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Claudia Sternberg, "Popular Mnemonics of the First World War: The Unknown Soldier and Distant Bridges." In: Jessica Meyer, ed. *British Popular Culture and the First World War*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008.

**Framed (by) Memory:
The Popular Mnemonics of the First World War in
The Unknown Soldier (Carlton TV, UK 1998) and Distant Bridges (UK/USA 1999)**

Claudia Sternberg (Leeds)

Mediated Memories of World War One in the 1990s

In the 1990s, only a few eye-witnesses were still alive who could relate their own experiences of the First World War. As if to compensate for these decreasing figures, the number of British World War One-related ceremonies, exhibitions, re-enactments and media productions reached a peak in the final decade of the 20th century. Literary, cinematic and televisual fictions contributed to this accumulation of representations, drawing on a vast visual archive of actualities and feature films and an extensive set of narrative elements which had been built up since the war years. Despite a considerable proliferation over the decades, certain themes, motifs and interpretations have continued to be privileged over others. They have been analysed and criticised as the central 'myths' of the First World War. Samuel Hynes summarises:

We know [the elements of the mythical story] all by now: the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant, patriotic women; the growing sympathy for the men on the other side, betrayed in the same ways and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped.¹

While mainstream British feature films and television dramas of the 1990s stand firmly within this long tradition, a growing awareness of the historical distance to the Great War and the

shift from ‘communicative’ to ‘cultural’ memory can be detected in the treatment of conventional material.² This awareness has been externalised in scenes and sequences displaying a high degree of audiovisual intertextuality and media reflexivity, which can operate both on the aesthetic as well as the narrative level. The former, for instance, can be found in the feature film *Regeneration* (1997, Gillies MacKinnon) which contains visual citations of the wartime documentary *The Battle of the Somme* (1916, British Topical Committee for War Films) and uses desaturated cinematography in the battle scenes.³ Monochromatic still photography is brought to life in the credit sequence of *The Trench* (1999, William Boyd), a feature film whose narrative also includes the appearance of an officer and two cameramen who shoot propaganda footage in a frontline trench. By actualising the visual archive in various ways, these films ‘authenticate’ their historical narratives and provide audiences with a recognisable and anticipated iconography. At the same time, they also point to the temporal distance which exists between the two historical moments of representation by drawing attention to differences in the materiality of the medium and the conditions of production.

A further approach to addressing the shifts and changes in 1990s memory culture with regard to the First World War becomes manifest in the construction of a narrative framework which connects the contemporary spectator with the past by using a transgenerational mediating agent, explicit references to commemorative traditions and further metamnestic and metamemorial signifiers. Metamnestic refers to discursive statements regarding the processes, possibilities and limitations of human memory and remembering and usually requires a narrator’s or character’s voice speaking from a position of retrospection; metamemorial denotes mechanisms of collective and public remembrance of historical events and calls for references to war memorials, the two-minute silence, Remembrance Sunday etc.⁴

This essay sets out to discuss the latter strategies – rather than those employed in the first approach – with reference to the British TV miniseries *The Unknown Soldier* (1998) and

¹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), 439.

² Jan Assmann defines communicative memory as based on everyday communication, characterised by non-specialisation, reciprocity, a certain disorganisation and formlessness as well as a limited temporal horizon, which “does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past” (Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 [1995]: 127.) Cultural memory is described as distant from the everyday; it “has its fixed point[s]; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance).” (*ibid.*: 129)

³ On the cinematography of *Regeneration* see Andrew O. Thompson, “A Cosmopolitan Celebration of Cinema,” *American Cinematographer* 78.2 (1997): 113-18.

⁴ Cf. Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider and Claudia Sternberg, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Mediendiskurse der Erinnerung in Großbritannien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 70 and 147-48.

the British-American feature film *Distant Bridges* (1999) whose very titles are already indicative of an engagement with a ‘distant’ and increasingly ‘unknowable’ past. The two texts have been chosen because of their structural similarities and notable differences on the metamnestic level. They are also representative of World War One fiction from the 1990s⁵ and are clearly embedded in popular culture – albeit one as quality drama broadcast to millions of television viewers, the other as a low-budget debut feature restricted to a DVD release. My main objective is to provide a close reading of the two texts which is informed by narratology and contemporary memory studies. My analysis will be preceded by a brief content summary which also places the two productions within the larger history of audiovisual representations of the First World War in Britain.

