

# Remembering the Past through a New Form of Memory: A Review and Evaluation of Prosthetic Memory

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## 1. Introduction

In “*Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*”, published by Columbia University Press in 2004, author Alison Landsberg introduces a new form of memory, one generated from the interface between personal and mediated historical narratives. This type of memory does not originate in real experience, but functions like authentic memory. Landsberg thus names this new form of memory “prosthetic memory”, as she applies it to the studies of American mass culture. The book on one hand, suggests an inevitable separation between history and memory in the process of historical succession, and on another hand, emphasizes the power of mass culture in forming prosthetic memories. Prosthetic memory, according to the author, is not only a new form of memory, but also an effective tool to shape and reshape people’s cognition of the past.

Landsberg studies three remembrances of American culture: immigration, slavery, and the Holocaust. Through analyzing different representations found in novels, movies, and museums, she argues that the prosthetic memory generated from the encounter between artistic works and one’s personal archive of experience can form and reform people’s cognition of a past they never personally experienced. The book analyzes how memory is represented in artistic works and how it drives American remembrance of immigration, slavery and the Holocaust. Landsberg concludes that prosthetic memory – as a ramification of mass culture – can not only facilitate the assimilation of immigrants, strengthen African American identity, and reconfigure white people’s cognition of slavery, but also lead to the creation of a different mnemonic sphere in remembering the Holocaust. The significance of this book is not limited to its terminological interpretation of a new form of memory, but also in extending current memory studies. It inspires us to ask in the age of modernization whether remembering the past is not a ritualistic mourning of the past anymore but rather a knowledge acquisition. If so, then what historical angles should be included in the process of knowledge transmission? If it is not, where is the appropriate position from which to mourn the past?

This book is mainly divided into four parts. Part one discusses the definition, characteristics, and mechanisms of prosthetic memory. Part two analyzes representations of prosthetic memory in artistic works of immigrant assimilation in the United States. Part three interprets a reconstruction of African American identity via the analysis of

representations of prosthetic memory in artistic works of slavery. The last part extends the discussion to the creation of mnemonic space in the remembrance of the Holocaust in the United States.

## 2. Outline

### 2.1 Understanding the theory of prosthetic memory, its variables and mechanisms

#### *The background, definition, and characteristics of prosthetic memory*

With the rapid progress of modernization, new technologies like cinema enable “unprecedented circulation of images and narratives about the past”.<sup>1</sup> According to the author, a new type of memory – “*prosthetic memory*” – is produced from the interface between personal and historical narratives of the past, for example, by visiting museums and watching films or television miniseries.<sup>2</sup> Since this new form of memory is not the memory of an actual experience, it is essentially “a sensuous and experiential memory”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, “prosthetic memories are adopted as the result of a person’s experience with a mass cultural technology of memory that dramatizes or recreates a history he or she did not live”.<sup>4</sup>

For a more comprehensive understanding of prosthetic memory, the author identifies four characteristics of this new form of memory. First, these memories are not natural, not the product of lived experience or “organic” memories, they are derived from engagement with a mass mediated representation.<sup>5</sup> Second, these memories look like to artificial limbs worn on the body.<sup>6</sup> Third, “prosthetic” signals interchangeability and exchangeability.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, they are useful because they feel real and can help people think about the world and their ethical relations to the other.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Variable 1: Inauthentic experience and the experiential medium*

Landsberg explains the mechanism by which prosthetic memory is produced with three variables: *inauthentic experience*, *inauthentic memory*, and *empathy*. In Chapter one, the author points out the differences between “having a real experience” and “experiencing the real”. “Having a real experience” means being involved with a historical moment and becoming a part of it whereas “experiencing the real” means experience of a historical moment but not getting involved in it.<sup>9</sup> The latter, because it is not a direct participation in the historical moment, and it merely aims at providing experience through indirect participation, it is thus termed “inauthentic experience”.

