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Media Conscious Understanding of Historical Popular Culture

The availability of historical information in our everyday media environment is staggering, but this information is not usually identified as history. History is thought of as a subject in school or an academic discipline. It is a proper thing. There are professionals who do it. A random piece of information that one comes across in the social media platform Instagram does not seem to fit into this paradigm. However, the culture of convergence¹ that permeates the use of digital media is challenging the idea of history being bound to strict disciplinary borders. Similarly, the complete overhaul of access to information, which the Internet has made possible, has changed the way information is generally thought of. Slowly, people have begun think of information as something that is easily available. The standard mode of thought is no longer that one has to make an effort to find information, but that information can be easily accessed when needed².

Convergence changes how mediated content is perceived and accessed,

*convergence represents a paradigm shift across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture.*³

As we have come to expect information to be easily available through media, we have also become used to thinking that particular pieces of information converge together independently of where or how they are available. The process of using information has shifted from finding the needed information and applying it, to finding patterns in the available information. Convergence of information has become something to be expected. It has become a standard mode of operation. All information is seen to converge together and to hint towards some larger body that is beyond the representational capabilities of any single representation.

¹ See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press, 2006.

² See Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Perseus Books, Cambridge, Mass. 1997; Jenkins 2006.

³ Jenkins 2006, 243.



A couple of years after Henry Jenkins' *Converge Culture* (2006), Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading begun to ask how digital media and convergence culture will affect memory studies and history. In the introduction of *Save As... Digital Memories* (2009), they present an interesting question:

*how far any culture can continue to invest in old-style ideologies that generate myths of history (national, religious and political) that are meant to galvanise people and are communicated through traditional mass media or dislodge such myths by participating in and producing their own multi-media memories that are personal and collectively shared. Does this new convergence culture of digital media mark the end of history and the beginning of memory?*⁴

Over ten years have passed and so far it does not look like history is ending. Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, and Reading were right in asking how converging transmedia and participatory culture change our relation to the past. However, like many others, they missed the fact that history has always converged. It was simply not as visible as convergence tends to be in digital media environments. In the analog era, historical representations were linked through footnotes and bibliographies, encyclopedias and scholarly networks. What is new for history in the digital age is the multitude of media and the possibilities they offer, not convergence itself. However, outside of academic history, we can see that today popular historical culture⁵ has begun to converge on itself instead of converging around academic research.

This happens because so much information about the historical world is already easily available. The core facts of history are already set: dates and locations of events, political and cultural actors, etc. When historical representations in popular media acknowledge these facts, they link their representation to the vast body of historical knowledge that can be accessed by a simple "Google search". This ease of access to information has also forced popular representations to take into account an increasing amount of historical information. Popular media franchises are analyzed by their fans with a scrutiny that mirrors the work of history scholars on their source materials.⁶ The filmic renditions of Marvel characters and their adventures are carefully crafted, so that long-time comic book fans do not create an uproar in social media due to

⁴ Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading, "Introduction". *Save As... Digital Memories*. Edited by Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2009, 8.

⁵ "Historical culture" has become the most used iteration, but "history culture" or "history-culture" might capture the concept better. As most of the works referred in this paper use "historical culture" I use that. Although, "history-culture" would be my preferred spelling.

⁶ Ilkka Lähteenmäki, *Encountering History in the Media*. Acta Universitatis Ouluensis B Humaniora 174. Juvenes Print, Tampere 2019; Ilkka Lähteenmäki, "Transmedia History". *Rethinking History*, online preprint 2021; Jenkins 2006.

inaccurate depiction of some relatively minor detail. A similar appreciation for detail can be observed in fans of historical games. If a World War II strategy game portrays an incorrect thickness of a turret armor of a German Panzer IV tank, players expect the issue to be fixed, since the correct information is easily available. The key here is knowledge and its ease of accessibility. Because historical information is expected to converge across media, it needs to be taken into account in the production of popular historical representations. A game representation of the Roman Empire is expected to be consistent with the historical information that is easily available. Often this specifically means information that is available online (Wikipedia usually being on the top of the list of “sources” people check for information.).

Discussions about historical details in popular culture show how historical information has become a part of, for example, popular gaming culture. Game studios even offer platforms for these discussions with their online forums⁷ and social media pages. Games provide an interesting case as they can be updated. Historical games can be changed after their publication, if a need arises to match some historical information. This is a possibility that is not available to all media. A director’s cut can be released after the initial showing of a film, but even that cannot change what has been captured on film. This again shows how fluid digital media content has become. Seemingly superficial forum discussions about the accuracy of historical representation also show that popular historical culture and researched knowledge of history are perceived to be strongly linked, even though there is a long tradition of historians being suspicious of popular instantiations of historical culture.

