

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Augé, Marc, *Oblivion* (trans. Marjolijn de Jager). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2004, 92 p.

Marc Augé is a French anthropologist whose thought-provoking essays have appeared in English translation for the past 10 years. To anthropologists he is likely known for his early research in West Africa. To a broader audience, including sociologists and social theorists, he is likely known for his explorations of contemporary urban and global space, in essays such as *In the Metro* (2002) and *Non-places* (1995). Though Augé's previous interests are evident throughout this essay, he breaks new ground introducing the theme of *Oblivion* (*Les formes de l'oubli*) – a challenging reflection on memory and forgetting. The essay is far-reaching, advancing the concept of oblivion through brief but suggestive explorations of psychoanalysis (and the idea of “memory trace”), narrative theory (especially philosopher Paul Ricoeur's work), French literature (Dumas & Proust), reflections on his own earlier field work in Africa, and a recurring engagement with the problem of ethnocentrism. The essay is organized into three chapters. In the first, Augé introduces the inextricable relationship between memory and forgetting. In the second, he describes the role that oblivion plays in shaping personal and cultural narratives. In the third, he identifies three “figures of oblivion” and outlines their function in social life.

Augé turns the table on scholarship that theorizes memory as an active, constructive process entailing selection, recording, and storage (i.e. cognitive psychological theories and even some social constructionist theories). Instead, for Augé, memory is intertwined with oblivion. In the same way that the rhythm of life depends upon a recognition of the inevitability of death, memory acquires its meaning through the possibility of its own annihilation, and is shaped by its own dissolution. Memory, then, does not acquire its substance through the choice introduction of positive content, but rather through the gardening and “pruning” performed by oblivion (p. 17). Introducing another metaphor, Augé says “memory is crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea” (p 20).

However, even as oblivion is the “life force” of memory (p. 21), it is also a perpetually elusive and insubstantial force. He draws on the psychoanalytic concept of memory trace to elucidate this mystery and thus establishes a dynamic that rests at the heart of the essay. The memory trace parades as true memory – a snapshot of the past – when in fact it is a mere

representation. It can never capture the absent moment toward which it merely points. The absence signified by the memory trace is the product of oblivion, always present and active in the production of memory, always an object of desire, yet forever out of reach – a foundation without substantial form. Both the individual and collective relationship with time develop out of this dynamic, in which oblivion invites attention yet escapes encounter.

Augé, then, identifies three figures of oblivion: return, suspension, and rebeginning. In the form of social rites these figures of oblivion join the individual to the group. Through these rites, oblivion also structures the relationship between past, present, and future, undoing their established narrative inter-relations and making possible an escape from the weight of any single time or memory. The first figure of oblivion is *return*, and it is exemplified through rites of possession. In possession, the individual is inhabited by a presence that takes over the self and speaks through him or her as an ancestor, establishing a continuity with the past – as if time had never gone on. The oblivion of return requires a total forgetfulness of self so that old habits and forms of life can be re-lived. The second figure of oblivion is *suspense* and it is exemplified through role inversions, when, for example, on the day of carnival, a man becomes a woman, or a slave becomes a master. The weight of the past and the future are forgotten so that one can live in a disconnected and inconsequential present. The third figure of oblivion is *rebeginning*, which forms its relation to time once the past and the present are forgotten, and the future is not yet determined. It is a “radical inauguration” (p. 57) realized in social rituals of initiation, embodying the hope of starting over again.

Oblivion is stimulating and revives a way of thinking about memory forgotten by many contemporary theorists of memory. In doing so, Augé invites reflection on the ethics and practice of forgetting, reminding us of Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1983 [1874]) condemnation of the historicism of his day. Augé’s essay is particularly important as technologies of memory (electronic databanks, Internet websites, DNA maps, scrap-booking) provide persons and communities with the seeming possibility to store all memory, experiences, and material forms for future posterity. The current obsession with archives, commemorations, and digitalization presumes that the essence of memory rests in the act of recording and storage, rather than that of oblivion. In his reflections on ethnocentrism and the relationship between different cultures, Augé also reminds the reader that forgetting is crucial to creating the new cultural forms and social entities invited by globalization.

Augé, however, only gets us started here. For example, while he champions the merits of oblivion – “we must forget in order to remain present, forget in order not to die, forget in order to remain faithful” (p. 89) – he only touches on the destructive component of oblivion. He is perhaps too gentle in his assessment of oblivion, putting aside the relationship between death and oblivion that he suggested at the outset of the essay. Especially given his early emphasis on psychoanalytic concepts, Augé

should see that oblivion also seeks destruction; to render life quiescent. Of course, Augé does not completely overlook this. He shows, for example, that the collective memory of community depends upon the sacrifice of the individual. In the ritual of possession, the person is lost to her or himself in order to re-inhabit the past for the sake of community. Indeed, Augé hints at these aspects throughout the essay, but in the end makes a bold decision to champion forgetfulness, even with its risks. Striking a balance between the virtue of memory and the virtue of forgetting is a problem introduced here, but certainly in need of further exploration.

References

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Jeffrey Stepnisky, University of Maryland, College Park

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