Electric Sheep: the myths, constructs, and integrity of memory

Alison Winter, ***Memory: fragments of a modern history.***
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Selling 'existences' for twenty-five dollars a shot, hypnotists in 1950s America took their soul-searching clients back before birth to access memories from their previous lives. This brief 'nationwide preoccupation' with past life regression is one of eleven episodes richly documented in Alison Winter's history of memory in the twentieth century. It followed reports from Morey Bernstein, a Colorado businessman, that when he hypnotised a local housewife she remembered vivid details of her life as 'Bridey Murphy' in nineteenth-century Ireland. A 'giddy salon culture' developed in the wake of public thrill at Bridey's precise and emotional personal memories, transmitted across incarnations. While party invitations instructed guests to 'come as you were', one teenager's suicide note announced his desire to explore reincarnation 'in person'. Striking conjunctions of the zany and the tragic, as in this case, or of the sensational and the scholarly, characterize the critical incidents in the cultures and sciences of memory which Winter explores, from forensic uses of Dr House's 'truth serum' in the 1920s to recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse in the 1980s. Her beguiling tales of scientists, rogues, and suffering patients all haunted and enticed by memory flow easily, illustrated with movie stills, cartoons, ads, and pictures of curious contraptions. The Schneider Brain Wave Synchronizer, sold to consumers from 1958 to manipulate memory by tuning its pulsing lights to the brain's electrical activity, was one product of the repeated rush to straighten out the 'twisted molecules' which surely *must* underlie every 'twisted thought'.

Psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris reported recently that 63% of American citizens believe human memory records experienced events like a video camera, and 48% that memories, once formed, are permanent and do not change: research psychologists, in contrast, almost unanimously rejected these claims. In 1980 a similar survey found 84% of psychologists, compared to 69% of non-psychologists, accepting views like these. Simons and Chabris acknowledge that academic opinions have changed over time, but argue that 'the current consensus reflects the substantial accumulation of evidence over recent decades rather than shifts in fashion'. Winter might be sceptical of this progressivist explanation of volatility in expert opinion: she fully expects the latest 'sensational new projects' in memory science 'to give way in their turn, or even to be violently overturned'. The fact that lay views remain more stable confirms her suggestion that the 'vibrant culture of lay psychological exploration' in twentieth-century America has 'a continuous history', though her methods for tapping it are less direct.

Memory is often in play when it is not explicitly in question. We rely unthinkingly on our capacity to remember past experiences when we are making decisions and telling stories, planning or cooking or navigating or listening to music, in settings that have no direct focus on memory itself. History, like anthropology, can seek other ways to glimpse the tacit skills of remembering in practical life, trying to catch what and how people remember, rather than what they *say* about memory. Yet history by fragments can appear somewhat arbitrary, and Winter gives no explicit principles for her choice of discrete moments or movements in the memory sciences. The method works well for following across diverse domains the transmission and fate of tactics for probing internal archives of personal experience. Wanting to access uncensored memories, police and military psychologists earlier in the century employed drugs and hypnotic techniques on both willing and unwilling participants. Such strategies of extraction had real effects that often diverged substantially from their wishful aim, but they continued to circulate later in distinct therapeutic contexts. Winter also pursues such dreams of digging up buried memories across media and popular culture, integrating the histories of Cold War science fiction and American home movies, or following the migrations of the concept of a 'flashback' from military propaganda through feature films to trauma theory. The claims of Wilder Penfield in the 1950s that electrical stimulation of his patients' brains replayed perfectly preserved memories not only fed off and into the 'rising realist epistemology' of uncrafted and unedited amateur film, but also directly influenced artists: Lee Strasberg compared the evocation of specific emotions in method acting to Penfield's memory experiments, and the device used to produce particular emotional states in Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is the Penfield Mood Organ. The quest for vivid inner archives permanently stored in the brain also fuelled striking collaborations across intellectual traditions. Lawrence Kubie, a Yale psychoanalyst, sat in Penfield's surgery recording the conscious patients' free associations to explore memory's 'library of many volumes' while the neuroscientist operated on the cortex.

