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Spatial Images in Collective and Autobiographical Memory and Their Therapeutic Use

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Abstract

This article examines the role of space in collective and autobiographical memory through a close engagement with Maurice Halbwachs's work. After presenting the theory of memory as reconstruction in dialogue with Walter Benjamin and discussing the relationship between individual and collective memory through Paul Ricoeur's interpretation, the article analyzes space as one of the central frameworks of memory. This role derives both from the analogy between orientation in space and orientation in memory, explored by Mary Carruthers in her study of medieval ars memorativa*, and from the concrete function of space in the everyday practices of groups, as reflected in their collective memories and revealing a narrative organization of space (de Certeau). Through the experience of physical or represented space, individuals can adopt a group's perspective and reconstruct its collective memory. The final section discusses two videotherapy practices that make use of spatial images, highlighting their therapeutic potential.*

Keywords: Halbwachs, recollection, intersubjectivity, narrativity, audiovisual

At the outbreak of the Second World War, in September 1939, Walter Benjamin was interned in a French camp as a German citizen. Among those who might have intervened to secure his release was Maurice Halbwachs[1], a sociologist and philosopher who had studied with Bergson and belonged to the Durkheimian circle (Jedlowski 2001: 17). Benjamin would die one year later while attempting to leave Europe; Halbwachs would perish in the Buchenwald concentration camp in March 1945, after being arrested by the Gestapo for protecting his son, who was a member of the Resistance. Before the war, however, Benjamin had the opportunity to attend Halbwachs's courses at the Sorbonne, and in *On the Concept of History* one can discern an echo of Halbwachs's idea that the past is a stake, contested between opposing interests and groups: "Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it" (Benjamin 2003: 391).

For both Benjamin and Halbwachs, memory – whether historical or personal – is not simply preserved or transmitted, but is always reconstructed from the standpoint of the present (Halbwachs 1976: XVIII)[2]. As Benjamin famously writes, "History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]" (Benjamin 2003: 395). In his two major works devoted to memory, *The Social Frameworks of Memory* [1925] and the posthumous *The Collective Memory* [1950], Halbwachs maintains that the image of the past is never fixed once and for all, but

[1] Max Horkheimer had asked Georges Scelle and Maurice Halbwachs to exert pressure for Walter Benjamin's release; Benjamin himself, however, believed that the decisive help had come from one of Adrienne Monnier's acquaintances at the Ministry. See Benjamin's letters to Horkheimer dated November 30 and December 15, 1939 (Benjamin 1978: 834, 840).

[2] A partial English translation of key passages from *The Social Frameworks of Memory* as well as from *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* is available in the volume *On Collective Memory* (Halbwachs 1992: 37–192, 193–236).

is constantly renegotiated: the world of present interests shapes the memory of the past. The image I have of my father, for example, has never ceased to evolve – not only because new memories have been added, but because I myself have changed (Halbwachs 1980: 72). Memories are always fragmentary and must be reconnected and integrated through an operation of reconstitution (Halbwachs 1976: 92). Against Bergson (1988), who holds that the entirety of memory is preserved and can be evoked if one only learns how to navigate through it, Halbwachs argues that only past states corresponding to our present concerns can reappear, since "the reason for their reappearance lies not in them, but in their relation to our present ideas and perceptions: it is therefore not from them that we proceed, but from those relations" (Halbwachs 1976: 142)[3].

Halbwachs also wrote a third book on memory, the last to be published during his lifetime: *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* [1941]. Often underestimated as a mere case study in the history of religions, this work offers a highly illuminating perspective on the role of space and topography in the construction – and thus the recollection – of collective memory. In this respect, it reveals another affinity with Benjamin, whose unfinished masterpiece, *The Arcades Project*, examines the urban space of 19th-century Paris – specifically its *passages* – as a repository of the "collective dream". As Benjamin writes, "topography is the ground plan of every mythic space of tradition and […] it can indeed become its key" (Benjamin 1999: 851). The memory of literary, artistic, political, and historical figures is linked to specific places endowed with a "*vertu évocatrice*" (518), leading to an interpenetration of past and present images. While Benjamin's unfinished project does not offer a systematic theory of

[3] Translation mine. Original French: "La raison de leur réapparition n'est pas en eux, mais dans leur rapport à nos idées et perceptions d'aujourd'hui: ce n'est donc pas d'eux que nous partons, mais de ces rapports".

memorial topography, a close engagement with Halbwachs's three major writings on memory nonetheless makes it possible to sketch – if only in preliminary form – a theory of the role of space in the formation of both collective and autobiographical memory.