Wulf Kansteiner has found an interesting confession made by a historian (in 1987), which I think showcases the general attitude that historians have had towards the popular. He quotes the historian John O’Connor being afraid that the

*steady diet of television docudramas and pseudo-docudramas, from Plymouth Plantation to Roots and Watergate, from I Claudius to Shogun and the Winds of War; has begun to undermine whatever respect there might have been in public mind for the work of the professional historians and history teacher.*⁸

Kansteiner reads O’Connor’s argument as distrust of visual media, which seduces the viewer to accept history that is not accurate. Visual history-entertainment is seen as a cultural phenomenon that corrupts people (especially the young), who do not have the historiographical knowledge to challenge what is presented to them.⁹ Thus,

⁷ See e.g. <https://forum.warthunder.com/index.php?/forum/236-historical-discussion/>.

⁸ Kansteiner 2017, 174 quoting J. O’Connor, *Teaching History with Film and Television*. American Historical Association, Washington 1987, 3.

⁹ Wulf Kansteiner, “Film the Past, and a Didactic Dead End: From Teaching History to Teaching Memory”. *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, 174.

it seems that the issue of non-scholarly history is not that it is necessarily worthless or bad, but that it is easy to accept. Popular history lacks the barrier that academic history has around it, and this is frightening to the scholars who have worked their way through that barrier. Of course, this is not only about the ease of access to historical representations. Scholarly epistemic requirements are still present in the critique of visual media, as the fear is that people accept a “wrong past” when they do not possess the skills and background information to critically evaluate popular historical culture. However, a lot has changed since the late 1980s, and at least parts of O’Connor’s fears have become moot (if they ever had any basis to begin with). The main suspicion – that people do not possess capabilities to question the tempting visual history presented in television series like *I Claudius* (1976) and *Shogun* (1980) – is gone.

The amount of work required in order to access historical information has changed radically. Anyone can access so much historical information relatively easily that critical questions regarding the history shown in a television show can be made from a living room couch. In the 1980s it would have required so much more work to even begin to question, for example, if *I Claudius* or *Shogun* series were portraying the correct political figures. A better-off family might have had a multivolume encyclopedia at home for first consultation, but more than likely one would still have needed to physically visit a local library and search for a book about Ancient Rome (maybe Edward Gibbons’ works were available) or feudal Japan. Probably the search for information would have needed to continue even further (especially with *Shogun* related information in a Western country). A librarian would have needed to be consulted and a book ordered, which would have taken some time to arrive. One would have needed to have quite a bit of interest in the topic to go through all that simply to question a TV series.

Compare this to pausing the show and picking up your phone to do a Google search on “Claudius” or “John Blackthorne” (the protagonist of *Shogun*) and finding out dates, existing historical characters, contextual information about the authors and producers of shows, or YouTube videos discussing, for example, “The real John Blackthorne of Shōgun”¹⁰. In the 1980s, a single historical representation might have been the only one you come across of a topic like feudal Japan. Today, that historical representation has turned into an entry point to vast amounts of information available through a variety of media. Our encounters with popular historical culture have become so transmedial that we do not usually even acknowledge it.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UW9uPMc0>. YLE 29.6.2021.

Mediated culture

One of the main challenges of mapping historical culture (or history culture) is the simple issue that we are trying to make sense of cultural practices, not history *per se*. Thus, the toolbox of a cultural anthropologist or an ethnographer might be more beneficial than that of a historian. History is often seen as a uniform body of knowledge, but historical culture like most forms of culture is not uniform. It is a collection of multiple sub-cultures, which are linked to other cultural practices outside of “historical culture”, and often the only connecting aspect within it might be references to historical events, characters, or locations. In practice, this means that for example historical games, which are part of historical culture, are also part of gaming culture. Thus, they manifest cultural practices linked to both history and games. This means that the analysis of historical games requires understanding of cultural practices that are different than for example in the analysis of historical novels, or films. In this paper, I bypass this requirement of understanding specific cultural practices relating to specific media, by discussing history and historical culture in the wider context of popular culture. Historical information permeates popular culture, and it has been argued that it plays a large role in how people gain their “sense of history”¹¹. Therefore, my focus is on history culture within popular media. This could be conceptualized as popular history culture, which in turn would be a sub-category of the larger history culture.

It is also worthwhile to open the concept of “popular culture” a little bit before venturing to more complex issues. The latter part of the term, “culture” is generally used in three slightly different meanings. It can mean: 1) the general development of aesthetics, intellectualism, and spiritualism. 2) the way of life of particular period or group of people. 3) intellectual or artistic works, practices, and activities¹². All these three are vague and it is hard to argue that any particular human activity would not fit within at least one of these. Much like the umbrella concept of culture, “popular culture” can be defined in a couple of ways: 1) Popular culture can be conceived as a form of culture that is popular, i.e. it is well-liked and touches the life of a large part of the population. Or, 2) it can be thought to be culture that does not fit into “high culture”, a sort of inferior part of culture that is not as good as the proper “high culture”.

