

Eva Dewes, Sandra Duhem, eds.. *Kulturelles Gedächtnis und interkulturelle Rezeption im europäischen Kontext*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008. VICE VERSA. Deutsch-französische Kulturstudien. xxi + 678 pp EUR 49.80, cloth, ISBN 978-3-05-004132-2.



**Reviewed by** Udi Greenberg

**Published on** H-German (January, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

Eva Dewes and Sandra Duhem's edited volume examines the construction of shared "European" memories. As part of recent historical attention to transnational and global perspectives, the essays in this enormous collection seek to go beyond the national outlook in discussing representations of the past. Yet this "European" outlook is more circumscribed than many would expect. As Manfred Schmeling writes in his introduction, the collection is the first in a series of planned publications about German-French relations, which will explore Germany and France's "joint roots" in what he calls the "old Europe" (p. ix). Indeed, of the thirty-four essays in the collection, the vast majority deal with either a German-French exchange of narratives, or one culture's representation of the other. Covering a wide range of topics and objects, from consumption through poetry to visual arts and diplomatic history, these essays explore the continuous German-French connection from the early Middle Ages through the Renaissance until the twenty-first century. Several other essays, which mostly focus on the Greco-Roman

world, are included to serve as models for the bridging of different communities' and cultures' shared historical stories. This structure, as well as Schmeling's echoing of Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida's famous notion that Germany and France compose the core of (an imagined) "old Europe," gives the impression that the collection has at times become too willfully caught up in the creation of cultural-political myths instead of turning a critical eye on the process of their formation.

The essays are divided into three sections, each focused on a general form or technique of memorialization. The first section, titled somewhat vaguely "Forms of Historical Memory" (*Historische Erinnerungsformen*), deals with different political and cultural representations of the past. This section is the most varied, both in materials and theoretical perspectives, which stretch from state institutions and policymakers through private agents and questions of canonization to the role of tourism and mass consumption in the formation of historical narratives. Martina Hart-

mann, for example, shows how representations of Merovingian queens reflected changes in perception of the Frankish past throughout the early Middle Ages; Alice Perrin-Marsol discusses the seventeenth-century library of the Duke of Braunschweig as an attempt to construct a joint German-French cultural canon "between geographical spaces, between ignorance and knowledge, between one culture and the other" (p. 87); and Sven Externbrink focuses on the continuous role of the Peace of Westphalia as a symbol through which French diplomats reflected on both French policy towards Germany and foreign affairs in general until the Treaty of Versailles. Though the richness of viewpoints is meant to illuminate different potential transnational perspectives, many of the section's articles remain within national, mainly French, boundaries, and have little to say about the actual German-French exchange of historical narratives.

An interesting exception to this problem is Thomas Grosser's contribution, "Memories and Souvenirs" (*Erinnerungen und Souvenirs*), in which he explores German tourism to France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through his discussion of the development of German traveling culture from an elite activity into a form of mass consumption, Grosser shows how German travelers incorporated French symbols and history as part of their self-representation. The complex ambivalence that characterized these travelers' attitudes toward French culture, architecture, and, most of all, history throughout the eighteenth century became a crucial part of German visitors' perceptions of their own past. Indeed, for the elite visitors of the eighteenth century the palace at Versailles served as a symbol of French success at establishing a strong and "healthy" government, in contrast to the "provincial" and "rigid" German courts (p. 112), while also standing as a symbol of despotism and tyranny. After 1789, German middle-class tourists rushed to Paris to collect stones from the ruins of the Bastille, in order to display them as evidence of

their participation in the creation of liberty and "to make the enthusiastic supporters of freedom happy" (p. 118). Grosser emphasizes the importance of personal experience in the construction of historical narratives, and suggests that the creation of joint German-French memories reached its peak with the mass tourism of the nineteenth century, when many bourgeois Germans observed France more and more in terms of familiar pleasure and entertainment, rather than as a hostile foreign country. The experience of the middle class, Grosser suggests, was crucial for the production not only of national identity, but also of other, transnational narratives.

The second section, "Literary Memories," explores the role of the past in poetry and prose. Though the literary objects invite a closer, more focused comparison, the variety of languages, contexts, and periods under discussion remains broad, from Peter Riemer's discussion of what he calls the "oral nature" of ancient texts to Isabel Capeloa Gil's study of W. G. Sebald's "Poetics of Destruction as Constructive Memory." Several of the articles, however, share the theme of literature as an instrument in the discussion of joint French-German, or "European," categories. Bernard Franco, for example, explores how the events of the French Revolution, most of all the murder of Georges Danton, generated debates among German writers and intellectuals regarding the role of art as the interpreter and maker of history. Nathalie Dauvois claims that the translations of Horace during the Renaissance consciously served to develop a "European" humanism. Manfred Schmelting, in an article on Christoph Ransmayr, Salman Rushdie, and Marie Darrieussecq, follows Renate Lachmann's notion that "the memory of the text is its intertextuality" (p. 335) to claim that through the usage of Roman models, in this case Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, these Austrian, British, and French writers sought to produce a common intertextuality and a shared "European" memory. Though the articles of this section provide interesting and at times thought-provoking

insights into both the pieces they explore and their historical context, it seems that a clearer, more focused definition of some of the terms would have been in order. Often, the term "European" acquires an overly broad meaning, becoming a synonym with something that is simply not one-dimensionally national. It is not quite clear, for example, in what sense Ransmayr's usage of Ovid as a literary source is indeed a European intertextuality, rather than one that is directed at every reader familiar with Ovid.