I will first outline Halbwachs's conception of the social frameworks of memory, integrating some of the main critiques that have been directed at it. I will then focus on the role of space, arguing that it constitutes a fundamental element not only of historical and collective memory, but also of the construction of autobiographical memory. Finally, I will offer some reflections on the potential therapeutic value of spatial representation, particularly in visual and audiovisual forms.

1. Halbwachs and the Social Frameworks of Memory

If memories are not preserved unchanged in their entirety, but survive in fragmentary form and can only be reconstructed in accordance with present interests and affects – as Halbwachs maintains – then some form of mediation is required between our present state and the contents of memory, which are not directly accessible. Just as we do not hear every word in a conversation, but a few salient traits are sufficient for us to reconstruct the whole, so a few fragmentary images can take the shape of a memory if we are able to localize them within a context. The contextual elements that mediate between past and present are what Halbwachs calls the frameworks of memory.

But what is the nature of these frameworks? Should they be understood as transcendental structures that shape memory from without, like a riverbed shaping the course of a river? According to Halbwachs, they are more plausibly constituted by contents of experience; in other words, the frameworks themselves are made up of memories (Halbwachs 1976: 98). These include different kinds of

contents – visual, haptic, spatiotemporal, but also linguistic[4]. What matters, however, are not the individual elements taken in isolation, but their mutual relations: the network they form. Just as we recognize a star by identifying the constellation to which it belongs – as Halbwachs writes, revealing yet another affinity with Benjamin's thought – we recollect a memory through the mediation of its framework, even though this framework is itself nothing other than a configuration of memories (Halbwachs 1980: 41; Leone 2001: 100). For this reason, "each time we reposition one of our impressions within the framework of our current ideas, the framework transforms the impression, but the impression, in turn, modifies the framework" (Halbwachs 1976: 135)[5]. For a fragment of memory to be preserved and reconstructed, it must therefore be *localized* – that is, connected to a framework that includes spatiotemporal references, linguistic meanings, and images with social significance.

1.1. In Which Sense Are the Frameworks of Memory Social?

Drawing on pragmatist philosophy (Dewey 1958; James 1890), Halbwachs argues that human beings perceive and remember only those objects that are relevant to their action (Halbwachs 1976: 62). This operational, pragmatist – or enactivist – dimension, however,

[4] Halbwachs's notebooks reveal a growing interest in Kant's theory of schematism, especially in relation to time, space, and causality (Brian 2021: 6). He nevertheless seems to reinterpret this theory in his own way – an interpretation that can be fruitfully compared with that proposed by Garroni (2005). Halbwachs often refers to the schematic nature of the elements composing the frameworks of memory; however, to use Garroni's terminology, he appears to conceive them neither as pure schemas nor as purely sensory images, but rather as schema-images: images endowed with the characteristic traits that can be grasped by perception, yet also with a selective set of traits that enables recognition. This already implies a connection with a semantic, linguistic, and even conceptual dimension.

[5] Translation mine. Original French: "Chaque fois que nous replaçons une de nos impressions dans le cadre de nos idées actuelles, le cadre transforme l'impression, mais l'impression, à son tour, modifie le cadre".

should not be reduced to a merely organic aspect, such as the motor memory of bodily attitudes (as in Bergson), but must also take into account social habits. In other words, we can remember only what accords with our interests and affects, and these depend not only on our actions but also on our interpersonal relations. Even our most personal feelings and thoughts originate within specific social contexts and circumstances.

In most cases, the need to localize a memory arises either in response to a question posed by others or to one we pose to ourselves, "because one examines these memories from the outside, as if they were those of others" (Halbwachs 1976: 115)[6]. More generally, the work of recollection involves an exercise of reflection[7] – that is, the capacity to detach from oneself, to externalize one's thought, to adopt the standpoint of another, and to observe one's memories from the outside.