This is fine picaresque history, with wide appeal. But Winter has higher hopes for the assembled fragments, claiming that they add up to a book that is 'at once a social history of memory science, an intellectual history of remembering, and a cultural history of the mind'. The troubled intersections of psychology and the law provide most of her cases, often themselves originating in some puzzling or sensational fragmentary memory, of which researchers, clinicians, or lawyers had to make sense. While the 'unbounded scope' of the topic does justify selectivity, Winter does not situate her project against other histories of memory, and the aggregate is narrower than the ambition demands. Alongside a thin treatment of mainstream experimental psychology, on which more below, there is little on the scientific or cultural significance of Alzheimer's disease and the dementias, or on neuroscientific initiatives to taxonomise and localise distinct memory systems. At the other end of the disciplinary spectrum in memory studies, apart from some discussion of the history of media and recording technologies, Winter does not touch at all on the 'memory boom' in the applied cultural memory industries of the later twentieth century. This is surprising even in a socio-cultural history of individual memory alone, which does not highlight or theorize social memory processes. Significant forms of remembering occur, for example, as people engage with monuments and memorials, architecture and museums, rituals and commemoration. Many readers would want a history of twentieth-century memory to consider how the Holocaust and the century's other vast and violent losses have figured in individual and shared remembering, or the ways that memory practices have played vexed and complex parts in projects of reconciliation and amnesty, in political change or cultural integration across distinctive cultural contexts. Perhaps Winter's unmarked geographical focus on North America partly explains her decision not to address these topics. When she excavates the 'elaborate understandings of how the mind works' in lay psychological culture, the lay views in question are all American. The book leaves North America only for a couple of excursions: specifically American concerns are also at stake when Winter compares memory science to evolutionary biology in terms of 'the challenge it represents to what are taken to be moral essentials'.

To render visible views of memory outside the academic world, Winter draws effectively on American archives: from newspaper reports in the 1900s of murder trials resting on eyewitness testimony or dubious confessions, through thousands of letters written to Bernstein about Bridey Murphy's memories and the writers' own past lives, to the False Memory Syndrome Foundation's records of the memory wars of the 1990s. These are rich sources, more revealing than questionnaires of the place of memory in the weave of social life. Winter links ideas about the authenticity of memory to the commodification of American family time across the century. Where Kodak had once encouraged the preservation of family 'stories' or 'hours', postwar campaigns shrank those 'hours' to frozen 'moments'. Advertisers and consumers alike slipped so easily between external technologies and inner processes that archiving the precious instants could seem a family duty, with life itself as personal capital. A cultural history closer to ethnography might ask whether and how practices of individual and shared remembering did in fact change in those American families which wholeheartedly adopted specific new recording media. Or, if Winter had moved into the current century beyond summarising a couple of recent neuroscientific projects in her final chapter, she might have studied the roles of technological resources in the contemporary memory marketplace, in both frenzied and intriguingly hybrid forms. Enthusiastic 'lifeloggers' are tagging experiences as they are lived using automated apps and mobile cams, or hyping 'neurobic' workouts to enhance the 'brain fitness' of anxiously ageing populations.

Yet now as in the 1950s, we wouldn't need such media to scaffold our memories if our own biological resources really did preserve the past pristine. Of course, as Winter shows, recording devices were often taken up as models for internal memory processes, the source metaphors of fantasies of total capture, as if there was some deep functional parity between technologies and brains. But on more subtle minority views, external systems do not replicate but rather complement our unaided memory capacities. Our practised interactions with cognitive artifacts rely on the radically different features of inner and outer traces: where words, images, and digital media can sometimes, with appropriate use, stably maintain their content over time, our neural memory systems seem naturally to mix and interanimate distinct experiences. A key line of thought to hold in mind if we want to see this constructive quality of remembering as potentially beneficial, as a feature rather than a bug, is this longstanding human tendency to spread memories into and over reliably integrated external symbol systems.

In exploring the changing relations between lay and expert memory practices as new professions emerged, Winter shows how often the idea of 'movielike memories secreted in the subconscious' was pursued with particular zeal by specialists and scientists. But she also treats it as the fundamental or default common sense view, and as one with high emotional and moral stakes. It is 'intuitive' to think that experiences are perfectly preserved: and while it is commonly accepted that memories *can* be unreliable, any scientific support for our 'deep-seated attachment' to a personal archive of the past is reassuring, even 'exciting and perhaps emboldening'. Winter's history confirms, nevertheless, that quests to reproduce the literal content or emotions of original experiences often fail to comfort. In contrast, she describes claims that memories are malleable as evoking understandable unease or outrage. Given 'the persistence of memory projects seeking to recover the authentic past, and others rebutting this possibility', Winter acknowledges the temptation to see her book as depicting a cycle between two stable models, with one side defending the fidelity of recording and retrieval, and the other sceptically stressing the constructive nature of remembering. But this reading, she warns, would 'miss the point': instead, we are to see both expert and lay actors over the decades as shifting terrain pragmatically, mining earlier claims and techniques to fit current needs. Yet this sharp dichotomy does structure the whole book, both across and within chapters, and Winter does not successfully suggest ways to dissolve or move past it.