This latter take has a variety of problems, especially if we consider how culture changes over time. Shakespeare’s works are an often-used example. When they were created, they were popular culture for the masses, but these days they are one of the central pillars of English-language literary “high” culture. Shakespeare is thus

¹¹ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture*. Routledge, London and New York 2009; Lähteenmäki 2019.

¹² John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Pearson, Harlow England 2012, 1–2; See also Raymond Williams, *Keywords*. Fontana, London 1983, 87–90.

an example of how cultural practices or works move from one category to another over time. This change of categories is not limited to aesthetic or artistic works, but is apparent also in everyday activities and practices. In the Western world smoking was originally a high-class activity, but has later become a part of popular culture. The interesting part in this phenomenon of status shifts of cultural practices is not that popular culture can rise to become part of high culture, or that high culture can be brought down, but what maintains the distinction between the “popular” and the “high”. That is, which institutions and institutional processes are needed for the distinction to be meaningful.¹³ Formal education and the selected cultural practices it promotes are often seen as one major institutional force here¹⁴. The influence of formal education should not be underestimated, as “popular culture” is often produced by independent or commercial actors and lacks any “official” stamp of authorities or public institutions. Thus, “popular culture” often appears to be in a constant state of change and it is perceived to be more organic than “high culture”. Nevertheless, history didactics and educational practices relating to history play a significant role in our perception of what is proper history and how historical information should be valued¹⁵.

My use of “popular culture” aligns itself with the first way of defining the term. It is about culture that is popular. Generally, I follow Henry Jenkins’ take that “popular culture” has nothing to do with socioeconomical status or class, but it does have to do with informal educational practices, as “[t]he skills needed to make sense of popular texts emerge through informal education practices as we spend time consuming media with friends and family”.¹⁶ This means that one has to engage with popular culture to understand what is happening in it, much in the same way as academic historians have to read history books and articles to understand the scholarly aspects of their craft. Understanding historical culture requires similar commitment; it needs to be engaged with as a phenomenon that stands on its own, not as an extension of something else. For instance, history didactics brings historical culture back to education and looks at it as a source for educational material. Memory studies categorizes it as remembrance, whereas historians mainly see it as failed history. Cultural studies, where historical culture is engaged within its own cultural practices, are few and far between.

Ann Rigney has nicely condensed the central importance of cultural practices as “they are formative in their own right, and need to be understood in their own terms

¹³ Stuart Hall, “Notes on deconstructing ‘the popular’”. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Edited by John Storey. 4th edition. Pearson education, Harlow 2009, 514.

¹⁴ See e.g. Storey 2012, 37–58 for a general take on issue.

¹⁵ See *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*. New York University Press, New York and London 2007, 16.

as well as in relation to the actors whose attitudes and emotions they shape”.¹⁷ To do this is to acknowledge that there are probably practices within historical culture that only make sense within it. Thus, it is of paramount importance that we develop and apply a large variety of theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools to the analysis of historical culture. Each new framing highlights different aspects of the analyzed phenomenon. In the analysis of historical culture, memory studies has been the dominant conceptual framework for analysis, to the point that every aspect of historical culture sometimes seems to be tied to remembrance. Competing analyses need to be developed for the field to move forward, but this is not an easy task, as digital media has fragmented uniform history culture – if there even was one to begin with.

Scholars of memory studies have struggled with the digital world. Memory studies has tended to have a rather material understanding of mediation (physical photographs, film, buildings, etc.) even though it has slowly shifted from analyzing “memory production in single media”¹⁸ to discussing how different platforms interact with each other. A telling example of this struggle is how Ann Rigney employed the concept of remediation in an attempt to make sense of the use of different media for remembrance. She broadly understood Jay David Bolter’s and David Grusin’s concept of remediation¹⁹ “as the continuous translation of media content from older to newer media and from one platform to another, with a view to creating fresh effects of immediacy”²⁰, which is generally correct but misses one very important aspect of remediation that changes media analysis profoundly. Remediation is not only about re-using old content in a new form, but also about how the use of new media changes the old media²¹. Bolter and Grusin argue that we cannot even comprehend the representational power of a specific media without comparing it to other media. When a new media is introduced, it is claimed that reality or authenticity is achieved better through it than through older media. When this is claimed, “real” and “authentic” are also redefined in a way that supports the newer media’s claim to represent reality.²² This simultaneously forces us to re-evaluate the representational capabilities of older media. Thus, remediation is not only about how new media re-uses old content, but also about how all media is constantly changing because

¹⁷ Ann Rigney, “Cultural Memory Studies: Mediation, Narrative, and the Aesthetic”. *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*. Edited by Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen. Routledge 2016, 66.