Even our perception of time is not grounded in astronomical or physical references, but in the capacity to represent time intersubjectively (Halbwachs 1980: 88–127). A similar intersubjective condition of experience can already be found in Kant's second maxim of common human understanding (§40): "to think in the position of everyone else" (Kant 2000: 174). What Halbwachs has in mind, however, is not an abstract and universal *sensus communis*, but the point of view of the specific social group to which we belong – or, more precisely, to which our memory belongs. In this sense, the frameworks of memory are always social, and even our most private and intimate

[6] Translation mine. Original French: "c'est qu'on examine ces souvenirs du dehors et comme s'ils étaient ceux des autres".

[7] Halbwachs often emphasizes the intellectual, reflective, and linguistic character of the work of memory. In this respect, his position can be fruitfully compared with that of Vygotsky: the child thinks by remembering, whereas the adult remembers by thinking – that is, adult memory relies on semantic relations regulated by language. See Leone (2001: 87).

memories cannot be understood or recollected without the support of collective memory.

1.2. Forgetting and Recollection

On the basis of these premises, Halbwachs develops in *The Collective Memory* a rather radical theory of forgetting and recollection. If memories are not simply stored and later retrieved, but are always reconstructed through the mediation of social frameworks, then we remember something only insofar as there is an affinity between our present interests and affects and those that originally informed the remembered experience. Since our interests are always shaped by the groups to which we belong, we remember events that are significant for those groups – not only because others expect us to remember them, but also because the attribution of meaning has an irreducibly intersubjective dimension.

According to Halbwachs, "what constitutes the essence of a group is an interest, a shared body of concerns and ideas", rather than "a collection of definite individuals" (Halbwachs 1980: 118). Even in the absence of the people who share these interests with me, I am still able to place myself within the same current of thought. This is why a group does not forget part of its past as such: when forgetting occurs, it is because the group itself has changed. When we no longer belong to a group – in the strong sense that its body of concerns and ideas no longer affects us – we also lose access to the framework required to reconstruct the memories associated with that group. Something is forgotten when it is no longer possible to relate to a collective current of thought. For this reason, if we are unable to reconstruct a childhood memory, it is because there are too many differences between the conceptions and interests of an adult and those of a child; conversely, when childhood memories do resurface, they are often distorted by our present beliefs (Halbwachs 1976: 93).

Individual memory is not a sufficient condition for the recall and recognition of memories (Halbwachs 1980: 31)[8]. Even our most intimate experiences – those we have never shared with anyone – are shaped through shared systems of values and meanings, and in order to remember them we must recur to those frameworks. Of course, we always belong simultaneously to several groups: immediate and extended family, friends (often divided into multiple distinct circles), colleagues, neighbors, fellow citizens, not to mention members of clubs, parties, teams, and so on. Each group has its own collective memory, and many individual memories can be situated within multiple frameworks corresponding to distinct collective memories.

Some memories appear lost and irretrievable, only to re-emerge unexpectedly under certain circumstances. This occurs when, after a long time, we find ourselves once again sharing the point of view of a group and adopting its interests. The condition for such evocation is that we position ourselves – at least in thought – within an environment capable of functioning as a framework.

1.3. Individual and Collective Memory: Interpretations and Criticisms

Halbwachs's thought has been widely taken up by historians and sociologists within the field of memory studies (Schwarz 2016), but only more recently have psychologists shown sustained interest in his theories, particularly in clarifying how the retrieval of episodic memory involves reference to context and, therefore, a link to pre-existing networks of knowledge (Heux et al. 2023). Halbwachs's theory has often been criticized for neglecting the agency of individual memory and for hypostatizing what is seen as a somewhat metaphysical notion

[8] From a certain point of view, individual memory is not even a necessary condition, since we can participate in the collective memory of events we did not experience firsthand. Even in such cases, however, individual memory contributes its own perspective.

of collective memory (Feyles 2007: 207–248; Chalier 2023). His friend and colleague Charles Blondel (1926) was the first to object to this theory from the standpoint of what has been called the "psychologizing thesis" (Ricoeur 2004: 121): all memories, however socially influenced they may be, are said to retain an intimate core preserved in the individual mind and can be evoked at will. Halbwachs addressed Blondel's objections in a chapter of *The Collective Memory* entitled "Individual Memory and Collective Memory", where he explains apparently unique remembrances not as pure fragments of experience privately possessed and stored in the mind, but as the result of a complex intersection of multiple collective influences.

