

# Popular Cultural Memory

## *Comics, Communities and Context Knowledge<sup>1</sup>*

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### Abstract

Conventions of genres, types and icons of popular culture are the shared knowledge of media audiences. Becoming acquainted with them through the reception of media texts resembles a socialisation process in its own right: It constitutes a community of media readers. The context knowledge they share is their popular cultural memory. On the level of the individual reading process, this context knowledge then provides the necessary guiding lines for understanding the connotative dimensions of a popular media text.

Popular cultural memory is a repository of conventions and imagery that are continually reconstructed in contemporary popular culture. Drawing on J. Assmann's writings on the functions and processes of collective memory, the present article develops popular cultural memory as a concept to describe the workings of context knowledge for media texts, while taking into consideration both the macrolevel of audience communities and the microlevel of the individual reading process.

The comics series *Fables* by Bill Willingham (NY: DC Comics Vertigo, 2003-) will provide the example through which the article explores the functions of popular cultural memory in media texts, which can take shapes as different as the identification of genre, the stabilisation of intertextual reference chains or the creation of round characters and complex reflexivity.

**Keywords:** collective memory, visual narration, comics, audience community, fairy tales, intertextuality

### Introduction

Texts can never be understood in and of themselves. Recipients always need to be competent in the relevant context knowledge in order to make sense of the connotative dimension, the cultural conventions and value judgements the text draws upon. On a denotative level, a character might just wear a black shirt and a moustache. On the connotative level, we know that he is the villain of the piece.

As products of culture, texts always draw on their predecessors, be it through their choice of topic, genre or style. Their audience recognises these choices when it reads or watches a text and (usually)<sup>2</sup> classifies it accordingly. For understanding the connotative dimension of a text, audiences draw on their previous experience with media texts, recalling character types, iconography, speech styles or standard situations from their share in popular cultural memory and using these as context knowledge.

In popular cultural memory three dimensions of culture come together: the social dimension of the audience as its carriers, the material dimension of media texts and

the mental dimension of codes and conventions that facilitate the reading process (cp. Posner 1991 for this categorisation). These dimensions interact in many ways: Be it in providing the context knowledge necessary for the reading process, or in creating an audience community.

An audience community is a group of people who share a particular experience of media texts. Here, the repeated reception of the material dimension of media texts helps to build a common ground of codes and conventions, the mental dimension, and this common ground is the basis of an audience community. An audience community shares the same context knowledge of contents and codes. The idea of such collectively structured knowledge goes back to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who details in his books *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (The Social Frames of Memory, 1925) and *La mémoire collective* (Collective Memory, 1950) how such knowledge can become the basis of a shared identity.

Jan Assmann takes up Halbwachs and his notion of the collective memory of communities when he develops his concept of “cultural memory” in *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (Cultural Memory, 1992). Assmann also explores the historical dimension of such context knowledge and the interaction of texts and their contexts, drawing on the art historian Aby Warburg. Cultural memory remembers textual elements in the abstracted or “objectivised” forms of codes and conventions, which are then reconstructed in specific contemporary contexts.

This interaction between objectivation and reconstruction is the basis of the imprecise intertextuality common for media texts. Media texts refer to the conventions and codes established through other texts, but they forget about the actual contexts and the specificity of their source texts. Rather, they refer to a genre, a tradition or a discourse mode as the “already-read”, the *déjà-lu* in Barthes’ terms (1988 [1973]: 288), and thus context knowledge works here through an imprecise intertextuality.

After developing the concept of popular cultural memory based on Assmann’s cultural memory in the first section, the present article will discuss its relevance both for the creation of audience communities and for the workings of imprecise intertextuality in the reading process of media texts. The examples will be taken from Bill Willingham’s comics series *Fables*, which employs a broad array of visual and narrative codes and conventions of the fairy tale in its storytelling.

## Popular Cultural Memory

As an archaeologist, Jan Assmann concentrates in his discussions on ancient high cultures such as Egypt and Israel (J. Assmann 1992). His wife Aleida develops the implications of cultural memory in her work in literary studies, concentrating on the literary canon as the vehicle of what she calls “cultural texts” (A. Assmann 1998). The Assmanns’ approach to collective memory is quite one-sided, as they concentrate on phenomena usually classified as “high culture”: the literary canon or sites of national remembrance.