Inauthentic experience also refers to feeling and observing the past through a medium or carrier. In the theory of prosthetic memory, the medium can be a novel, museum exhibit, or cinematic artwork, which enables readers, visitors, or spectators to connect with a past they did not experience first-hand. These mediums which “provide people with the collective opportunity of having an experiential relationship to a collective or cultural past they did not experience”<sup>10</sup> are called “experiential sites”; reading novels, visiting museums, or watching movies are “an act of prosthesis”.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Variable 2: Inauthentic Memory*

When we discuss a memory, we first make connections to the real experience or to historical facts learned

<sup>1</sup> Landsberg, Alison, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Columbia University Press, 2004, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

previously. This is because only if these connections exist can the memory be authenticated. However, with the passage of time, survivors may die and historical evidence may fade severing connections to the ‘authentic’ past. Landsberg argues, “memories always circulate and interpellate people but can never return to an authentic owner, to a proper body”.<sup>12</sup> On that premise, when historical moments need to be recalled to construct national identity, historical narratives are accordingly required to be re-negotiated to match contemporaneous social conditions.<sup>13</sup> Thus modern mass cultural technologies are frequently a tool to continuously reconstruct memories through mediated images and narratives. This type of memory is generally defined as “inauthentic memory”. Prosthetic memory, as one type of inauthentic memory, can be taken on when people watch films or television, visit experiential museums, or enter virtual worlds on the Internet.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Variable 3: Empathy***

The third variable Landsberg introduces is “empathy”. Distinct from sympathy, empathy refers to the power of immersion into an experience, or understanding objects or emotions outside ourselves; it depends less on identification and recognizes the alterity of identification with negotiated distance.<sup>15</sup> Since empathy is not a self-pitying identification with victims but a way of having “both feelings for and feelings different from the subject of inquiry”, it does not pertain to any subject but to a negotiable distance between different subjects.<sup>16</sup> According to Landsberg, experiential sites, like novels, museums, and cinemas which supply mediated images and narratives are the best places from which to prompt empathy. When modes of conception and structures of feeling are conveyed by mediated images or narratives and integrated together, the act of prosthesis could generate motivation that transcends current distinctions between race, class, or gender, and generate a new public sphere uniting people from different areas.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Theoretical framework of the book***

Landsberg defines prosthetic memory as generated by mass cultural technologies, and believes that after it is taken in by an individual, it inhabits the individual’s body and becomes a part of the individual’s archive of experience. In discussing remembrance of immigration, slavery, and the Holocaust, Landsberg selects novels, movies, comic books, and museums to study as typical objects of mass culture. She analyzes the production of prosthetic memory in those artistic works, and hypothesizes that people could involuntarily allow mediated narratives and images to attach to their bodies and change their cognition of the past. The framework of this book is thus arranged to focus on how prosthetic memory is represented and conveyed in artistic works, based on the three variables mentioned above.

## **2.2 Representations of prosthetic memory in American mass cultures**

### **2.2.1 Representations of prosthetic memory in artistic works on immigration**

#### ***Tensions, assimilation policy, self-alienation, and the suture between past and present***

In her case study of immigrant assimilation in the United States during the 1920s, Landsberg suggests that the negotiation process of immigrant assimilation included four representations: tension between Anglo-Saxons and immigrants, assimilation policies, self-alienation of the immigrants, and renderings of sutures between past and present. In this chapter, Landsberg selects the movie “*The Road to Yesterday*” (1925, Cecil B. DeMille) and the autobiography “*The Promise Land*” (1911, Mary Antin) as cases which exemplified the negotiation processes surrounding immigrant

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

assimilation.

The tension represented in the artworks is closely connected with the background of the 1920s immigrant crisis, when the United States was confronted with a large immigrant influx, and concerns about keeping the 'purity' of Americans led to anti-immigration policy. In discussions on whether immigrants would be a national investment or whether they would weaken the nation, the immigrant crisis was imagined as "a crisis of national consumption"<sup>18</sup> and described as "an indigesting problem in the United States".<sup>19</sup>

In the fierce debates concerning assimilation and anti-immigration policies, the pro-immigrant theme of "overcoming divisions of nationality, cultural and class" was widely expressed in the movies.<sup>20</sup> In order to promote assimilation policy, narratives and film scenarios dramatized the tension between immigrants and native-born Americans on one hand, and introduced the solution of marriage on the other, encouraging immigrants to become American by marrying Americans.