Memory and Genre: The Return of the Pre-1930 Narrative

ITV’s television drama *The Unknown Soldier* was devised as a substantially budgeted period piece and was broadcast in three parts in 1998. Directed by David Drury and written by Peter Barwood and Patrick Harbinson, it received the Silver Spire in the TV drama miniseries category at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1999. *The Unknown Soldier* starred Juliet Aubrey, who had been cast as Dorothea Brooke in the BBC’s adaptation of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* in 1994, and Gary Mavers, known as Dr Andrew Attwood from the medical series *Peak Practice* (ITV 1993-2002), thus targeting, at least in terms of casting, audiences of literary drama as well as TV serials. The miniseries was also released on video; the box cover shows Aubrey and Mavers in a nurse’s and soldier’s uniform, thus promising a romance plot set during wartime rather than a combat and battlefield drama.⁶

The Unknown Soldier tells the story of upper-class Sophia Carey whose family home in the country has been converted into a voluntary hospital and convalescent home. Sophia, who has lost her three brothers in the war, looks after the soldiers as a nurse. She feels drawn to one of her patients, a shell-shocked mute amnesiac, who was found walking naked in the field. Through electric shock treatment the man regains his speech, but does not recover the memory of his previous life. He is named ‘Angel’ and assists Sophia as an orderly while he struggles to find out who he is and was. Jenny, a young working-class munitionette, appears and claims that Angel is her fiancé John Gower. While this is never confirmed, the two

⁵ For a discussion of British World War One novels of the 1990s which employ similar strategies see *ibid.*, 228-41.

⁶ First World War romance was also central to an earlier television production, the BBC’s *Wingless Bird* (1997, David Wheatley), which was based on a novel by Catherine Cookson and adapted by Alan Seymour.

women and Angel form a melodramatic triangle in which female solidarity eventually overcomes jealousy and social difference. After the end of the war, Sophia finds it impossible to return to the passivity of her previous role as the squire's daughter; she leaves her family home, continues her work as a nurse and keeps up her relationship with Angel. Her father disapproves of her behaviour, as does Stephen, a hospital liaison officer without front experience who is interested in Sophia. In 1919, Sophia is pregnant and weakened by hard work and influenza. Angel stays with her until their child is born and Sophia dies; then he disappears and, as the TV play indicates, commits suicide. Their daughter, who is named Sophie after her mother, is cared for by Jenny, who acts as a surrogate mother to the parentless child in post-war Britain.

Distant Bridges is the first feature film written and directed by Dusty Rhodes⁷ and is based on a story by Rhodes and producer Colin Buller. Shot on cost-effective Super 16mm film stock, the film was completed in 1999, but received only limited distribution through the US-American DVD market. The cover of the DVD capitalises on the combination of bloody war and young love, mainly addressing – with a blurred Union Jack in the background and the tagline “1914-18 ... A Hell of a Time to Fall in Love” – young American and international buyers.⁸ As the low-budget film does not have a well-known cast, it promotes the teen appeal of their young actors, Richard Harbutt and Laura Patch, by using their images on the cover and in the DVD picture gallery.⁹ The gallery shows stills of the young protagonists in period dress, but also in stylish 1990s clothes and sexualised poses, appearing, for example, bare-chested (Richard Harbutt), with a holstered gun (David East) or in an unbuttoned camouflage blouse (Laura Patch).

Distant Bridges tells the story of two young men who have grown up in a small English market town, for which the picturesque 1913 scenery at the North of England Open Air Museum Beamish served as location. Arthur is a literary-minded, innocently patriotic youth, eager to fight for Britain in a war that he assumes to be like those fashioned in juvenile fiction and heroic poetry. ‘Will’ (Wilfred) is a less attractive, but more mature and realistic young man. He is Arthur's friend and admirer, and when recruitment officers come to town, both enlist as underage volunteers. Quickly, Will and Arthur encounter the realities of modern

⁷ Director Ian Rhodes uses ‘Dusty Rhodes’ in the credits of *Distant Bridges*; he is not identical with Dusty Rhodes, the American wrestler.

⁸ An earlier attempt at making the First World War attractive for young audiences was made with *Biggles* (1985, John Hough), a feature film based on the title character from the *Biggles* novels of W.E. Johns. The cinematic adaptation is built on a time travel plot that enables two young American urbanites from the 1980s to meet and fight with the British flying ace Biggles at the time of the First World War.

⁹ After his lead in *Distant Bridges*, the British actor Richard Harbutt, now Richard Cambridge, has continued to act in shorts and low-budget horror and action films.

war on the Western Front: they suffer the hardship of trench life, experience fear under fire and witness the mutilation and death of their fellow soldiers. Behind the lines, Arthur is initiated into sexual maturity in a brothel and, when on leave, sleeps with his girlfriend Amy. Arthur dies in battle, and only the wounded Will returns to their home town alive. Will recovers and enters into a relationship with Arthur's sister Alice. He also acts as surrogate father to Arthur Jr, the child born to Amy after Arthur's death.