Although Halbwachs's somewhat speculative terminology may invite misunderstandings, he never actually conceived collective memory as an organ of a collective mind existing at the same ontological level as individual minds (Bastide 1970; Grande & Migliorati 2024: 13). Rather, he moves beyond the Durkheimian idea of an external collective consciousness toward a relational theory of networks or constellations. Individual memories and acts of remembrance do exist, but they are never self-contained, since they rely on contents, frameworks, and points of reference that are elaborated by others and shared with them. Collective memory is therefore neither the sum of individual memories nor a mere historical background against which personal recollections are projected; instead, it corresponds to currents of thought and experience that mediate between individual memory, on the one hand, and historical memory, on the other (Halbwachs 1980: 50–87; Ricoeur 2004: 393–397).

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur engages extensively with Halbwachs, from whom he borrows a great deal but whom he also criticizes on two interconnected grounds. Recollection undoubtedly takes place from the standpoint of the present; yet, at times,

Halbwachs seems to reduce these present concerns to something merely undergone, thus reverting to what Ricoeur calls "a sense-data–based theory of sensible intuition" (Ricoeur 2004: 523). Against this view, Ricoeur insists that the act of recollection must also involve a degree of initiative: even if it is true that we never remember alone, personal identity cannot be reduced to a mere effect of the environment.

Collective memory should therefore be understood as intersubjective in the sense of a co-construction that involves both the agency of the remembering subject and the contributions of other members of the group, as well as broader environmental factors. At the same time, Ricoeur argues that "we find in Halbwachs's own text the resources for a critique directed against him" (Ricoeur 2004: 123). Alongside the claim that the frameworks of memory shape the reconstruction of the past, Halbwachs also maintains that individuals are capable of displacing themselves from one group and situating themselves within another, moving from group to group. This implies that we can, at least in part, choose the frameworks through which we reconstruct our past: "If not, society would be without any social actors" (Ricoeur 2004: 122).

Collective memory derives its strength and duration from being supported by a group of people; nevertheless, it is always individuals, as members of a group, who remember[9]. Each individual memory thus represents a particular perspective on collective memory – a

[9] Paolo Jedlowski (2001: 30; 2023: 33) has also pointed out a significant omission in Halbwachs's work: the absence of any sustained reflection on technologies of memory preservation and reproduction – that is, on the exteriorization of memory. This limitation may be explained by the fact that, for Halbwachs, memory frameworks are always already externalized, while the act of reconstruction remains individual. Precisely because individuals reconstruct their memories through collective frameworks, these memories can then be narrated orally or in writing, reproduced in other media, and shared – thereby contributing, in turn, to the ongoing formation of social frameworks of memory.

perspective that varies according to the position one occupies and the relations one maintains with different social circles[10].

2. Space and Memory

2.1 Memory-places

Since antiquity, space has been recognized as possessing a strong evocative power for memory. Studies of ancient and medieval mnemonic techniques by Frances Yates (1966) and Mary Carruthers (2008) have shown that these practices rely on an analogy between spatial orientation and mnemonic orientation[11]. Traditionally, memory has been conceived through spatial metaphors: a wax tablet, a seal, an archive, or a storehouse in which memories are arranged. Contrary to what one might assume, however – as Carruthers convincingly argues – these images were not intended to represent memory as the mere capacity to preserve remembrances, but rather as the capacity to recollect them.