Through mediated images and narratives in artistic works, it was easy to espouse the message of assimilation to immigrant audiences, and help get policy passed.<sup>21</sup> The film medium itself, Landsberg argues, has the ability to represent the past visually, and suture the protagonists' stories with people who live in the present.<sup>22</sup> The film medium thus becomes "a metaphor for a kind of prosthetic imagining, a way of remembering or forgetting the past, and which ultimately allowed one to imagine oneself in the present as a typical American".<sup>23</sup> The argument Landsberg presents here does not simply indicate a suture between film characters and immigrant audiences, but also suggests a suture between past and present, as if today's immigrants are similar to the protagonists of the past whose success stories (becoming American by marrying Americans and relinquishing their past) became realities which immigrants today could also attain.

### Self-Alienation as a price for embracing America

If assimilation policies were forced by politicians and encouraged by the mass media, the self-alienation among immigrants catered to the policy as well. In the autobiography *"The Promise Land"* (Mary Antin, 1911), the author revealed how second generation immigrants imagined themselves as American. Through analysis of the autobiography, Landsberg separates the transformation of "becoming American" into three stages: first, self-alienation – separating oneself from one's own past; second, embracing American history – allowing the American past to be attached to one's body; and third, imagining oneself "becoming American". Antin's own experience of becoming an American citizen is of first abandoning her history so that she could embrace her new American past then imagining herself inhabiting a new American body. In other words, abandoning one's past becomes the price for embracing America.<sup>24</sup>

Landsberg classifies this process of "identifying themselves as American" as a social typology wherein immigrants first identify themselves as belonging to American culture and then declare themselves Americans.<sup>25</sup> Ostensibly, it is an alternation of identity cognition, but it essentially "reinscribes a conflicted and potentially explosive social reality as a terrain of consensus and integration".<sup>26</sup> This social typology of imagining oneself as American has thus become a distinctly American form of self-imagining, in which the past that one claims and the trajectory that such a past enables has very little to do with the heredity of parent-child links.<sup>27</sup> Landsberg thus critically evaluates the

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Hanson, Miriam, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1991, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

social science of typology as depriving the individual of his or her uniqueness, and denying the biological heredity of identity, but also concedes that it supplies access to a public body which does not presuppose a particular birthright or biology.<sup>28</sup>

From Antin's description of her identity as "one of the Americans", Landsberg argues that parents' expectations of assimilation for their descendants were more creative and consistent, but naive as well. Continuous editing and negotiating of the past created a prosthetic memory which forced immigrants' children to imagine themselves as "one child of American children".<sup>29</sup> The self-imagination of being American thus obliged second generation immigrants to let the American past inhabit their selves.

### 2.2.2 Representations of prosthetic memory in artistic works on slavery

#### Oppression of slavery's history, the impossibilities and possibilities of remembering slavery

As a dark and ugly period in the nation's history, slavery was "for more than a century, a chapter to forget" in the United States.<sup>30</sup> The amnesia of slavery, according to the author, was not only found in whites but in African Americans as well, who "chose to look to Africa for a heritage of which they could be proud".<sup>31</sup> Only after the 1990s, when artistic institutions like the Detroit Museum started to challenge the obliviousness surrounding slavery, did people understand that racial oppression was widespread in the United States.<sup>32</sup> In discussing the remembrance of slavery, most historians believed that a slave could never return to the past, or be legitimately accepted by present society, due to the attitude: "since they were born, they are socially dead".<sup>33</sup> Landsberg criticizes this "social death" of slaves and argues that any type of cultural memory needs collective culture as a background. The slaves in America lacked both acknowledgment of their original culture, and acknowledgment of their masters' culture. This highlights the difficulties of memory (culture) transmission, but we can hardly declare it the end of a memory, or the actual social death of the slave in American society.<sup>34</sup>