¹⁸ Rigney 2016, 69.

¹⁹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2000.

²⁰ Rigney 2016, 69.

²¹ See Bolter and Grusin 2000, 20–84.

²² Bolter and Grusin 2000, 65.

we keep redefining what is “real” or “authentic” in relation to the representational capabilities of media.

Within memory studies, memory is usually split into two main categories, individual memories and collective memories. Individual memories are the memories of individual people. Collective memory, in turn, is formed of individual memories, but it also “refers to the *distribution* throughout society of what individuals know, believe, and feel about the past, how they judge the past morally, how closely they identify with it, and how much they are inspired by it as a model for their conduct and identity” (original emphasis).²³ As “real” and “authentic” are constantly redefined in our media environment, the distribution of knowledge and beliefs about the past are in constant change. Additionally, as we increasingly deal with knowledge as something that is simply available and accessed when needed, rather than consciously known by groups, it is worthwhile to ask if some other concept than collective memory would be better suited for analyzing aspects of historical culture that are related to historical knowledge.

Popular culture and knowledge

Andrew Hoskins has been on the forefront of arguing how current media ecology has radically changed the way memory should be discussed. He argues that

*a new ontology for memory studies is needed that is cognizant of media, and not as some partial or occasional or temporary shaper of memory, but as fundamentally altering what it is and what is possible to remember and to forget. It is much easier to be timid and to tinker around the edges of representational and archival discourses and technologies, to add ‘trans’ to the cultural, to reextend or re-distribute the cognitive, and to reduce the technologies of memory to the ‘prosthetic’.*²⁴

Hoskins is on the right track with his call for a more media cognizant framework for discussing memory, but his view has not been universally accepted by scholars. For example, in their discussion of historical culture as a concept, Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen argue that the focus of historical culture should be on

²³ Barry Schwartz, “Rethinking the concept of collective memory”. *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*. Edited by Anna Lisa Tota and Trevor Hagen. Routledge 2016, 10; See also Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz*. Ohio University Press 2006, 11–27 for a critique of “collective memory”, and the formation of collective memory based on individual memories.

²⁴ Andrew Hoskins, “The Restless Past: and introduction to digital memory and media”. *Digital memory studies – Media pasts in transition*. Routledge 2017, 7.

“historical knowledge” rather than on “representations of historical knowledge”.²⁵ They “think one of the main problems of the current state of both historical culture and memory studies is the emphasis on “collectivism””²⁶, which they see originating mainly from Maurice Halbwachs’ works, where he advocated for collective memory over personal one²⁷.

Collective memory truly has been central to memory studies, through which it has also become a central conceptual tool for discussions of historical culture. While I do not have the expertise to extensively discuss collective memory in the context of memory studies, I do argue that for historical culture to reach its potential as a scholarly network, a variety of analytical tools are required. Simply focusing on memory is not enough. I think that, fundamentally, Grever and Adriaansen are addressing the same challenge as Hoskins: the collapse of uniform broadcast media. However, the way they conceive the problem is radically different. Hoskins acknowledges that memory studies by itself is not currently equipped to deal with the prevailing media ecology and searches for tools in media theory. Grever and Adriaansen instead advocate a shift of focus to historical knowledge in order to find a way make to sense of the fragmented historical culture. I do not think that these two are mutually exclusive views. The accessibility of knowledge and combining information across media have become central functions of digital media.

The challenge is that a media cognizant theory of historical knowledge might require a re-evaluation of what can be considered as “historical knowledge”. The main reason is – like Hoskins has argued in the case of memory studies – that the digital hyperconnected world operates differently in relation to knowledge and information than the broadcast era did. Digital media has brought a variety of new media platforms, and due to how remediation functions, these have also changed how older media operate. Film or television are no longer the same media as they were in the 1980s or even in 2000s. Another central change is people’s ability to connect and access information. Pierre Lévy described the fundamentals of this change already in the 1990s, but I do not think even he could have imagined how quickly digital connectivity changed society and behavior. Lévy’s concept of “collective intelligence” is based on connectivity and availability of information on a scale that was simply not possible before the Internet. The central idea of “collective intelligence” is that “[n]o one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity”.²⁸ Every piece of knowledge is in the possession of someone, but not everyone has every piece of knowledge.

²⁵ Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited”. *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, 77.

²⁶ Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 77.

²⁷ Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 77.