Within the history of World War One representations on British screens, both productions share – despite their differences in scope, budget and target audience – a number of features with films produced in the period between the First and the Second World War. The central reference text for *Distant Bridges* is *Tell England* (1930, Anthony Asquith with Geoffrey Barkas and Harry Bruce Woolf), which also juxtaposed two different young men at home and at war.¹⁰ The interwar film about the Gallipoli campaign showed life and death under fire, comradeship, disillusionment, anger and fear; it emphasised the front/home front divide and alluded to the death wish of one young man whose ideals had been shattered. The televisual *Unknown Soldier* also draws on the repository of earlier World War One narratives, including the much popularised psychological consequences of traumatic front experiences¹¹ and even details like Angel's turn to children's literature for comfort, which echoes a similar scene in *Journey's End* (1930, James Whale).¹²

Tell England and particularly *Journey's End* are representative of those war films that centre on combat and the soldier's experience and conclude with the protagonist's death. These cinematic narratives follow the futility paradigm first introduced in autobiographical and literary texts in the late 1920s and have turned out to be the most influential in film history, determining the generic understanding of what constitutes a 'World War One film'. There were, however, many other war-related productions in the late 1910s and 1920s which offered different stories, characters and character constellations within an overall more accommodating tradition. They kept battlefield events off-screen or to a minimum, concentrated on the home front and civil society and did not allow the loss of lives to preclude hope and prospects for the future. For example in *Comradeship* (1919, Maurice Elvey) and *General Post* (1920, Thomas Bentley), the protagonists return from the war and marry women

¹⁰ The film was based on the novel of the same title, written by Ernest Raymond and published in 1922, but contained some significant modifications of its source.

¹¹ War neurosis and shell-shock have been central to the popular imagination of the First World War in British film history. The afflicted soldier as (romantic) hero features in *Guns of Loos* (1928, Sinclair Hill), *Tesha* (1928, Victor Saville), *Woman to Woman* (1923, Graham Cutts; sound version 1929, Victor Saville), *The Return of the Soldier* (1982, Alan Bridges) and *Regeneration*; he also appears as a more ambivalently drawn character in the ensemble films *Journey's End*, *Suspense* (1930, Walter Summers) and *Aces High* (1976, Jack Gold).

¹² The film was based on the successful stage play by R.C. Sherriff (1929).

of the upper class, who supported the war effort at home as nurses and community helpers. The central male characters of *Poppies of Flanders* (1927, Arthur Maude) and *Blighty* (1927, Adrian Brunel) die, but their position in the story is filled by worthy survivors.

It is to the latter films that *Distant Bridges* and *The Unknown Soldier* are indebted. Notably, both productions do not restrict their storylines to combat and the soldier's experience. *Distant Bridges* dedicates half of its screen time to home front life, an emphasis that was the norm in World War One-related films before 1930. *The Unknown Soldier* is set almost entirely at the home front and shares its focus on an upper-class nurse, romance and supportive gender relations and the crossing of class boundaries with feature films of the silent period. The productions from the late 1990s draw on this particular archive, but update the representation of women, significantly modernising their roles, self-image and relationships. Amy in *Distant Bridges* is a mature and outspoken young woman who has ambivalent feelings about the war and the young men's enthusiasm. Arthur's sister Alice is the driving force behind rebuilding disrupted lives in the post-war years. Sophia in *The Unknown Soldier* is an intelligent and determined character, who does not give up her work as a nurse once the war is over – as female leads would have done in films of the 1920s. Similarly, Jenny is drawn as a strong and resourceful woman of lesser means and social standing, who also asserts her independence.

Distant Bridges and *The Unknown Soldier* also see the re-emergence of the discourse of family and reproduction which featured prominently in post-war social debates as well as in cinematic and literary representations of the period. The birth and growing up of children, the reorganisation of family life, posthumous fatherhood and parental surrogacy were themes that enabled novelists and filmmakers to narrativise concepts of rebirth and renewal in a society for which the Great War and the loss of many young lives was part of recent living memory. Post-war stories, in print or on celluloid, were geared towards normalisation and in many films of the 1920s, children were indexical of the future and symbolised the continuation of both family and nation. *Reveille* (1924, George Pearson) and *Blighty* are prime examples in which the children of the fallen ensure that life can go on after the war.

The fact that some of these early representational strategies resurface in the late 1990s has little to do with a need for normalisation of lived experience. Rather, they offer a (nostalgic) framework for retelling the Great War as an event of great magnitude which affected and was experienced by men and women. Furthermore, the framework enables screenwriters and directors to tackle issues of mnemonic – rather than demographic –

continuity,¹³ involving the war dead and the war's survivors, their children and grandchildren and collective 'offspring': future generations, the spectators of the 1990s. This connectedness is made explicit in *The Unknown Soldier* and *Distant Bridges* by the use of narrative framing, a homodiegetic voice¹⁴ and the use of flashbacks and multiple time levels. In both the feature film and the television drama, these constructions relate directly to questions of individual and collective memory, but each production presents a significantly different approach to the memory of war and the generational transmission of this memory.