Ricoeur condemns the *ars memoriae* as an "outrageous denial of forgetfulness and, following this, of the weaknesses inherent in both the preservation of traces and their evocation" (Ricoeur 2004: 66), because he understands artificial mnemonic techniques as granting preeminence to "memorization at the expense of remembering (*remémoration*)" (Ib.). Carruthers, by contrast, argues that ancient and medieval theories of memory explicitly took forgetfulness into

[10] Ricoeur notes the quasi-Leibnizian character of this notion of perspective. Benjamin likewise defines his concept of origin as a monad, drawing on Leibniz's image of a city observed from the vantage point of a bell tower, with each monad representing the same world from a different perspective (2019: 27). Halbwachs himself is also the author of a monograph on Leibniz, in which he writes that Leibniz's philosophy reduces the world to a multiplicity of points of view (Halbwachs 1907: 43).

[11] Morawski (2024) identifies in Kant the strongest analogy between orientation in space and orientation in thought, thereby accounting for the prevalence of spatial and geographical metaphors in Kant's work. As we shall see, however, Halbwachs's spatial model appears to be more narrative than cartographic.

account, insofar as they recognized an interruption between the original act of impressing a sensory image and its subsequent recollection. "This break means that the original experience itself is lost, wholly or in part. Recollection thus becomes a reconstructive act" (Carruthers 2008: 29).

In his *Commentary on Aristotle's De memoria et reminiscentia* (II, 1–3), Albertus Magnus defines true memory as an investigation of what has been set aside, in opposition to mere iteration or rote repetition (*iterata scientia*). Mnemonic techniques (*artes memorativae*) are therefore not devices for preserving memories intact, but heuristic tools. The term *investigatio* itself is etymologically related to *vestigia* – tracks or footprints – which are not yet memories, but signs (Carruthers 2008: 23). Recollection thus consists in tracking down traces that must be localized, completed, and interpreted: "Because it recalls signs, reminiscence is an act of interpretation, inference, investigation, and reconstruction, an act like reading" (29).

The work of recollection described by Carruthers through recourse to the medieval tradition – which closely mirrors the account offered by Halbwachs – relies heavily on spatial frameworks. These should be understood, first and foremost, as spatial dispositions that make it possible to organize the relations among signs, following the model of the written text. Cicero already noted that memory is "the twin sister of written speech […] in a dissimilar medium" (*Partitiones oratoriae*, 26). Accordingly, ancient and medieval *artes memoriae* systematically employed architectural settings as artificial memory-places (*loci*), within which images were arranged in an orderly manner[12].

[12] Albertus Magnus cites Cicero's definition: "By backgrounds [*loci*] I mean such scenes as are naturally or artificially set off on a diminished scale, complete, in a visually striking manner, so that we can grasp and embrace them easily by the natural memory" (Carruthers 2008: 349). Other authors also referred to fields (*campi*) and gardens (*prata*) as memory-places.

These spatial metaphors and the use of memory-places can easily be understood as part of what Halbwachs calls the spatial frameworks of memory, which, according to him, are always involved in recollection, whether we are aware of them or not. Mnemonic *loci*, however, are primarily logical or imagined places. Halbwachs, by contrast, emphasizes the role of concrete, physical space in memory (Truc 2012; Proietti 2026).

2.2. Places of memory

By enduring over time, physical places provide assurance that we can recover the traces of vanished situations once connected to them, much as drifting boats are anchored to the seabed. Physical space – as it is collectively experienced by one or more groups – offers stable reference points through the relative permanence of material objects. This holds true for both autobiographical and collective memory. In the first case, it concerns places that are meaningful to a specific, often small, group to which an individual has belonged, such as a family home. In the second case, it refers to symbolic sites of national or religious memory, which can retain significance even for those who have never physically visited them.

In *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land*, Halbwachs explores this second scenario in greater depth. By examining the earliest travel diaries of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land, dating from the fourth century, he analyzes how the collective memory of biblical events came to be localized in specific physical places. Here again, a rupture between the events themselves and their recollection – caused by the destruction of Jerusalem under Titus and Hadrian and the subsequent displacement of populations – necessitated an act of memory reconstruction grounded in present interests, rather than the simple preservation of an inherited tradition.