Remembrance of slavery in American society reflects a different negotiation process from that of immigrant assimilation. While immigrant assimilation resulted from interactions between political decisions (external) and personal wishes (internal), the history of slavery involved almost a century of one-sided oppression. Thus, negotiating the remembrance of slavery is a much more complicated struggle. Prosthetic memory of slavery and racial oppression produced from mass culture technologies "neither produces an entirely new identity nor changes one's race".<sup>35</sup> Moreover, engaging in the negotiation process of remembering slavery's history "reconfigured a person's subjectivity via learning to see the world through black eyes".<sup>36</sup> This chapter reveals how prosthetic memory opens a way for both African Americans and whites to remember and understand the history of slavery in the United States. Landsberg selects the novel "*Beloved*" (Toni Morrison, 1987), the novel "*Song of Solomon*" (Toni Morrison, 1977) and the movie "*Rosewood*" (John Singleton, 1996) as main case studies for revealing slavery-related horrors on the plantation and describing the establishment of the African American community. She explores the representations of a child's desire to learn about slavery, and argues that a white spectator's subjectivity can be changed when racism is expressed from black perspectives in artistic works.

<sup>28</sup> The author on one hand emphasizes the universal conception of typology that present tense is an allegory of history, but on the other hand, suggests that the typology of immigration in the United States has been transformed into another form; that Americanization actually supplies the possibility of their "passing".

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Elkins Stanley M. *Slavery*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1963; Patterson Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

<sup>34</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

### Representing horrors, natal-Alienation, community, and desire

Many literary works and films dealing with slavery use African children to convey the brutal separation caused by slavery. The novel *“Uncle Tom’s Cabin”* (1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe), describes the separation of parents from their young son Tom. Tom’s mother Eliza’s crying dramatizes the horror of children being sold away from their mothers. Alison Landsberg states that the rendering of this separation sets the child “as the site of trauma in abolitionist discourse”,<sup>37</sup> and argues that since genealogy and memory was cut from the sold child, it must be recovered and re-produced from the child as well.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, as the African children were sold away as slave laborers, they were simultaneously refused entrance into their masters’ society, their identity as alienated children thus supplying a “critical distance from the reified structures of society [which] gives him or her a privileged role in unmasking racist ideology”.<sup>39</sup>

The novel *“Beloved”* (Toni Morrison, 1987) tells of a female slave’s horrible experience on a plantation and her escape. Sethe is a young slave working on a plantation named “Sweet Home”. To prevent her young daughter being sold away to suffer the same brutal torture of slavery, Sethe kills her and escapes to the town of Ohio with her other daughter, Denver. After arriving in Ohio, they find their house haunted by a ghost named “Beloved”, symbolically representing the daughter Sethe killed on the plantation. After struggling with “Beloved” for a long time, Sethe’s daughter Denver gets an African American community to perform an exorcism which finally saves Sethe from the haunting. In this novel, the horrors of the plantation are reflected in the ghost as well as in other imagery, for example, in an unborn baby’s indigo-dyed hands.<sup>40</sup> The horrors are indirectly conveyed by an unborn child inspires readers to imagine the hard work on the plantation and the irremovable stigma of their slave identity.

The novel *“Song of Solomon”* tells of an African American child who goes in search of his African heritage. Milkman Dead is kept from investigating his cultural heritage by his father Macon. Milkman’s curiosity about his past leads him to visit his Aunt Pilate. Aunt Pilate’s early experiences, her natal-separation, and her experiences with kinship and the community feeds Milkman’s curiosity about his genealogy. By tracing the lyrics of a song, Milkman finally identifies his ancestry, and comes to believe that the song Aunt Pilate taught him is the song of his great-grandfather Solomon. In the analysis of this novel, it is suggested that the more past memory is oppressed, the stronger the desire will be to learn of the past. Furthermore, it is also hinted that learning of the past (in this case, Solomon) can alter a person’s cognition of his or her subjectivity in the present (Milkman traces his genealogy and concludes that he is Solomon’s grandchild), even if conclusions are imaginary and cannot be confirmed.