Mnemonic Continuity and Discontinuity

Seventy years removed from the films and historical realities of the 1920s, *Distant Bridges* and *The Unknown Soldier* bridge the gap between the time of war and the time of reception by creating narrative frames set in the present, i.e. in the 1990s. These frames are directly connected with 'the past' through Will and Sophie Jr, respectively, whose voices – on-screen and off-screen – provide a retrospective commentary on scenes set in the war and post-war years. Questions of individual memory, but also the building up of collective memory, are mediated through the narrators, who remember (or try to remember) the past which is then, following cinematic and televisual conventions, 're-presented', i.e. rendered visible and audible in dramatised form. It is the underlying principle (and attraction) of historical and period productions that 'the past' can be recreated and reenacted on film. That 'the past' and 'past lives' can be remembered as film lies at the heart of the flashback that is conventionally attributed to a screen character who – voluntarily or involuntarily – recalls an original experience. In her study on the flashback, Maureen Turim underlines how the cinematic device connects personalised memory and depersonalised history:

If flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered

¹³ Mnemonic continuity implies the passing on of memories to the next generation. Those who ensure mnemonic continuity "feel that the remembered events are personally relevant and that they have a personal responsibility toward them." (William Hirst and David Manier, "The Diverse Forms of Collective Memory," in *Kontexte und Kulturen des Erinnerns/Contexts and Cultures of Memory*, ed. Gerald Echterhoff and Martin Saar [Konstanz: UVK, 2002], 45.)

¹⁴ Homodiegetic refers to a narrative posture in which "the narrator [is] present as a character in the story he tells" (Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1980], 245.). If the narrator is absent from the story he tells, Genette speaks of a heterodiegetic type of narrative (*ibid.*, 244-45).

experience. The process can be called the ‘subjective memory,’ which here has the double sense of the rendering of history as a subjective experience of a character in the fiction, and the formation of the Subject in history as the viewer of the film identifying with fictional characters positioned in a fictive social reality.¹⁵

A flashback construction provides the backbone to the narration in *Distant Bridges*. The film opens with a quick and crude dip into the visual archive: we see a dugout, a rat, barbed wire, no man’s land, a fallen soldier, a severed hand. After a fade, the spectator faces an old man in a close shot. The man is the aged Will, veteran of the Great War. Before the audience is taken back in time to the war years, the old Will looks at and speaks to the spectator. The film creates an unusual (pseudo-)communicative situation between screen character and viewer, between veteran survivor and later generations. Generational transmission of memory content is thus almost literally enacted and aided not only by the flashback, but also by another medium-specific – if rarely used – convention: the direct camera address. Will is speaking on the day before his 100th birthday and at first he refers to his individual life that has run parallel to that of the century:

When you’re old, you dwell little on the future, for it can’t be as important as the past. Tomorrow I shall be one hundred years old. [...] I’ve seen a lot of life: I’ve loved and lost, I’ve had friends come and go, I’ve enjoyed luxuries and known austerity.

As he continues, his words become a warning against forgetting and move the discourse on to a collective plane: “Like so many of my generation, I am a forgotten character from a final story. Time is running out and soon there will be no-one left to tell that story.”

The metamemorial function of the audience address is to set up a last and final opportunity for a (fictitious) eye-witness to speak publicly on behalf of the generation of 1914.¹⁶ Will’s authority to speak for the World War One combatant is further underlined by the fact that he is, eighty years on, still a ‘soldier’. He wears the uniform of a Chelsea pensioner of the London Royal Hospital which identifies him as belonging to a community of

¹⁵ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989), 2. For a discussion of the relationship between war, trauma, film and the representation of autobiographical memory as well as the notion of memory being akin to film see Alison Winter, “Film and the Construction of Memory in Psychoanalysis, 1940-1960,” *Science in Context* 19.1 (2006): 111-36.

¹⁶ The 1990s were indeed the decade of a number of such opportunities which, because of their ‘finality’, became high profile occasions with respective media coverage.

veterans who have decided to spend their retirement among ex-servicemen. Will tells the audience about himself, but mostly about his friendship with Arthur, the latter's aspirations and disappointments, Arthur's love for Amy and his death. This story is presented in long flashbacks, occasionally interrupted by Will's close-up or voice-over and further shots of Will in present-day London. The more the audience is drawn into the story of the war years, the greater the distance becomes, cinematographically speaking, between Will and the spectator. In a scene shot on the Embankment of the Thames, for example, his red coat and black cap still stand out, but he blends into the modern scenery of the metropolis, a relic soon to be lost, who carries an important part of the past which may not be directly accessible much longer.