²⁸ Lévy 1997, 13–14.

What Lévy is describing is not common knowledge shared by everyone, but knowledge that is held only by some individuals. However, with the ability to easily connect, these pieces of knowledge become available to every member of the community when needed. Later e.g. Henry Jenkins has developed this take in his discussions of participatory culture and online communities²⁹. This shift in the basic functionalities of how knowledge is used and perceived has become apparent, as theoretical frameworks attempt to redefine themselves in order to make sense of the digitalized society. In the case of memory studies, e.g. the *Digital Memory Studies – Media Pasts in Transition* (2017, edited by Andrew Hoskins), theorizations of the digital world have begun to acknowledge that media cognizant theories of the broadcast era are not usually enough to make sense of the digital. However, there seems to be a misperception that the broadcast media (and history/memory in it) have not changed and keep on functioning in the same way as they have since their conceptions. This is curious, as it has been publicly acknowledged that traditional broadcast media from journalism to film studios have struggled immensely with the digitalization throughout the twenty-first century.

This split in thinking about “traditional media” and “new media” is quite apparent if one looks at two theoretical books published in 2017: *The Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* (edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever) and the previously mentioned *Digital Memory Studies – Media Pasts in Transition* (edited by Andrew Hoskins). These two volumes have different goals, as the *The Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* is literally a handbook, discussing the ongoing use of theories, concepts and topics related to historical culture and education. The volume edited by Hoskins, in turn, attempts to move the theorization further and open new avenues of research. Also, one is about memory studies while the other is about historical culture and education, but practically both of these discuss memory studies, with some extra history didactics on the side. This again shows how deeply our theoretical tools for discussing historical culture are tied to memory studies. Yet, there is surprisingly little overlap between the two edited volumes. It is as if the digital world has had no effect on the older media, which goes against our whole understanding of how new media and remediation operate. Somehow, film still ends up being celluloid and seen only in theatres, television series are watched once a week when the show airs, and textbooks are read in libraries without access to the Internet.

There is an increasing need to open up the discussion of how media is currently used, how historical culture is present within different media, and how all this content fits into our conceptions of “history” and “the past”. Wulf Kansteiner’s discussion of historical film highlights how one-sided historians have been regarding visual culture during the twentieth century. For history professionals, film, photographs

²⁹ Jenkins 2006, 26–27.

etc. have been first and foremost historical sources. According to Kansteiner, while this has produced quality historiography, it has “also re-established a much cherished hierarchical differentiation between professional and allegedly amateurish attempts of representing the past”.³⁰ This kind of hierarchical dichotomy between “professionals” and “amateurs” has a long-lasting tradition in scholarly spheres.

Both popular history and memory studies are currently lacking detailed discussion of the media used for consuming historical culture. By this, I do not mean to call for a technical discussion of how digital film-making is different from using celluloid, but for an understanding of how media are used in the society and the way that affects our understanding of different issues, like the past. The general mode currently seems to be to analyze singular historical (re)presentations by contrasting them with formal education, historical research, or collective memory. However, nobody operates like this in their everyday media use when they encounter instantiations of historical culture. What they tend to do, is contrast instantiations of popular historical culture twith each other and combine the information these have provided. If one goes to watch, for example, Ridley Scott’s latest historical drama *The Last Duel* (2021) and wishes to know more about the trials by combat or duels, it is usually the Internet where answers are sought. It would be quite a spectacular case if school textbooks or academic historical research were consulted before Google, and Google tends to offer what is already popular. This phenomenon is not specific to historical culture but an ongoing change in larger popular culture and the way media is engaged with.

Active audiences

In his research on popular culture, Henry Jenkins has tracked what he calls “participatory culture” to the existence of amateur publishers who printed newsletters about their shared interests in the mid-nineteenth century. He sees this culture developing through early twentieth century science fiction fandoms to television

³⁰ Kansteiner 2017, 170.

fandoms and to online communities of today.³¹ Jenkins argues that audiences are not just passively taking in whatever media content they happen to be consuming. His argument is that fans of popular culture actively look for more information and engage with the available content in creative ways. Jenkins also argues that encyclopedic ambitions are a major source of motivation for audience participation. In its most basic form, the motivation behind participation is about wanting to know more and showing what you already know³². He then links participatory practices to his discussion of modern transmedia, where presentations are seen more as fragments than holistic wholes. Across digital media, all presentations are seen as incomplete but connected to other presentations about the same topic. It does not matter whether that topic is *Star Wars* or sixteenth century naval warfare; the modus operandi is the same. The first encounter with a topic might be, for example, a film or a game, but further knowledge is searched outside of that presentation itself and through whatever media the user is comfortable with.³³