The necessity of community is also emphasized in artistic works about slavery. The African American community not only symbolizes a trustworthy organization which helps African Americans overcome difficulties in an isolating society, it also represents a reliable sense of belonging, through which memory of ancestors can be preserved, recalled, and strengthened.

In *“Song of Solomon”*, the memory of slavery’s oppression spurs a child’s desire to learn a history he had not experienced; the starting point for the construction of slavery memory. The horrors of slavery are frequently expressed in artistic works, but – in contrast with the case of immigrant assimilation – they neither generate another round of forgetting, nor lead to an identity change away from ‘African’. The reason may be the separation and isolation African Americans experienced in the United States while growing up. Additionally, the artistic representation of an established community which supplied protection to African Americans may have translated into a prosthetic memory where the identity and subjectivity of African Americans’ real lives could also be protected and united by the community.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> “The indigo dye is the representation of the plantations days, since most of woman slavery were forced to work in large dye vats, their hands became a physical mark of their slavery identity.” *Ibid.*, 98.



## Representations of racism in artistic works

In the second half of the chapter Landsberg supplies another example of how prosthetic memory reconfigured white people's subjectivity towards slavery through the movie "*Rosewood*" (John Singleton, 1996), based on a little known historical event in 1923 Florida, where a false accusation caused white neighbors to "embark on a witch hunt", causing at least eight deaths in the black community.<sup>41</sup> In the movie, a white woman who lives in Sumner (a primarily white town) is beaten by her white lover, but cries rape and blames it on an unknown black man. Her accusation triggers violence against African Americans in the neighboring town of Rosewood (primarily black). The movie ends with a courtroom scene containing testimony from black and white witnesses. The survivors sue the state for its failure to protect the African Americans of Rosewood. In the real world parallel, Florida became the first state to pay reparations to its survivors of racial violence.

Landsberg comments that in contrast to other movies sharing the theme of slavery, the community of Rosewood is described as more regulated, prosperous and stable than Sumner.<sup>42</sup> The hateful speech and overall behavior of the white racists is presented more from the viewpoint of black people, forcing viewers to look at the world "from a perspective that is not naturally their own", which "enables them to acquire prosthetic memory".<sup>43</sup> When a white boy named Emmett refuses to be a racist like his father, he becomes a proxy for the white spectator to see brutality toward African Americans. Emmett renounces his father and white supremacist beliefs by the end of the movie, which through suturing actors and spectators, hints at white viewers' ability to make a similar choice in reality.

The remembrance of slavery reflects the complexities facing American mass culture in remembering its cultural past. It shows suppression of the past alongside a desire to know the past. It shows the brutal separation of families while also presenting the establishment of communities with shared memories. It assumes the voice of a child slave to narrate the cruelty of slavery and simultaneously compels white spectators to take personal responsibility for their racism. Although slavery and immigrant assimilation led to different results through prosthetic memory, both emphasized depending less on biological or familial connections in the memory transmission process.

Cinema, museums, and other artistic works, Landsberg argues, have become sites of "bodily experience" in which the spectator lets their body take on memories of events they have not experienced, allowing themselves to be marked or scarred by mediated historical scenarios. African American children in artistic works about slavery take on the role of a critical lens, through which white spectators see a past of which they were as unaware as their child proxies,<sup>44</sup> face past brutality, and take responsibility for past racism.

### 2.2.3 Representations of prosthetic memory in artistic works on the Holocaust

#### Traditional Images and Interpreted images

The Holocaust was forgotten in the United States during the post-war era,<sup>45</sup> and by 1974 was regarded as a freak event. Some scholars blamed univocal discourse merely portraying Jews as victims, and criticized statements that "enabled America to shirk those responsibilities that do belong to Americans as they confront their past, their present, and their future".<sup>46</sup> In the beginning of this chapter, Landsberg argues that popular discussion on prejudice and dispossession could actually constitute the first step to redress historical crimes for which America is directly responsible.<sup>47</sup>

In discussing Holocaust remembrance in American society, Landsberg selects the comic book "*Maus: A Survivor's Tale – My Father Bleeds History*" (Art Spiegelman, 1973), the movie "*Schindler's List*" (Steven Spielberg,

<sup>41</sup> New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C01E2DA153EF932A15751C0A961958260> (access on December 11, 2015)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 114, only one article was published in 1947, in the New Republic on the subject of Auschwitz.