Distant Bridges not only creates a cross-generational bond between the veteran as narrator and the spectator, but also shows – on the intradiegetic level – how mnemonic aids such as objects can act as 'bridges' of memory.¹⁷ In order to facilitate mnemonic continuity, the 1920s are introduced as a third time level and an important period of consolidation and reconstruction, situated between the destructive war years and the 'distant' present in which the telling takes place. In one of the film's scenes set in the post-war period, Arthur Jr has grown to be a young boy. Will gives him his father's good luck coin as a token of remembrance. As the token changes hands, it also changes its quality, just like memory itself. The object reminds both man and boy of the dead Arthur, but the boy's memory of the war, unlike Will's, is not episodic, i.e. "clothed in temporal and spatial specificity" and referring to "'personally experienced' events, places, or things",¹⁸ but semantic, i.e. based on indirect knowledge and without spatio-temporal specificity. Nevertheless, it is still lived (as opposed to distant) semantic memory because of the significance attributed to it, its immediacy and autobiographical relevance to the fatherless boy.¹⁹ The transfer of the token reflects the film's structure, where the spectators, the latter-day 'children', are also subject to Will's "generational tutorship" that "involves a process by which episodic memories are translated into semantic memories."²⁰ The audience is made to feel the moral obligation to contribute to the passing on of World War One memory.

The three intertwined time levels suggest that 'past' and 'present' are simultaneously accessible and have been brought together by Will's reliable accounts of the wartime events and his direct appeal to on-screen and off-screen memory agents. This is particularly pertinent in the hyperbolic final sequence of the film that is edited as a series of shots, intercutting all

¹⁷ Distant Bridges also uses letters as 'bridges' which allow for more than Will's voice to be heard and are used to link front and home front characters.

¹⁸ Hirst and Manier, "The Diverse Forms of Collective Memory", 41.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

time levels, repeating pivotal moments and ‘recalling’ all characters. The spectator learns about the fate of the soldiers encountered in the narrative; among them are survivors like Will and the fallen like Arthur, who are commemorated annually in November. The heavily scored sequence is full of pathos, and Will’s voice-over stresses how the foundation for a necessary and appropriate memory culture was laid in the post-war years:

There were many who called us the lost generation. Maybe we were, but if we had lost our way the time would come when, as Alice so bravely put it, we would have to cross those bridges and put our lives back together again. There were thousands like us who would try to do the same. Some would succeed and some would fail. But there was hope now and in our hearts we knew we would stick together, not only for ourselves but for tomorrow and for the memory of our lost friends.

The memory of lost friends is also secured in another way. Will states: “Arthur still survives too, but in name only, carved deeply on a grand stone memorial, gazed at by curious visitors and climbed on by small children.” The memorial is described as made of stone and long-lasting, but more importantly, as being noticed by those who pass it.²¹ Put up to honour Arthur and others, it will outlast Will, as will the obelisk in the final shot of the film, situated in the central square of the Royal Hospital. At the end of the narrative, the *mise-en-scène* relegates Will, the eye-witness and communicator of the century’s memory, to the margin of the frame. He is seen from behind and moves away from the camera, the spectator and the impending 21st century; the image is dominated by the obelisk whose actual historical specificity – it commemorates the battle of Chillianwalla of 1849 in the Punjab – is overwritten by its generic monumental character as a memorial.

Remembering is constructed as positive and important in *Distant Bridges*. Visuals reliably ‘replay’ the (remembered) past; generational transmission is shown as possible and is duly celebrated. It is therefore not without irony that the film itself will be an insignificant item in the vast archives of mediated World War One memory because of its confinement to a small audience. While this is due to production value and limited distribution, it needs to be

²¹ First World War memorials like the one referred to in the fiction of *Distant Bridges* were erected in great numbers in the 1920s. At the time, unveiling ceremonies were frequently shown on newsreels in the cinema. An unusual fictional account of an unveiling in a small town can be found at the beginning of the otherwise rather clichéd feature film *Land of Hope and Glory* (1927, Harley Knoles). Later films often exclude life in post-war civil society from their narratives, but if memorials are visualised – as is the case in *King and Country* (1964,

acknowledged that successful First World War narratives are less likely to be celebratory and frequently thematise the incommunicability of wartime experiences, trauma and repression and mnemonic discontinuity. *The Unknown Soldier* is a case in point: it also contains a narrative frame, three time levels and a voice who speaks to the spectator, but it tells an altogether different story from *Distant Bridges* and presents the viewer with a more complex narration.