Yet it is particularly significant that, even though the precise memory of specific locations had been lost[13], Christians felt a strong need to reconstruct a topography of the Holy Land as soon as circumstances allowed: collective memory, in order to endure, had to be anchored in concrete spatial frameworks (Halbwachs 1941: 161)[14]. The localization and monumentalization of sacred sites thus fulfilled social and memorial functions. For this reason, the historical validation of the authenticity of these places was of secondary importance: "What is authentic and real about the sites is the memory-work, the thinking to which they gave clues" (Carruthers 1998: 42). By the same token, buildings and objects should not be identified with the memories they evoke, since "even when a building is gone, the site itself often continues to play the same role in people's memories, as a 'common place' in their mental maps" (Ib.).

The pilgrims' travel diaries also offer a compelling illustration of the dialectic between autobiographical and collective memory. On the one hand, their itineraries appear to follow the Bible almost like a guidebook; on the other hand, the journeys themselves and the resulting travelogues contribute to shaping collective memory by determining the prominence and lasting success of certain locations. Collective memory of biblical events is thus activated through the vivid impressions that pilgrims gather and connect to it. From Egeria in the fourth century to Riccoldo da Monte di Croce in the thirteenth, pilgrims

[13] Gérôme Truc (2012: 150) distinguishes between "memories of places" and "places of memories", the latter being reconstructible even when the former have been lost.
[14] While Halbwachs maintains that "every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework" (1980: 139) – whether real or imaginary – Pierre Nora (1996: 1–20) argues that *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") emerge precisely when embodied collective memory weakens and institutions decide to preserve it deliberately. *Lieux de mémoire* compensate for the loss of spontaneous memory by crystallizing it into staged, symbolic forms – monuments, texts, rituals, or locations – and thus appear at the moment when memory turns into history. Nora further contends that, in contemporary societies, collective memory has become extremely fragile and is almost entirely externalized in *lieux de mémoire*.

travel in order to recollect memory images "which they had made on the basis of their prior reading of the Bible" (Carruthers 1998: 42), and which enable them to "more feelingly picture thoroughly all that happened in these places" (*Itinerarium Egeriae* V, 8).

2.3. Spatial Distribution and Group Functions

Beyond its permanence, space is characterized by its organization and distribution. In *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs devotes an entire chapter to the role of space (1980: 128–157), showing that spatial distribution is not arbitrary but closely reflects group functions. Whereas mnemonic *loci* constitute a conscious strategy of recollection, the organization of lived space bears the traces of the functions it performs for a group. Each part of space corresponds to particular aspects of the group's structure and way of life. Our everyday lives unfold within a spatially limited world, typically encompassing the home, the workplace, and the principal places of the city or region that we frequent. The layout of an apartment reveals much about family relationships, even though only family members fully grasp the specific meaning of each place. Likewise, the spatial organization of a church, an office, or an entire city reflects the needs, traditions, and shared meanings of the group that inhabits it. This organization must be understood not only in practical or functional terms, but also as the expression of a way of being and a system of values. In this sense, even a place frequented by a single individual can express a way of life shared with other human beings (129).

This implies that modifications within a group – such as births, deaths, relocations, or changes in social or economic status – are mirrored in spatial transformations: places bear the traces of the development of a group's collective memory. Groups shape space in their own image, yet the place they occupy is not like a blackboard "on which one may write and erase figures at will"; it offers resistance. As

Halbwachs writes, "the group not only transforms the space into which it has been inserted, but also yields and adapts to its physical surroundings. It becomes enclosed within the framework it has built" (130). Through this complex reciprocal process[15], groups inscribe their form on the ground and rediscover their collective memories within the spatial framework thus produced. Without such interaction, spatial images would not aid recollection, just as an empty blackboard does not remind us of any particular sentence once written upon it.

Halbwachs does not conceive spatial frameworks as abstract geometric figures, since for him experienced space is never homogeneous but always articulated into nodes of affordances (Halbwachs 1976: 97) – the same affordances that oral, non-industrial societies would perceive as hierophanies. Just as Aboriginal Australians recognize each rock along the so-called *songlines* as being associated with a specific cosmogonic myth (Chatwin 2012), the various rooms and objects of a house acquire emotional value for the child because they are associated with particular family members and events (Halbwachs 1976: 97).