In his basic work on the memory concept, J. Assmann divides “collective memory” into “communicative memory”, the memory for which living witnesses still exist, and “cultural memory”, which is situated on the other side of this “floating gap” in the mythical past (J. Assmann 1988 or 1992; for an English translation of his basic assumptions, see 1995). While “communicative memory” belongs to the realm of the everyday and is

subject to constant change, “cultural memory” is part of the *longue durée* of a society; it is stable and linked to fixed points in the past (cp. J. Assmann 1988: 10).

This neat distinction, however, fails to account both for the longstanding historic continuity of popular culture itself, for example in the tradition of the fairy tale, and for such repertoires of genres, topics and styles which have moved across the high culture/low culture divide. Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (The Pictorial Atlas Mnemosyne), which shows the continuities of ancient conventions of pose and gesture, features stamps, advertisements and newspaper clippings next to works by Delacroix (2000 [1929]: 128) or Botticelli (2000 [1929]: 132). We find the same memory content in works of both high culture and low culture, which are conceptualised by J. Assmann as cultural and communicative memory, respectively. Moreover, the cultural memory of the canon can be subject to politics and market laws to the same degree the communicative memory of the everyday can have conduits that last longer than the *saeculum*. Fairy tales, for example, are not limited to the present, as is communicative memory, but they also do not fulfil the high culture criteria of cultural memory.

In recent years, the Assmanns’ concept of cultural memory has been used for analyses of popular culture successfully, for example in the work of Astrid Erll on British and German novels on the First World War (Erll 2003, 2004) or the work of Gabriele Linke on popular romances (Linke 2003). Going through Assmann’s main criteria for “cultural memory” (1995: 133f.)<sup>3</sup>, we will discuss in the following how the concept can help to connect the dimensions of the social, the mental and the material for media texts, and thus develop our own understanding of *popular* cultural memory.

The first criterion for cultural memory is that it allows for the *concretion of an identity* through the community of its recipients. Both the national communities of Assmann’s memory cultures and the fan communities of today’s media culture emerge from common reception experiences. Shared reception experiences form an in-group of those “in the know” – those who have developed the necessary context knowledge to understand certain connotative dimensions. For the nation, these reception experiences are externalised and structured in remembrance rituals and school education; for the communities of popular media texts, they are implicit and informal. Audience communities will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

The second criterion of cultural memory is its capacity to be *constantly reconstructed* in relation to the current situation. As fairy tale research<sup>4</sup> shows, the versions of fairy tales over time clearly reflect the discourses and values of the time of their emergence. Perrault’s *Cendrillon*, written in 17<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic France, highlights “la bonne grâce” (2006 [1697]: 269) as a woman’s most important virtue, whereas the Grimms point out *Aschenputtel*’s bourgeois diligence and the Disney *Cinderella* is prim and proper. Willingham’s bratty Cinderella works as one of the Fabletown government’s secret agents and, thus, *Fables* brings the character into a new context: that of the espionage thriller. The interaction between text and context knowledge through reconstruction will be discussed in the section on the comics series *Fables*.

Characters, genre conventions and discourse types are unspecified elements of the recipients’ context knowledge, but they become specified when they are realised in actual texts. These “unspecified elements” are the result of what Assmann calls *objectivation*. Textual elements become generalised when they enter cultural memory. They are taken out of their immediate textual surroundings and original social contexts and turn into conventions, icons, character types and standard situations of popular media texts. Cin-

derella, her shoe and the spell being broken when the clock strikes twelve can then be reconstructed in new contexts and can express or comment on them, as we saw above.

This exchange of objectivation and reconstruction processes in popular cultural memory is similar to the workings of the hermeneutic circle Hans-Georg Gadamer describes in his *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method, 1965 [1960]): Readers of media texts bring their previous knowledge, their “Vorwissen”, to the text, which provides the context knowledge against which they understand the text. “Vorwissen”, which includes the objectivised conventions, icons, character types and standard situations, provides the lay of the land, which is then modified during the reception process as these objectivised features are reconstructed as elements of the current text and thus confirm or change the “Vorwissen”. Through the reception process, context knowledge develops and can provide a new perspective and new expectations already for the next reading process. Context knowledge as a central factor for the reception process of media texts will be discussed with reference to Assmann’s objectivation/reconstruction interaction later on.