Jenkins' point is that for the most part we actually have complementing rather than competing media. Content is spread on different platforms because different media excel in representing different aspects of the "real". Films are wonderful for emotional engagements, games can create immersive environments or show systems, texts are searchable and contain huge amounts of information, social media encourages participation, digital encyclopedias link topics etc. Media (re)-presentations are seen as entry points to content rather than complete works. This does not rule out academic history, for example, but academic history is usually only available as a text and often behind a paywall. Thus, there is quite a high barrier for accessing academic works. Sadly, Google tends to find content that is already popular in digital media rather than obscure academic journals. The combined force of ease of access and the ability of popular culture to provide entertaining engagements with the chosen topic of interest, converges our information-related

³¹ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media – Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York University Press, New York 2013, 29–30; Referring to works of Paula Petrik, "The Youngest Fourth Estate: The Novelty Toy Printing Press and Adolescence, 1870–1886". *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850–1950*. Edited by Elliot West and Paula Petrik. University Press of Kansas, Kansas City 1992; Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*. Verso, London 1991; Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1992; Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Routledge, New York 1992; Francesca Coppa, "Women, Star Trek and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding". *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 1, 2008. <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/44/64>. Accessed 29.6.2021; See also Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York University Press, New York and London 2006.

³² Cf Lévy 1997.

³³ See Jenkins 2006.

engagements around popular culture rather than around formal education. Research-wise, Jenkins' findings offer the viewpoint that engagements with historical culture can also be discussed in the light of epistemic interest in the content, even though formal education or actual research are not engaged with. This means that we should expect to find a variety of reasons for why popular historical culture is as popular as it is. We should accept that even knowledge-related motivations can be central in engagements with popular culture.

Memory studies and media

There is an ongoing call for expanding the use of the conceptual framework of memory studies for understanding non-written history. Arguments like “memory studies, not history, is the appropriate academic framework for discussing filmic renditions of the past”, or, “when using film and TV in the social studies classroom, we should be teaching about memory not about history in an academic sense”³⁴, appear relatively often in discussions related to historical culture. These arguments are on the right track in claiming that the conceptual framework of academic history is poorly suited to discussing historical films, or the relation between film and history in general. However, if what I have presented in this paper is valid, then memory studies should not be the only conceptual framework we should be using in discussions of these topics. For example, formalist analyses on different media and their function in relation to history³⁵ have provided interesting insights, but have not yet had much impact on our general understanding of historical culture.

The issue at hand is not that memory studies has not understood the importance of e.g. visual information. Photographs and film are constantly used and analysed in relation to remembering, or in order to study how private and public memory mix together, for example through journalistic photography or news. The issue is that quite a bit of popular and inauthentic visual historical material is not related to remembrance or memory in a meaningful way. This has become more and more apparent with the development of digital media, as it is easier than ever to produce

³⁴ Kansteiner 2017, 181.

³⁵ See e.g. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1995; Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on film/film on history: Concepts, theories and practice*. Pearson Longman, Harlow 2006; Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History goes to the movies: Studying history on film*. Routledge, London 2007; On games: Dawn Spring, “Gaming history: computer and video games as historical scholarship”. *Rethinking History*, Volume 19, Issue 2, 2015, 207–221; Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past”. *Playing with the Past*. Edited by Matthew Kapell and Andrew Elliot. Bloomsbury, New York 2013, 53–167; Adam Chapman, *Digital Games As History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. Routledge 2016.

believable visual representations of the past. Everyone living in the Western countries “knows” how the European Middle Ages looked like. Popular representations of the Middle Ages can be recognized *as* representations of the Middle Ages, independent of whether a particular representation is in any way accurate or not. These (re)-presentations do not get mixed with personal memories, because no currently living person has been alive during the Middle Ages. Thus, these kinds of representations get discussed as public, cultural, or prosthetic memory.

It seems that there is a sub-category of “memory” for any kind of non-formal engagement with the past or with history-related material, even though there are other theoretical frameworks for making sense of (popular) historical culture. While engagements that are related to personal remembrance are common with popular historical culture, this only holds for depictions of the twentieth century. If we look at representations that engage with older material, the level of personal memories becomes non-existent and the discussion shifts to more complicated “collective memory”, which has been problematized in recent years by e.g. Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen³⁶. Their critique is that by emphasizing collective memory, memory studies focuses “too much on the mnemonic representations of specific events within specific social groups” and ends up “disregarding the production, performance and dissemination of memories in communicative interaction between people, groups and institutions”³⁷. In their view, historical culture should be appreciated at the “broader cultural context” where historical representations and mnemonic infrastructures are generated.