Adversarial forensic contexts encouraged the polarization. As early as 1908, Hugo Münsterberg argued that psychology could usefully complicate the legal assumption that deliberate falsehood was the only alternative to telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth, an optimistic ideal at the best of times. At the other end of the century, Winter identifies strangely symmetrical motivations and tactics at play across the two bitterly opposed camps in conflicts about repressed memories. Activist therapists and lawyers found shocking evidence of widespread childhood sexual abuse in many women's recovery of horrific isolated memories, thought to have been originally buried by primitive survival mechanisms: in a concerted backlash in the early 1990s, a well-organized campaign sought to discredit many of these claims as 'false memories' produced by suggestion and hysteria. As each side marshalled support through impassioned public interventions, both communities 'saw themselves as survivors of a terrible private injustice', perpetrated solely by either an evil past abuser or a messianic and intrusive therapist, with both locating the causes of all mental conflict outside the individual. Carefully tracing the history of legal reforms and civil suits brought by both sides in the American psycho-political landscape, Winter shows how personal pain, once brought into court, often had to be rendered more categorical: the legal culture 'encouraged sharper distinctions between continuous and repressed memories', where otherwise some women might have explored other ways in which over time they had avoided being overwhelmed by their difficult pasts. Among the academic psychologists whose increasing criticism left recovered and repressed memory 'in disgrace' by the late 1990s, the rush to judgements of simple truth or falsity could lead to monocausal thinking about memory, as if the failure of quests to exhume singular relics of past experience, free of later interpretation or complex webs of influence, rules out any possibility of truth-telling. Winter provides a detailed and balanced social history of the memory wars, complementing equally unaligned if more theoretically challenging earlier contributions by Ian Hacking, Janice Haaken, and Sue Campbell.

In her only, nicely-judged departure from chronological sequence, Winter interposes a chapter on Frederic Bartlett and his 1932 book *Remembering* into her treatment of these late-century crises of memory. She situates Bartlett's constructivism about remembering against ideas about conventionalization among Cambridge anthropologists like W.H.R. Rivers. In integrative treatments of memory and perception, Bartlett argued that we make sense of past and present reality by selectively picking up the most salient features of available information, which we then fill out with plausible interpretive additions that best fit our interests and schemas. Winter suggests that the positive recuperation of Bartlett's dynamic conception of memory traces by later psychologists to provide 'a respectable genealogy for their skeptical attacks on remembered testimony in the courtroom' misrepresented his approach. Bartlett did not see operation of reconstructive processes in remembering as inevitably making memories 'false or bad. In fact, he thought they served us better as a result'. Winter's story here is almost right, both historically and conceptually, but remains sketchy enough to need substantial elaboration. She is aware of the need to rethink the implications of constructivism, and to see how radical plasticity (rather than a fantasy of the unsullied, uninfluenced memory trace) can still ground responsible ways of interpreting and bearing witness to the past. She reminds us, for example, that before the twentieth century 'confabulating' meant talking together or conferring, rather than the individual's ungrounded or fictional psychic invention. But the relentless neutrality of her historical scholarship tends to stymie its potential theoretical contributions, leaving in place the sense that it is 'profoundly disturbing' to claim that remembering is reconstructing past experience. Apart from a chapter on the controversial but media-friendly notion of 'flashbulb memory', Winter's account of the rise of cognitive psychology and its broader impact on memory science takes up less than a page, and flattens out distinct phases of experimental, institutional, and theoretical debates. Her readers get no sense, for example, that the category of personal or 'autobiographical' memory, which is the central topic of the book, just didn't figure in mainstream psychology for decades, and was kept alive primarily in the philosophy of mind (and, of course, also in literature and memoir, fields conspicuously absent from Winter's history) until an explosion of experimental work in recent years.

