UK. In

Impact case study (REF3b)

June 2012 she co-organised the Empathy and Memory Studies Conference (Birkbeck, 23 June 2012) which was attended by approximately 200 people, (50% were non-academics). A curator and research officer at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) who attended the conference, subsequently contacted Dr Arnold-de Simone to discuss the redesign of the permanent exhibition of the IWM, London and the potential impact of concepts of empathy on this project. Dr Arnold-de Simone then became involved in a project with the Digital Learning Officer at IWM focusing on online resources for schools linked to the Centenary of the First World War, which will be available via IWM's website. He writes, 'Silke and I have spoken a lot about objects and how they are viewed in various different media, including online. This has affected how I have gone about selecting objects, and I have been focussing primarily on the impact they will have online and their ability to convey our learning outcomes specifically within that medium.' In July 2013, at the conference 'Challenging Memories: Silence and Empathy in Heritage Interpretation', they gave a collaborative talk on the impact of digital media on the presentation of sensitive material and the responsibility this places on the museum. Fifty members of the network attended, half of them non-academics working in learning and education in museum and heritage sites, including the Head of Learning from the Imperial War Museum (Source 8).

The ongoing development of Dr Arnold-de Simone's research impact in museum and heritage sectors is reflected in her recent involvement (since May 2013) as an adviser on an HLF funded project to turn the last remaining steam coaster SS Robin into a heritage site as part of the regeneration of the Royal Docks in East London. She provided advice on developing the concepts for the interpretation onboard. (Source 9)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Center for Building a Culture of Empathy requested a recording of Arnold de-Simone's talk at the [Conference on Empathy and Memory Studies](#) (June 2012)
2. Arnold de-Simone's [article](#) is listed on this reading list for a course at C The Visual Arts Foundation, Toronto, Canada

Dr Arnold-de Simone was an active member of the following knowledge exchange networks which connect academics and practitioners in museums and memorial work, and for which reports can be supplied on request:

3. [After the Wall. Representing and Remembering the GDR](#) (2009-2010), Coordinators: Dr Anna Saunders (Bangor University) and Dr Debbie Pinfold (University of Bristol)
4. [Silence, Memory and Empathy in Museums and at Historic Sites](#) 2012-2013. Co-ordinators: Dr Joanne Sayner (Birmingham University) and Dr Jenny Kidd (City University)

Testimonials

5. Testimonial 1 from Head of Research of the GDR Museum, Berlin (Germany) (Testimonial: factual statement)
6. Testimonial 2 from the former Director of the Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture of the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt (Germany) (factual statement)
7. Testimonial 3 from Director of the Bernauer Strasse Wall Memorial, Berlin (Germany) (factual statement)
8. Testimonial 4 from Digital Learning Officer, Imperial War Museum, London (factual statement)
9. Testimonial 5 from Director of KDC London (an industrial heritage consultancy)