There is a fair amount of history-related content consumed that falls within the conceptual borders of historical culture, which are difficult to link to remembrance. For example, think of a Wikipedia article about the Roman Empire³⁸, which usually gets over 2 000 visitors per day³⁹. When one engages with the information provided by that encyclopedic entry in question, the engagement probably has epistemic motivation behind it rather than remembrance. There are good reasons for undertaking memory studies, but is memory studies truly the only conceptual framework we should be using to understand the huge variety of historical popular media? What exactly does the conceptual framework of memory studies offer for the analysis of a historical strategy game, like *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox interactive 2012), which begins in 1066 and ends in 1453? Or likewise for analyzing the before-mentioned Wikipedia page?

³⁶ Grever and Adriaansen 2017; See also Kansteiner 2006, 11–27.

³⁷ Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 77.

³⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire. Accessed 29.6.2021.

³⁹ https://www.wikishark.com/title/en/Roman_Empire?text_search=&view=2>ype=0&factors=. Accessed 29.6.2021.

I think it would be worthwhile to re-evaluate the call to teach memory, rather than history, when historical films and television are engaged with in schools⁴⁰. Certain popular film or television is probably best discussed in that context, but I think it is obvious that the conceptual framework of memory studies is not applicable to every possible instantiation of historical culture. The further back we go in time, the less relevant the concept of memory becomes for understanding why and how popular historical culture affects people's conceptions of the past. The issue is not that memory studies is an ineffective framework, but it seems that if all engagements with historical culture are conceived as different forms of remembrance, the contribution of the framework to our understanding of historical culture becomes questionable. If there are no ways to engage with popular historical culture without the engagement being about remembrance, in one form or another, then the analysis becomes one-sided and the conceptual framework of memory studies starts to lose its analytical usefulness. The old Popperian argument that if a theory cannot be falsified it is a bad theory, still has some use. Thus, I think that Andrew Hoskins' call for a more media cognizant theory should be expanded to cover historical culture and not just memory studies. There is a need to have alternative scholarly frameworks for understanding historical culture, and I think a media based one would open up interesting options for research.

Historical consciousness

Yet, the contributions of history didactics and memory studies to conceptualization of historical culture should not be underestimated. They have made it possible to discuss history as a social practice, rather than as a purely personal cognitive act.⁴¹ However, I do not think that the questions related to epistemic and knowledge should be abandoned, especially if they are a part of the motivation why people consume historical popular culture in the first place. The relations between history, memory, historical consciousness, and historical culture are complex. That is why I think questions related to knowledge should not be limited to discussions of formal learning environments, but also be a part of our general conceptualization of historical consciousness. Based on how "historical consciousness" and "historical culture" are usually conceptualized, there should be no need to use memory as the sole scholarly framework for understanding these phenomena. For example, if we follow the usual distinction, according to which historical consciousness is generally perceived to mean "an awareness of the fundamentally historical character of human behavior, knowledge, institutions, events and developments in society, including one's own

⁴⁰ W. Guynn, *Writing History in Film*. Routledge, New York 2006, 165–178; Kansteiner 2017, 181.

⁴¹ Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 74.

position”⁴², we find that historical consciousness is construed through a variety of factors.

The differentiation between historical consciousness and historical culture usually follows Jörn Rüsen’s conceptualization, where historical consciousness is seen as an internal quality of a person. Historical consciousness is then contrasted to the outer “historical culture”, which consists of “institutions and organizations that form the infrastructure of historical learning, enabling the collective instruction for the acquisition of general and specialized historical knowledge”⁴³, which seems to point specifically towards formal learning environments and institutions. For Rüsen, the external or outer “historical culture” seemed to be highly tied to institutionally provided information about history, and omitted popular culture entirely. This seems to be in line with Grever’s and Adriaansen’s remark that Rüsen also defined historical culture as “the complete range of activities of historical consciousness”⁴⁴, when modern Western education was discussed. Rüsen apparently aimed to conceptualize historical culture as a category for all manifestations of historical consciousness, but tied it to formal education. Grever and Adriaansen describe Rüsen’s take on historical culture comprising of “schools, government guidelines and schoolbooks, but also museums, exhibitions, historically inclined cultural industries, commemorations, mass media and similar institutions”.⁴⁵ It is somewhat unclear what mass media consists here, but I think it is safe to assume that it was related to broadcast and probably news, as digitalization had not taken off yet in the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, the grand idea was that “historical culture” would provide a framework, under which academic history and different popular and educational institutions could be understood as being interconnected, rather than separate

⁴² Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75; See also M. Grever and C. van Boxtel, *Verlangen naar tastbaar verleden. Erfgoed, onderwijs en historisch besef [Longing for Tangible Pasts. Heritage, Education and Historical Consciousness]*. Verloren, Hilversum 2014, 20; R. Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories”. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Edited by R. Koselleck. Columbia University Press, New York 2004, 267–288; J. Rüsen, “Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development”. *History and Memory*, 1, 1989, 35–60; *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*. Edited by P. Seixas. Toronto University Press, Toronto 2004, 8–9.