A good example for the potential of a more focused French-German perspective is Danielle Buschinger's essay on the image of the German Middle Ages in contemporary France. Buschinger identifies a wave of French translations of German medieval epic poems starting in the late 1990s, from the *Nibelungenlied* to *Parzival*, and claims that the German texts provide literary alternatives for France's contemporary challenges. For example, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, according to Buschinger, is relevant to modern French readers because in contrast to French epic poems such as *La Chanson de Roland*, "the Muslim, like the Christian, is human, who deserves respect ... [and not] the child of the devil" (pp. 229-230). France thus expresses its dilemmas in face of its Muslim population through an imagined German history. Yet Buschinger goes further, to trace this French interest in German literary models as part of a long, bidirectional exchange of images, in which "the Middle Ages is the art of the imaginary par excellence" (p. 233). French and German literatures, he claims, were dependent on each other since their earliest stages, and both countries' fascination with the Middle Ages should be understood not only in its contemporary or earlier, national and romantic contexts, but as part of their conscious borrowing from and imitation of each other. Like Grosser, Buschinger demonstrates how thoughts and categories that seem to have been born in a local context were in fact part of wider, transnational trends, and could

often be articulated only through reflections on the neighbor across the Rhine.

The third section explores memory in the visual arts. Like the other two sections, this opens with a view of antiquity with Johannes Bergemann's essay on gravestones and public monuments in ancient Greece and Rome, and continues through the Middle Ages up to the present day. As in the previous sections, the articles here use "memory" in an elusive and very diverse ways. Pierre Vaisse, for example, sees art as an active participant in the construction of memories, and discusses the representation of historical objects, in this case the old Germanic tribes, in French visual art and art historiography during the nineteenth century. Michael Hesse, on the other hand, observes art as the passive object of projection, and shows how, throughout the eighteenth century, Gothic architecture was associated with different aesthetic qualities, from "ugly barbarism" (p. 444) to delicate modernity. An interesting exception to this section, and to the collection in general, is Jörg Träger's discussion of Bavarian painters and sculptors' representation of the Napoleonic Wars (in which Bavaria famously fought both on the side of the French emperor and against him) from Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power up to the end of the nineteenth century. Träger shows how early paintings depicted Napoleon and the Bavarian king in common visual codes and in positions that art consumers associated with Roman imperial art. After Napoleon's defeat, not surprisingly, Bavarian artists turned to a style associated more with "Germanic" forms of art, with the monuments to the Bavarian kings and the wars emphasizing the difference between the two nations. Though this development is not surprising in itself, Träger's emphasis on an element that is neglected in other essays in the collection is important: namely, the collapse of joint transnational narratives into hostile, antagonistic ones.

The tremendous variety of topics, objects, and theoretical approaches, as well as its monumental

length, makes the collection's intended audience somewhat unclear. Though many of the essays contained in it are interesting, and at times remarkable, and might be very useful for specialists and general readers alike, it seems that the structure of the collection would have benefited from a more focused choice of material and a clearer definition of some of its main terms. The importance of "memory" for historical research, as well as the problem of its vagueness, has stood at the center of intense attention for two decades, generating such a tremendous volume of publications that it is unclear to whom a general collection, which sets to map the different optional directions for research, is to be addressed. The focus on intercultural exchanges of historical memories, in which one society borrows the other's narratives or develops new, joint ones, is promising and crucial in providing a fuller, more complex view of the creation of historical memories. Here again, however, this collection would have benefited from a more focused selection, as some of the articles focus on purely national phenomena that contribute little to this new and valuable perspective. An additional weakness is the omission of any traces of the American side of the story of the modern construction of "Europe." Though this aspect is often neglected in both research and even more so in public discussion, the United States played a vital role in the socialization of Europe at the economic, political, symbolic, and intellectual levels, while at the same time serving as one of the most central counter-images for the construction of such transnational, European images. Although this omission is common in many works on the origins of "Europe," addressing the issue is crucial and would have enriched the collection.

Despite these weaknesses, however, the essays in the collection offer a useful model for historical research that seeks to transcend national and comparative perspectives in an attempt to reach a fuller, richer understanding of the construction of memory. They offer much to ponder and constitute a contribution to the ongoing con-

versation about Germany's relations with its surroundings and its reactions to global trends.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Udi Greenberg. Review of Dewes, Eva; Duhem, Sandra, eds. *Kulturelles Gedächtnis und interkulturelle Rezeption im europäischen Kontext*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23703>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.