The TV drama concentrates on Sophia, Angel and their daughter Sophie Jr, who – for different reasons – are deprived of the knowledge of the war. Sophia is drawn as a character grieved by the physical and psychological wounds of her patients and the death of her brothers; she is aggravated by her ignorance and turns to Angel (“I need to know what it was like. Why did I have to stay behind?”), but he is equally at a loss as a shell-shocked survivor of trench warfare who suffers from amnesia. Angel does not regain his memory and therefore never passes on any recollections and reflections to his own or later generations. He does not grow old like Will, nor is he given a narrator’s voice. The TV drama’s retrospective agent is Sophie Jr, who speaks off-screen as an elderly woman in Episodes 1 and 2 and appears briefly in the final scenes of Episode 3 as an on-screen character at the age of six in the 1920s and in her eighties in the 1990s.²² She was born after the war and never knew her parents, yet the audience learns that she has been compelled to follow a commemorative impulse that is based on lack. At the beginning of the TV drama, she asks: “Why do we keep going back, back to that patch of land, that piece of time? They told me never to forget, but I said how can I forget if I can’t remember?” With this metamnemonic passage, Sophie alludes to the complex relationship between the generations when one is connected to a time of collective trauma and the other to a period of heightened mnemonic obligation.²³

Not only repression and inaccessibility, however, are at issue here. Questions of memory and identity are complicated further. Angel has no name; his rank and class, his activities on the front, his motivations and previous actions remain in the dark. What causes

Joseph Losey) and *War Requiem* (1988, Derek Jarman) – they are critiqued as highly problematic commemorative responses to what the filmmakers present as pitiful death.

²² A further heterodiegetic voice is that of the titles at the beginning of each part of the TV drama. The titles provide a depersonalised and ‘historical’ context for the fictional material and introduce the overarching themes for each episode: profound memory loss, the search for missing men, post-war court martials.

²³ Sophie also encapsulates the paradox of what Marianne Hirsch has theorised as postmemory. Hirsch distinguishes postmemory “from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. [...] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.” (Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* [Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1997], 22.)

him grief, opens opportunities for others. To numerous characters in the TV play he serves as an empty screen onto which they eagerly project their own images in an attempt to fill a void, to create coherence or to seek closure within a world destabilised by the war. Not only Sophia, who lost her brothers, and Jenny, whose fiancé did not return from the front, compete over Angel's 'appropriation'. Soldiers take Angel for a brave comrade; doctors see in him the prototypical malingerer from the ranks; hospital inspectors recognise in him a traumatised fellow officer, suffering from combat fatigue and war neurosis. A grief-stricken woman insists, to the bewilderment of her husband, that Angel is her missing son; a disabled private, struggling to find work and readjust to civil life, sees in him the disloyal comrade who profited from exploiting others. And finally, military authorities identify Angel as a deserter and murderer, who faces post-war execution. Despite the use of photographs and witnesses, not even the most concrete identities are ever conclusively confirmed, and Angel's own fragmentary snippets of memory, surfacing in nightmares and under hypnosis, remain dubious and disconnected.

In the course of his increasing despair, Angel begins to believe in, and even take on, some of the identities projected onto him. Like a member of the audience in his own drama, he is told about the/his history of the war by others. With nothing but the bodily signs of war neurosis to go by, Angel – contrary to Will – is bereft of the combatant-survivor's authority to tell the tale of himself or others and have ownership of his memories. It is this "nonmastery"²⁴ based on traumatic repression which eventually leads to his self-destruction in the final part of *The Unknown Soldier*. Similar to *Distant Bridges*, the final sequence brings all time levels of the narration together. Angel takes off his clothes on the beach in 1919; men prepare to go over the top and enter no man's land during wartime. After having shed his temporary identity of 'Angel', he goes naked into the sea, just like he had come out of no man's land. He remains a 'no man', the 'unknown soldier' of the production's title. As a fictional character, he can be seen as the equivalent to the Unknown Warrior, the rankless, nameless and ageless body from the Western Front who was transported from the battlefields of France to his tomb in Westminster Abbey. Ronald Blythe describes how the corpse, who had been carefully chosen as not to carry any specific signifiers, was suddenly transformed into the carrier of all possible signifieds:

The dead man who had set out without a name, a voice, or a face only a few hours before was being invested with a hundred thousand likenesses, and for

those who could not resist a temptation to strip the symbol there was the possibility that one of the likenesses fitted.²⁵

Some of the characters' claims about Angel's likenesses are grounded in an identification of 'type'; others insist that he is an individual who was known to them intimately in the past. These ascriptions, one might argue, are no memories at all (for example, if they serve to discredit a rival) or at best 'false memories'. From a constructionist point of view, the various 're-cognitions' of Angel could be read as confirming cognitive assumptions about individual memory. Here, the model of stored memories that can be retrieved has been replaced by an understanding of the process of remembering as similar to perception. If it is triggered – in our case by the characters' encounter with Angel in combination with their social frameworks, personal grievances and desires – a particular pattern is activated and other patterns are excluded or suppressed. This activation exists only in the 'now'; the past does not 'return' to consciousness. Past events account for the pattern, but they themselves are not retained in any form. Memories are not restituted, but constituted.²⁶

Additionally, the projections can be interpreted as attempts to create a coherent, fully integrated story in light of the inexplicable and unsettling elusiveness of Angel's (non-)existence. As has been suggested by the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet:

Memory is an action: essentially, it is the action of telling a story. [...] The teller must not only know how to [narrate the event], but must also know how to associate the happening with the other events of his life, how to put it in its place in that life-history which each one of us is perpetually building up and which for each one of us is an essential element of his personality.²⁷

²⁴ Mieke Bal, "Introduction," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover; London: University Press of New England, 1999), ix.