Although Halbwachs never states this explicitly, one might say, following Ricoeur, that space is not homogeneous because it is narratively organized, or – echoing Michel de Certeau (1984) – that narration is always spatially unfolded. The space both Halbwachs and de Certeau have in mind is not modeled on the map, but on the itinerary: it is not a geometrical space defined by the mere being-there of inert objects, but a space constituted through the operations of historical (or mythical) subjects. For this reason, every story is in fact a "spatial practice" or a "spatial trajectory", and every lived space must

[15] On the interactive relationship – one that precedes and shapes the elements it comprises, including both individuals and their environment – see Montani (2025), who also draws, among others, on Tomasello (2022), the theorists of material engagement (Malafouris 2013), and the hermeneutic tradition.

be "enunciated" through the everyday practices that shape it, thereby endowing it with collective memory.

2.4. Recollection through space

By returning to a meaningful space, it becomes possible to recover a state of mind – previously experienced by oneself or by others – that enables the reconstruction of a memory. Space does not contain memories as such; rather, the experience of space conveys an atmosphere[16] that helps us adopt the disposition required to assume the group's perspective. What is reproduced is not a specific memory, but a certain inclination – a direction of sensitivity and thought. This also applies to places one has never visited before but that are nonetheless meaningful for the group to which one belongs, as in the case of pilgrimage or even cultural travel. Visiting such places for the first time allows individuals to situate themselves within the group's current of thought and to reconstruct part of its collective memory by integrating stories previously heard or read with vivid impressions experienced in the present.

Physical presence in a place, however, is not always necessary. Even reproduced or imagined spaces can help recreate the disposition required to recover the social framework associated with certain memories – especially when the reproduction refers to a concrete, specific place rather than an abstract one. As Halbwachs notes, not every believer can undertake a pilgrimage to the holy sites, but "it is enough to picture them" (Halbwachs 1980: 154). In both *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* and *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs refers to the many reproductions of the Via Crucis and the Holy Sepulchre, which enable believers unable to

[16] For an introduction to this concept see the excellent Italian anthology on the phenomenology of space edited by Bandi and Vegetti (2024).

travel to Jerusalem to place themselves "in a position to relive inwardly […] the successive episodes of the Passion of our Lord" (Halbwachs 1980: 155) – that is, to participate in a collective memory[17].

More generally, verbal descriptions of space, graphic representations, and even more so photographic and audiovisual reproductions can fulfil this function, granting access to the atmospheres and frameworks through which memories are reconstructed.

3. The Therapeutic Use of Spatial Images

The second chapter of *The Social Frameworks of Memory* ("Language and Memory") is devoted to the analysis of a pathological condition: aphasia. Halbwachs understands aphasia not as the disappearance of verbal memories, but as the loss of the linguistic capacity to place oneself in another's position. The narrowing of the field of memory that characterizes severe forms of aphasia is thus attributed to the loss of one of the principal social frameworks of memory. Although Halbwachs does not directly address the therapeutic implications of this analysis, his account suggests that working toward the partial restoration of one or more memory frameworks may possess significant therapeutic potential. Since space – as we have seen – is such a fundamental framework of memory, spatial images may therefore play a particularly relevant role in therapeutic practices.

This perspective concerns not only therapies directly aimed at treating memory disorders, such as dementia[18], but more broadly any therapeutic practice that addresses – whether explicitly or implicitly – the close link between memory and narrative identity. In recent

[17] This logic is particularly evident in medieval religious theatre, as well as in the iconography of the Passion, the Deposition and the Holy Sepulcher (Mâle 2024).
[18] On this point, see the earlier videotherapy project *memofilm* (Grosso 2013; Feyles 2017).

decades, narrative medicine has gained increasing prominence as a clinical approach that recognizes storytelling as central to understanding illness, care, and patient identity (Charon 2006). This approach also encompasses performative, visual, and self-narrative practices that frequently make use of audiovisual tools (Cohen & Johnson 2015).

Unlike purely verbal narratives, audiovisual narratives inevitably incorporate spatial images in a significant way. Following Halbwachs, the audiovisual representation of meaningful places could therefore be deliberately employed to place individuals – whether as spectators, participants, or authors of the images – in a position that facilitates the recollection of memories associated with those places. The representation of an "attuned space" (Ströker 1987) may help foster the disposition required to adopt the group's perspective and its currents of thought, thereby mending the relationship between autobiographical and collective memory. This, in turn, enables the co-narration of personal identity in dialogue with a specific group and may open up possibilities for transforming one's self-image.