⁴³ Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75; See also A. Assmann, “Re-framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past”. *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Europe*. Edited by K. Tilmans, F. van Vree and J. Winter. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2010, 35–50, 37; J. Rüsen, “Geschichtsdidaktik Heute – Was ist und zu welchem Ende betreiben wir sie (noch)?” [“Didactics of History Today – What Is It and for What Purpose Do We (Still) Use It?”]. *Bildungsgeschichte und Historisches Lernen. Symposium aus Anlaß des 65. Geburtstages on Prof. Dr. Karl-Ernst Jeismann [History of Education and Historical Learning. Symposium on the Occasion of the 65th Birthday on Prof. Dr. Karl-Ernst Jeismann]*. Edited by E. Hinrichs and W. Jacobmeyer. Georg-Eckert-Institut, Frankfurt a/M 1991, 9–24, 17.

⁴⁴ Rüsen 1991, 17; Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75.

⁴⁵ Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75 referring to Rüsen 1991, 17.

processes that should be looked at individually. Conceptually, “historical culture” highlights how “history” is present in most (if not all) parts of culture, and is a specific cultural element to be identified in practices and presentations.⁴⁶ However, as more and more different media have invaded our everyday, life it has become increasingly difficult to analyze how historical culture comes together. With the digitalization of media, historical culture – like all uniform cultures of the twentieth century – has fragmented to a point where conceptualizing it through traditional institutions or broadcasted mass media has become an increasingly futile effort.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have argued for a more media cognizant understanding of historical culture. I have also expressed some hope that historical culture would be engaged with as its own cultural phenomenon, not as an extension of something else. Currently, memory studies is the prevalent theoretical framework for analyzing nearly all instantiations of historical culture. My fear is that if we do not diversify the theoretical and conceptual toolbox used for analyzing historical culture, we will never even consider challenging the interpretation that historical culture is simply an extension of memory. My take on historical culture focuses here on popular media, and attempts to understand historical culture as something that happens in media. It highlights other aspects of historical culture than an understanding based on, for example, history didactics would highlight. Therefore, my discussion rests heavily on our understanding on general functioning of digital media and popular culture. By adopting this view, it also brings in theorization about the knowledge and historical information that is embedded in popular historical representations. I think it is important to “revive” scholarly interest in how popular historical representations tie in with historical knowledge, and how audience’s/consumers’ interest in popular historical representations also derives from knowledge.

Consumers of popular historical culture expect historical information to converge, independent of the media they use. This creates an extremely interesting situation, where popular culture representations made for entertainment are expected to match the real world (to an extent) by their audiences. A popular historical representation needs to be in accordance with historical information that is easily available, for it to even be considered as a historical representation by its consumers. The tricky part is that “easily available historical information” can change quite rapidly, as it is almost every time accessed through Google. As popular historical culture has begun to converge around “easily accessible historical information”, it has also moved further away from academic research, because academic research is not usually very

⁴⁶ Rösen 1994, 5; Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75.

easily available. Thus, there is a need to also reconsider how, and through which media, historical research should be popularized in the future.

Abstract

This article focuses on popular historical culture, particularly on how the use of digital media has changed our engagements with historical culture. Popular historical culture is discussed as a cultural phenomenon that is present across all media. Because of the digitalization of media, cultural practices related to history have fragmented, and historical culture is engaged with in a variety of ways. These engagements can take widely different forms depending on the media used. In this article I argue that a more media cognizant understanding of historical culture needs to be developed. This is necessary because digitalized media has changed our dealings with historical knowledge, and remediation is constantly challenging our perception of how “reality” can be properly represented.

In the paper, I discuss how theoretical works related to historical culture have a slightly troubled relation to digital media, and do not properly take into account how media content is consumed today. I argue that the source of these troubles is at least partially the hegemony of memory-related theory in the scholarly understanding of historical culture. The current scholarly discussion of historical culture mainly lacks understanding of how popular media functions and is engaged in the digital age. For this reason, central aspects of digitally mediated historical culture do not receive enough scholarly interest.

In the article, I employ a framework based on media studies for understanding popular historical culture. By doing so, I distance my analysis from discussions related to memory and begin to develop a view, in which instantiations of popular historical culture are seen as converging media that people engage with in hopes of gaining more knowledge about the past. Here, different instantiations of popular historical culture are seen as entry-points to more history-related content, rather than as competing holistic representations. This leads to an alternative knowledge-centered interpretation of why popular historical culture is engaged with.