²⁵ Ronald Blythe, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties, 1919-1940* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983 [1963]), 10.

²⁶ Cf. the introduction and contributions in Siegfried J. Schmidt, ed., *Gedächtnis: Probleme und Perspektiven der interdisziplinären Gedächtnisforschung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991). On the 'reconstructive turn' in memory theory and the rejection of "an archival picture of memory" see also Sue Campbell, "Our Faithfulness to the Past: Reconstructing Memory Value," *Philosophical Psychology* 19.3 (June 2006), 362. Campbell states that "[r]econstructive accounts stress [...] the dynamic nature of memory through two closely related theses. The first is that there are many different influences on the content and format that together yield the meaning of our rememberings [...]. The related thesis [...] is that memory change over time and occasion is a normal feature of remembering." (ibid., 262-63)

²⁷ Pierre Janet, *Les médications psychologiques*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Société Pierre Janet, 1919-25), 273; quoted in van der Kolk and van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 170-71.

Angel has lost his narrativising faculty which would enable him to escape his locked state of amnesia. The TV drama does not afford him – who is neither survivor nor one of the fallen – a cathartic moment of remembering. To others, however, as Mieke Bal points out, “[t]raumatic (non)memory [...] gives insight, through contrast, into the formation of ‘normal’, narrative memory.”²⁸ This is redemptive for later generations, who are capable of narrativising and thus ‘normalising’ the past, even if – as *The Unknown Soldier* implies – any actual retrieval of history ‘as it happened’ is impossible. Read beyond the merely diegetic and the discourse of memory, the construction also relates to history and historiography in general. As Jacques Rancière states:

There is history because there is the past and a specific passion for the past. And there is history because there is an absence [...]. The status of history depends on the treatment of this twofold absence of the ‘thing itself’ that is no longer there – that is in the past; and that never was – because it never was such as it was told.²⁹

What remains ‘untold’ by Angel, is provided in the stories of others which are a necessary part of meaning construction for Sophie and future generations. The final sequence of *The Unknown Soldier*, therefore, does not only show death and destruction. As in *Distant Bridges*, the survival of the young is foregrounded. Young Sophie grows up after the war under the care of Jenny and Sophia’s father, her grandfather. Six years after the Armistice, she watches the completion of a war memorial which introduces her to formalised memory culture, instituted to aid her in bridging the generational gap. The man who engraves the names explains to the young the importance of keeping the memory alive, but John Gower’s name on the memorial does not provide the reassurance for Sophie which Will claims for Arthur’s name in stone in *Distant Bridges*. Sophie’s voice-over articulates her difficulties and her reliance on the statements of others: “He never gave me a chance to remember my dad. My mom [Jenny] said he stayed long enough to hear me gurgle, then he went away. She said he died; they said they found his clothes on the beach.” The old Sophie, who now appears on-screen, has come to terms with this absence. Visiting the individualised grave of her mother, she states: “I carried their memory, the two lives that gave me life. So I come back [...] and I

²⁸ Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” ix.

²⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994 [1992]), 63 (quoted in Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001], 146).

remember.” As a second-generation rememberer, she has found a way to ‘remember’ without the certainties that *Distant Bridges* implies.

As the case of Sophie shows, the position and authority of the memory agent are affected not only by generation, but also by gender, and certain cultural hierarchies are reflected in the two productions under investigation. *Distant Bridges* locates and anchors the ability to remember and pass on the memory of the war firmly in the male combatant. The ‘authenticity’ of his recollections is never questioned, and generational transmission, symbolised by ‘handing over’ the token coin, is staged as a ritualistic transfer from man to boy. *The Unknown Soldier* subverts this gendered paradigm by depriving the male lead of his memory and instituting two women at the centre of the diegesis who are both without first hand experience of life at the front and who are never formally initiated as carriers of the memory of war. This subversion is further heightened by the fact that Angel is neither a witness-survivor nor killed in action. Rather, he is a victim of the ancillary cruelties of the First World War, shell-shock and military jurisdiction.³⁰ And by drawing attention explicitly to the millions of victims of the influenza pandemic of 1918/1919, the woman Sophia, who dies as one of them, also belongs to the ‘lost generation’, whose losses, as the TV drama suggests, are not those of the battlefields alone.