But Winter is right to hint that moves in the 1980s to revivify Bartlett's naturalistic, anthropological, heavily contextualist psychology in the form of ecological approaches and 'everyday memory' were assimilated or hijacked by the successful brands of forensic applied psychology that arose in sceptical research on eyewitness testimony and then nourished the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. As a result many writers, myself included, subsequently slipped too fast from acknowledging that we reconstruct the past on the basis of interest-driven, dynamic traces to claiming that human memory intrinsically tends towards distortion and error, that memory just plays us false. But as Sue Campbell especially has argued, this rhetorical move from construction to confusion is ill-founded. In assuming that true memories would have to *escape* influence, it fails to apply constructivism thoroughly enough. It maintains an archival ideal of truth in memory even while insisting on the illusory status of that ideal. And it neglects the ways we standardly rely on other people and on more or less stable environments to help us hold information and manage the past effectively enough.

The powerful grip of the idea that memory construction entails falsity is exemplified in Jenny Diski's review of Winter in the *London Review of Books.* Diski describes a familiar childhood memory in which she can see herself in the remembered scene, as from an observer's perspective. After suddenly noticing 'the anomalous point of view' of the memory, she decides that it is not 'a "real" memory' but 'an indicator of how false recollection can be'. It's not that Diski has come to suspect that this is a full-scale screen memory, from which some specific revelation can be deciphered: yet, as Freud too was tempted to do, she treats such external perspectives in recollection as evidence of not just plasticity but wholesale invention. But the experience of remembering in this way from an observer or third-person perspective is not only common, characterizing at least a substantial minority of ordinary autobiographical memories, but also perfectly compatible with accuracy. Only if truth in memory required, impossibly, the exact reinstatement of every frozen feature of original experience would it be essential for the remembering self to occupy the same visuospatial perspective now as the past self did then. As I pull together the various components of a remembered scene – the array of sensory-perceptual, emotional, kinesthetic, and cognitive elements which are compiled in a complex recollection of an extended, meaningful past event – I can still be remembering what really happened even while I now take a new perspective on it.

Bartlett used images or semantic material like the folk tale 'The War of the Ghosts' in his demonstrations that, over time, people transform and normalize what they remember. As he argued, in such domains 'literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant': the ideal of verbatim reproduction arguably gained significance historically only in the wake of external techniques for reliably reproducing transmissible texts. But where 'literal recall' makes sense at all, it does so more for such reproducible information than for richly structured, multisensory personal experiences. The notion of autobiographical memory too as a perfectly preserved archive, to the extent it has had the grip on popular belief that Winter claims, has perhaps been repeatedly exported from rhetorical and educational contexts as well as from the history of recording technologies. But 'true' does not necessarily mean 'literal'. Once we shift to the autobiographical domain, to memory for experiences with emotional significance, our concerns with the past cannot be bypassed by refusing any interest in truth and falsity, the strategy which Winter ascribes to Bartlett. Remembering complex events and episodes just *is,* among other things, making claims on the past. Constructivism does undermine the simple realism about memory which insists on the availability of a unique, single version: but it does not undermine the ordinary realism about the past that is implicit in our understanding that we sometimes get the story wrong. So memory theory needs alternatives to either treating construction as fabrication, or losing grip on the possibility of being true to the past.

Such investigation into the diverse functions of autobiographical remembering has in fact characterized burgeoning memory research programs in cognitive, developmental, and social psychology and in philosophy of mind over the last twenty years. Whatever the biological history of this strange capacity to remember particular past experiences, its roles now include both the ongoing maintenance of social relationships and the ability to imagine and plan specific future actions. The constructive processes involved in present retrieval or simulation of past and future episodes alike are just those which ground our abilities to generalize, recognize patterns, and update our understanding of self and world. In its intrinsic flexibility and context-sensitivity, human memory differs dramatically from mechanisms that store distinct items separately in static form, without selection or integration. Recollection is thus not a matter of establishing a pure relationship with a single past moment, by way of a unique snapshot across lost time. Rather, it often involves the drawing together of diverse, repeatedly reconsolidated resources, with recall driven by the interanimation of sensory fragments and images, background knowledge, later re-evaluations of the emotional significance of events, the ghosts of bodily sensations and gestures. Though these constructive processes can lead us astray in familiar ways, and though it often matters greatly that memories may be false, they do not inevitably compromise our integrity as rememberers. In collating these scattered, glittering fragments of modern memory, Alison Winter's book mirrors the selectivity that is one characteristic of its subject.