<sup>46</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 15, italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 115.

1993), the movie *“the Pianist”* (Roman Polanski, 2002), and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as case studies in the transforming images of both Jews and German commanders in artistic works.

*“Maus: A Survivor’s Tale-My Father Bleeds History”* (Art Spiegelman, 1973) is a graphic, semi-autobiographical novel, serialized from 1980 to 1991. The story was based on author Art Spiegelman’s father, Vladek’s real experiences in Nazi-occupied Poland. In the comic book, the author portrays Jews as mice, Germans as cats, and other non-Jewish people as pigs. The main protagonists are modern-day Holocaust survivors, who flash back to memories of extermination camps. The character Vladek’s peculiarities, such as collecting trash like old wires, reveal the value that basic objects had in the camps, and also serve as allegory for the recycling of Holocaust memory.<sup>48</sup> The serialized *“Maus”* became a medium through which memory of the Holocaust was passed from Vladek to later generations as well as to readers in real life. Images of pale Jews and brutal Nazi German commanders are a common trope in traditional Holocaust movies. The brutality of the Holocaust and its mass killings are often simply represented as “witness death”. *“Maus”* went beyond the brutality and cruelty of the Nazis in Poland to portray the ongoing trauma afflicting survivors, for which this work won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

*Schindler’s list* (Spielberg and Zaillian, 1993) is a movie based on the novel *Schindler’s Ark* (Keneally, 1982). It tells of German businessman Oscar Schindler who saved over a thousand Polish-Jewish refugees by employing them in his factory during the Holocaust. The movie won 7 Academy Awards in 1994, and since then the Holocaust “had indisputably become a highly visible public issue in the United States”,<sup>49</sup> and the “popularity of this movie attests to its status not just as a film, but as a public, historical event as well”.<sup>50</sup> Similar to *Schindler’s List*, the movie *“The Pianist”* (Roman Polanski, 2002) – also based on an autobiographical book (*“The Pianist”* by Wladyslaw Szpilman, 1998) – tells how famous Jewish-Polish pianist Szpilman hides himself while Nazis deport his fellow Jews to extermination camps, and is secretly saved by German commander Wilm Hosenfeld.

Both movies feature German protagonists who protect Polish-Jewish lives and help them avoid extermination camps. Compared to other cinematic works about the Holocaust, Landsberg noted that the two movies transformed previous depictions of German commanders from stereotypically devilish to some being virtuous, and altered the portrayal of Jews from being weak and pale victims into “more talented”, “more recognizable” images. Landsberg highlighted that mediated narratives with balanced observations of different subjects will help change spectators’ cognition of traumatic historical events. For example, in portraying Jewish people’s fear of the killings, *“the Pianist”* presents radical images of violence from different angles, which viscerally conveys empathetic emotions to spectators rather than solely impersonal ones. Both *“the Pianist”* and *“Schindler’s list”* transmit these emotions toward Jewish victims not only through Jewish characters, but also through depicting German characters’ redemptions, providing a different angle towards understanding “the plight of the other”.<sup>51</sup>

### Generation of prosthetic memory in an experiential museum

With the development of mass cultural technologies, memories of the past became less dependent on the authentic or real, instead relying more on knowledge, responsibility, and empathy.<sup>52</sup> Contemporary museums are thus designed as a type of experiential site for knowledge acquisition, enabling visitors to adopt historical memories as experience rather than simply gaining knowledge. In visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Landsberg observes how prosthetic memories attach to visitors’ bodies, who then adopt them as a personal archive of Holocaust experience.

