



Review of 'Memory: Fragments of a Modern History'

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Balmer, A. S. (2014). *Review of 'Memory: Fragments of a Modern History'*.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



Alison Winter (2012) *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 978-0-226-90258-6, pp.319, cloth hardback \$30.00, E-book \$17.50.

Review by Andrew S. Balmer

Is memory like a video camera, recording our experiences as we engage in the world? If so, is it a relatively accurate recording, digital and in crystal clear high definition, or is it more like early silver-halide film development, plagued by chemical burns, fading rapidly and with limited resolution? Alison Winter's excellent book relates fragments from the history of scientific work on memory and often engages with the metaphors used to understand what memory is and how it works.

The book contains a wealth of stories that interweave various scientific, medical, legal and political threads in the broader narrative of our understanding of memory. Winter's attention to detail comes through as she revels in the myriad twists and turns that studies of memory have taken. As the choice of title should indicate, though, she has also been careful not to draw out a linear narrative and makes it clear that understandings of memory in any given time were multiple, contested and conflicting. Much like the way our own memories leap back to us from time gone by, the ideas of the past seem to return as the problem of memory changes with the contexts in which the question is posed. Whether in the police interrogation, the cinema, at home on camcorder, during medical diagnosis or in the midst of a murder trial the significance and conceptual account of memory has always been bound up with contexts of its problematisation. As such, the two far poles of understanding memory as a perfect and reliable recording or as a fragile and fallible record open to constant revision recur, overlap and challenge each other in the various fragments from the past that Winter recounts.

Her work helps us to see how this was acutely the case, for example, during the Second World War (chapter 3). Military leaders, psychologists, therapists, doctors and other medical experts were all involved in choreographing a response to the pressing problem of mental trauma exhibited by increasing numbers of soldiers as WWII developed. In Britain there had been some preparation for this outcome and psychiatric casualties were anticipated. In America, however, it had been assumed that psychological profiling of soldiers would have weeded out those vulnerable to such trauma and so there was no conceptual or material infrastructure in place to deal with the vast numbers of soldiers who were unable to return to battle due to mental illness. Concepts that had developed in medico-legal terrains (such as the biological account of memory central to the use of truth drugs) and in psychiatry (such as the notions of abreaction or reintegration deployed in psychoanalytic therapy) came into conflict, jarred or were fused together as actors developed a pragmatic response to the rapidly worsening situation regarding mental trauma. Amongst this mix of conceptualisations Winter describes how technology became vital not only in the diagnosis and treatment of memory problems (for example in narco-analysis) but also in the governance of the problem. Having ill-prepared for the dire need of psychiatrists on the frontlines, American officials had instead to make use of general physicians to treat soldiers' mental health problems. One way to facilitate this was to distribute video recordings of treatment practices in order to help train physicians near to battle. According to these training videos, sodium pentothal, which had been developed as a truth drug earlier in the century (chapter 2), would be a useful and fast method through which soldiers could be treated and returned to the fight. The videos were edited in such a way as to promote a particular treatment narrative, in which the truth drug helped soldiers traumatised by a battle experience to relive the events that they had repressed and so to reintegrate the memories in a healthy way. In this regard, a more sociotechnical reading of Winter's work can help us to see how the materiality of film, cinema and photography has played a role in constituting our understanding of memory, not only as a metaphor or analogy but also a mechanism through which memories and knowledge can

be captured, altered, distributed, adopted and imprinted. Alongside this, the development of truth drugs and their distribution in WWII was also importantly coproductive. The value and mechanism of action of the drugs was shaped by the conditions of the war so that they took on a new role and could have new effects in the particular situation of psychiatric treatment at the frontlines; and the practices of treatment and governance of the army were significantly shaped by the material effects of the chemicals that were put to work in the bodies of the men suffering from traumatic memories.

The book is full of useful descriptions begging for a more conceptual analysis and although Winter does gesture towards such an investigation and interpretation her historical account perhaps pulls some punches that a sociologist, such as myself, would expect to find. Disciplinary differences aside, however, that the book is written from the disposition of a historian is of course no fault and instead makes for compelling and exciting reading. This is a fascinating text, pieced together from fragments of the past in such a way that each chapter recalls but also revises the previous ones. It is as much a performance of the question of memory as it is a description of some of the various answers to have been posed in response to it. It is very much worth a read and I recommend it wholeheartedly.