That such narrative strategies can easily be overlooked because of the centrality of the soldier as the ‘real’ holder of the memory of war, becomes evident in one of the production’s epitexts.³¹ In an article in the *TV Times*, *The Unknown Soldier* is covered as the success story of actor Gary Mavers, who rose from Peak Practice to serious drama as well as from butcher, carpenter and shop assistant to RADA-educated performer. The article is concerned with ‘authenticity’, stressing the casting of disabled actors instead of the able-bodied in the roles of the veterans and reminding the readership of the authenticity debates around the controversial World War One miniseries *The Monocled Mutineer* (1986).³² The article focuses exclusively

³⁰ While shell-shock has no nationally specific connotation, executions do: “The British army executed far more of its own troops than the other major armies engaged on the Western Front. In 1918 alone – when the death penalty was most sparingly used by the British – the number of men executed still exceeded that of the German army for the whole war.” (Gerard Oram, *Military Executions during World War I*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 164.) In the history of British WWI films, desertions and court martials were already referred to in the dialogue of *Suspense* in 1930, but it is Losey’s *King and Country* which, in 1964, dedicated an entire cinematic narrative to this practice.

³¹ Genette’s term epitext refers to material which is associated with, but situated outside a specific text, for example reviews, interviews and correspondence; Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997), 8.

³² The TV drama, written by Alan Bleasdale and directed by Jim O’Brien, was based on William Allison and John Fairley’s research into the conditions and mutinous resistance at the training camp Etaples in 1917. The validity of their research, which drew mostly on interviews and witness testimony, was called into question by historians, among others by Julian Putkowski, the BBC’s historical advisor to the production. Cf. John Fairley, “History as Lived by the Men Who Were There,” *The Listener* 25 September 1986, 8-9 and 18, and Julian

on male representation and, being entitled “Will Gary’s Grandad Approve?”, reintroduces the combatant-witness in the person of Mavericks’s grandfather, “who celebrates his 101st birthday this year, served on the Somme and still has vivid memories of World War One”. The grandfather is stylised as the person whom the actor Mavericks “most wants to please” and as the “toughest critic” who will judge whether cast and crew ‘got it right.’³³

Conclusion

The two productions discussed here share some major tropes and narrative elements with war-related films of the 1920s. To counterbalance this nostalgic appropriation, they modernise gender roles and relationships and each adds a present-day voice to introduce a degree of postmodern reflexivity and metamemorial consciousness, symptomatic of the 1990s, into the popular genre of wartime romance. Both productions use several time levels – war, post-war and present – to emphasise the agency and ‘memory acts’ of the second and further generations and the spectator. They do, however, differ in their take on how and to what extent an exchange between generations and the past and present is possible and consequently employ two distinct approaches to the representation of memory and remembering. *Distant Bridges* insists on the effectiveness of oral testimony, formalised commemoration and male-centred transgenerational communication, whereas *The Unknown Soldier* questions and deconstructs – in various ways – any ‘straightforward’ (i.e. linear, stable, reliable and generational) transmission of the memory of the First World War. And yet, there is a paradox at play: the television drama shows Angel’s, Sophia’s and Sophie’s struggles to know and to remember what happened in the war. And while they struggle, the spectator is not given the ‘final story’, but all or at least many of its potential stories. *The Unknown Soldier* contains (sometimes abortive) storylines which centre, among others, on the shell-shocked officer, the upper-class volunteer, the working class hero, the malingerer, the deserter, the disabled veteran, the marauding ‘wild’ soldier, the military administrator, the aristocratic nurse and the munitionette. The narrative is set in France and England, in a country house and a working class home, in medical institutions, at court and at the front; it covers physical and mental disability, faradism, hypnosis and the influenza pandemic. It addresses the professionalisation and subsequent ‘demobbing’ of women as well as class conflicts and post-war reintegration. The TV drama draws on a multitude of available subnarratives and satisfies the spectator’s visual and narrative desires. *The unknown soldier* is both unknown and at the same time could

Putkowski, “Toplis, Etaples & The Monocled Mutineer,” *Stand To! Journal of the Western Front Association* November 1986, 6-11.

³³ Daphne Luckyer, “Will Gary’s Grandad Approve?” *TV Times* 25 April 1998: 22.

not be more familiar; his past is absent from himself and his offspring and yet in its potentiality completely present on the screen. The ‘nonmastery’ of memory on the character level does not at all preclude an all-encompassing mastery on the level of representation. Despite all narrative uncertainties, what must be known and remembered of the First World War is never contested or hidden from view. In fact, the entire project could be disclosed as a narrative ploy, presenting as many stories as possible which together make up the stereotypical ‘popular memory’ of the First World War. Despite their differences, *Distant Bridges* and *The Unknown Soldier*, therefore, both present their viewers once again with the full – mythical – story.

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