The museum exhibits, according to Landsberg, differ from photography and newspaper articles in that they

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



are displayed as “mute survivors”. It is difficult for the exhibit itself to convey the authentic historical moment (because most of them are artifacts), but all of them convey the illusion of belonging to someone who had permanently disappeared. Landsberg thus argues that the exhibits are not a representation of presence, but a representation of profound absence.<sup>53</sup>

Facing this representation of loss, Landsberg realizes that although visitors feel connected to what they see, like loss and dispossession, they are not penetrated by the sympathetic emotion of the loss; rather, visitors still remain aware of the profound differences between the “mute survivors” and themselves. For Landsberg, the museum is not simply a site to access old memories, nor solely a site where memory can attach to an individuals’ body. The Holocaust Museum generates a new memory in which visitors not only take on others’ memories of Auschwitz, but also construct their own memories of the Holocaust when, for example, they hear testimonies narrated through headphones. The Holocaust museum is “an occasion for an empathetic relationship with the Holocaust victims, thus we could imagine the museum as a transferential site or space”.<sup>54</sup>

## 2.3 Summary and significance of the book

“*Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*” is the first work to introduce the theory of “prosthetic memory”. In interpreting this theory, Landsberg agrees that memory is socially constructed, but emphasizes that the form in which the past is remembered has been transformed drastically in recent decades, along with the development of new mass cultural technologies (e.g. literary works, movies and museums). According to the author, the development of these technologies has promoted faster and wider memory transference. Furthermore, a memory which does not come from personal experience is more effectively produced and transferred by mass cultural technologies. Even if this type of memory is filled with mediated images and narratives, Landsberg believes it functions as organic memory which configures and reconfigures people’s understanding of ethical relationships.

In the case of immigrant assimilation in the United States, Landsberg describes the negotiation process between Anglo-Saxons and immigrants in the 1920s by focusing on how prosthetic memory effectively promoted immigrant assimilation. In the case of slavery, the author found a different result to assimilation; that prosthetic memory strengthened the identity of African Americans, and forced American whites to take responsibility for racism. As to the Holocaust, Landsberg identified a transformation in how it was remembered in the United States, arguing that prosthetic memory steered cognition away from caricatures of diabolical Nazis and helpless Jews to more empathetic figures. Through artistic works on the Holocaust, prosthetic memory led to an awareness of “the plight of the other”.

“*Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*” also presents a reality in which memory transference has expanded from being limited to a certain community in a certain era, to a wider public sphere. In the age of globalization, especially with the development of cyberspace, this type of memory produced by mass cultural technologies will have greater importance in reconfiguring cognition of the past, hence the importance of this research.

## 3. Evaluation

### 3.1 The importance of prosthetic memory in memory studies

In earlier studies of memory, Maurice Halbwachs was the first to identify “collective memory” and advance memory studies from the personal and psychological to the collective and social level. Halbwachs argued that collective memory is not a simple accumulation of personal memories but a socially constructed memory, based on the

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

social and cultural regulations of a certain period. In his book *“On Collective Memory”*, he stated that collective memory needs to settle in a social framework, and when the social framework changes, the collective memory which inhabits it will change accordingly. The notion of collective memory is based on two parameters: the first is that collective memory is socially constructed; the second is the definition of the social framework. The social framework is similar in structure to a mnemonic space for the preservation and transference of memory, in which individual memory is seen as different nodes, with interconnections among other nodes creating a shared space which can be occupied by collective memory. Halbwachs thus argued that shared notions within a group form the collective memory.

In the interpretation of prosthetic memory, Landsberg agrees with Halbwachs that collective memory is socially constructed. In other words, Landsberg sees prosthetic memory as also constructed and reconstructed by social regulations. However, unlike Halbwachs, Landsberg lays more emphasis on the power of mass cultural technologies, and believes that these technologies are capable of connecting and unifying people who have nothing in common. Landsberg extends Halbwachs’s definition of ‘social framework’ to a wider public sphere, in which ‘social’ is not limited by race, class, geography, time, or space. It would seem that Landsberg and her studies of prosthetic memory are refining the characteristics of memory transference for the current age of globalization.

In another study on collective memory, Marita Sturken’s book *“Tangled memories, the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering”* (1997) advanced the view that visual images trigger both memory and amnesia. Sturken argued that even if memory is often embodied in objects, and operates to prompt remembrance of the past, memory has never resided in a photograph or in any camera images.<sup>55</sup> To Sturken, for every image that produces memory, there must be something that is forgotten, because visual images “arrest time” and cut off historical continuity.