We can observe this therapeutic use of spatial images at work in two clinical applications of audiovisual technology: the *Audiovisual ID* (AID) and *Videopharmakon*, both developed within the research project *Aesthetics and Therapeia*. The *Audiovisual ID* is a short video (5-10 minutes) that narrates the life of a person with dementia or Alzheimer's disease through interviews with family members, found footage, old photographs, as well as images related to collective memory and meaningful places. It is conceived as a supportive tool designed to facilitate relationships between individuals with dementia – often at a stage when they are no longer able to tell their own stories – and their formal and informal caregivers, who are frequently exposed to an additional level of stress due to the difficulty of establishing contact with the person in their care (Covelli & Feyles 2026).

One of the five AIDs produced so far, for example, is dedicated to a woman named Teresa. It opens with approximately one minute of footage showing the landscape of the region where she grew up: a bridge and a woodland path where she used to walk, as well as the fields where her family worked as sharecroppers. These spatial images are edited together with historical footage of a farmer working in those same fields and accompanied by a voice-over in which Teresa's daughter recounts her mother's childhood. Further spatial images punctuate the narrative as Teresa moves to the city: one of the construction sites where her husband worked, the ballroom where she liked to dance, and the apartment where she spent her retirement. Significantly, all these are operational spaces, closely tied to everyday activities, in de Certeau's sense.

As the film juxtaposes images of the city with those of the home or workplace, and the broader region with the field and the path that crosses it, it appears to activate a process of spatial recollection guided by a relation of nesting – that is, the inclusion of a more restricted space within a larger one – which, according to Neisser, unconsciously orients the retrieval of autobiographical memories (Leone 2001: 52). From the representation of each of these environments there emerges, almost as a reflection, the social function that the space served, and thus the group that frequented it. These spatial images make it possible to access currents of thought, systems of values, and emotional dispositions characteristic of the groups to which the person belonged. In this way, the film seeks to connect the multiple collective memories associated with the different groups to which Teresa belonged: from larger formations shaped by historical frameworks – the agrarian world of her ancestors, Italy's working class during the economic boom of the 1950s – to smaller and more intimate ones – her immediate family, as well as the more recent group she shares with her caregivers. As the caregivers watch the video, they weave together

the collective memories that once informed the patient's identity with their present impressions of her, thus gaining partial access to her world.

The second case, *Videopharmakon*, is a therapeutic filmmaking project addressed to adolescents on the autism spectrum, in which participants are first authors, then actors, and ultimately spectators of their own filmic narratives (Sabatino & Saladino 2024: 119-161). The practice typically involves two adolescents working together on a film, in collaboration with their families, within a deliberately inclusive setting designed to form a therapeutic group – a "healing community" (Almond 1974). The therapeutic setting is characterized by the group's playful engagement and by the presence of the camera, which functions as a relational tool before becoming a recording device (Deligny 2021). Within this framework, participants narrate stories that allow them to reenact and elaborate even the situations they have found most difficult, thereby working on their self-image.

Significantly, the therapeutic setting is not confined to a clinical space separated from the adolescents' everyday world, but is instead embedded within spaces of daily life, including their homes, since these coincide with the settings of the stories they wish to narrate. As Halbwachs teaches us, the same place can be meaningful for different groups and can carry multiple layers of collective memory. This is precisely what occurs here, leading to a transformation of space that comes to reflect a new group with different functions: no longer merely the restricted family unit, often marked by dysfunctional dynamics, but a therapeutic group in which family members are included with a renewed and positive role. In this way, the therapeutic work – conducted over a limited period and therefore at risk of fading once it ends – is sustained over time through continued engagement with a place that preserves and carries its memory.

Taken together, these practices suggest that spatial representation – especially in audiovisual form – can function as a mediator between collective frameworks, autobiographical memory, and therapeutic processes, opening up a field that deserves further theoretical and practical exploration.

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