Landsberg supplies a more comprehensive reconstruction of the process of memory by analyzing artistic works from different periods on the same historical event, and elaborating the transformation of mediated narratives and memories over a longer period of time (1920s to 1990s). Landsberg not only focuses on literature and novels, but also turns her attention to museums to study trends in memory transformation and how we gain knowledge of the past. Given the wider scope of study, prosthetic memory would appear to negate Sturken’s “time arrested” notion.

### 3.2 The limitations of the prosthetic memory concept

Landsberg’s emphasis on the power of prosthetic memory assumes a rift between authentic history and memory. The author states that remembering the past today is less dependent on authentic elements, and predicts that prosthetic memory produced by mass cultural technologies today will inevitably replace authentic memory in the future. It is difficult to forecast, but what we do know is that history is being made today and will form the basis of tomorrow. As long as this persists, authentic historical factors are unlikely to diminish in importance. Even predictions of change are due to our own interpretation of historical events, and what we accept as historical facts today are unlikely to vary too much because we need “today” to have been created by, and be consistent with “yesterday”. If “yesterday” is changed, “today” will be inexplicable unless changed to suit. Therefore, even if technology is someday powerful enough to reconfigure interpretations of the past, it will be difficult to say that it will completely override authentic historical factors. A rupture between authentic history and memory transference may exist, but that does not mean that we will no longer need historical authenticity.

The argument surrounding how prosthetic memory is taken into the body depends on the interpretation of “empathy”. Empathy, according to Alison Landsberg, can be imagined as a nerve that connects “a personal archive of experience” and “a historical narrative”. If – and only if – the prosthetic memory is compatible with the personal archive of experience, can it be accepted by the body. Landsberg quotes plenty of narratives from artistic works, and

<sup>55</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*, California University Press, 1997, 18-19.

deduces the function of empathy in artwork narratives, but the mechanism by which empathy alters cognition of identity and subjectivity lacks persuasiveness. In other words, what kind of “personal archive of experience” leads an observer to respond with empathy to artworks remains unknown. Both history and memory need continuity. The fact that Landsberg only emphasizes the power of cultural technologies in constructing inauthentic memories, while overlooking why individuals are willing to accept prosthetic memories undermines the logical argument for prosthetic memory.

Prosthetic memory does not mean forgery, but the process through which people adopt a historical memory that they did not experience first-hand. The credibility of prosthetic memory lies in simultaneously inhabiting the individual and being consistent with authentic historical factors. If the prosthetic memory is completely forged, or it betrays historical factors, it can only be considered “fiction” and is unlikely to be accepted and internalized by the individual. That is why fictions are unlikely to produce a historical memory, but artistic works based on historical factors do.

### 3.3 Connections with war memory studies of Japanese society

Even if its argument lacks persuasiveness, the book *“Prosthetic memory: the transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture”* – with its detailed interpretations – introduces the possibility of mass culture technologies creating prosthetic memory, forming, and reforming people’s cognition of historical events. The biggest difficulty in arguing for prosthetic memory is not proving it exists, but convincing the reader that people will willingly take on prosthetic memory through mediated narratives and images. If the prosthetic memory is at odds with one’s personal archive of experience, it will appear like an incompatible appendage. Only a prosthetic memory that matches the body perfectly can function as a normal limb.

There are countless Japanese post-war artistic works, each presenting its own interpretation of the war. Efforts to categorize those works will probably lead to chaos as there are no specific images that represent the typical war memory in Japanese society. However, if prosthetic memory needs to have historical authenticity, as well as match the continuity of personal archives in order to be adopted as mediated rather than rejected as forged, then finding artistic works which share common connections with authentic historical factors might supply objective and useful observations of the transformation of war memory in post-war Japan.

Finally, even if prosthetic memory is a useful modern construct for describing how the past is remembered, it is supported by collective and cultural memory, and we must be aware of the possibility that it might slip into idealism and exaggerate the power of mass culture in shaping people’s cognition of the past.