As all collective memory has to be mediated in order to be circulated among the community of its recipients, historical changes in memory can be clearly related to changes in media production (Schmidt 1992: 47; J. Assmann 1992: 24; cp. A. Assmann’s account of the development of the canon 1998 or 2004). Elements of collective memory can only be transferred through the generations only through their mediation in images, texts, films or (narrative) conventions. As the media themselves, their producers and their audiences change, so does their function as a conduit of memory. Pierre Nora describes acceleration as characteristic of today’s media consumption (1989: 7). In contemporary mass media, collective memory is only temporarily stable because of this acceleration (cp. Zymner 1998: 40). Therefore, one of the tasks of media texts is to provide clear referential patterns into context knowledge so the texts can locate themselves with relation to the tradition, thus enabling meaning-making in the reading process.

Popular cultural memory is a transmedial phenomenon. Its contents are drawn from many different media and can be reproduced via different media again. Ever since memory studies’ “foundation myth,” the story of Simonides of Ceos, the visual element and spatial order seem to be dominant: Simonides identified the individual members of a symposium party killed by a collapsing roof by picturing the image of their seating order. *Imago* and *locus* have consequently been the two key terms in mnemonics. The image (*imago*) identifies the concept, the place (*locus*) determines the concept’s hierarchy and order. This basic convention has been employed time and again, from Renaissance cosmology (cp. Yates 1966) to today’s household graphics in newspapers and schoolbooks.

Even though memories can be elicited through different channels such as words and sounds, smell or even taste, as with Proust’s famous madeleine in *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), it has been claimed that images have a special “power of appeal” (“appellative Potenz” Reichardt 2002: 230; see also Kansteiner 2002) to memory. They seem to elicit the remembrance of earlier texts more easily and readily than words do. Proving this contention is the work of cognitive research. For the present purpose, suffice it to say that images are one of the main modes through which popular cultural memory is elicited and around which communities of recipients form. Consequently, the basis of the discussion of popular cultural memory in the present article will be visual texts like the comics series *Fables* and fairy tale illustrations. In today’s multimodal media environment, however, recipient communities certainly retain a widely varied reading experience in their popular cultural memory.

## Audience Communities

The connotative meaning of Cinderella and her shoe or of the man with the moustache in the black shirt is known across the Western world and makes only for a very vague audience community. Looking at media texts for which smaller communities exist and which have crossed cultural boundaries renders more perceivable the connections between the audience, text and conventions, and thus the workings of popular cultural memory.

Previously, the nation state has been considered the platform of collective memory. It has provided the delimitations within which the community of those who share a common collective memory is located. Today, as the nation state is considered “a given” (Nora 1989: 11) and loses its relevance due to both local and globalising phenomena (cp. Robertson 1992 or Wood 1999), memory is again called upon to create a community. And again, mass media take on a central role in responding to this call. Communities of media recipients emerge, created through the socialisation process of media consumption. Through repetition of the same representations society reproduces its cultural identity: Growing up in the same culture, we acquire a common cultural background, a common collective memory and a common identity (Kansteiner 2002: 190). Consumption of the same media, however, is no longer necessarily equivalent to living in the same culture anymore as mass media and their contents become globalised themselves.

The genre of Japanese samurai films, for example, builds on the long national tradition of telling the story of a conflict between personal integrity (ninjō) and loyalty to the liege (giri). From Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) to the anime series *Samurai Champloo* (2004-2005), top knots and katana are paraded and adored in the West, too. It does not seem necessary to know the traditional tales and kabuki plays from which the popular cultural memory of samurai emerges in order to become a member of the community of recipients of “samurai fiction.”<sup>5</sup> Popular cultural memory works through imagination and appropriation rather than through research and historical exactitude. Having seen enough films and animes or having read enough manga of the samurai genre suffices to develop an understanding of its values, codes and conventions. The audience learns about the basic principles of the samurai code of conduct (bushidō) and honour suicide (seppuku), which are the dramatic mainstay of these stories. The more genre texts an individual audience member has read, the more sophisticated and detailed will his or her context knowledge be, as the hermeneutic circle starts turning.

Context knowledge of the conventions and codes of the samurai genre then provides the basis of communication and the in-group characteristic of this particular audience community. Obviously, the community of recipients of samurai tales is not identical with “Japanese nationality”. Even though it develops out of a national context, it moves beyond these borders through globalised media. Japanese film and manga have become fashionable in the West and the local knowledge of conventions spreads. Westerners become part of the community of recipients as they acquire the necessary popular cultural memory through the repeated consumption of these media contents.

Audience communities develop out of such shared reception experiences, which lead to a common context knowledge. Those “in the know” of this context knowledge, those with a share of the popular cultural memory of a particular genre, are then part of the in-group of this audience community. They can make sense of the connotative dimension of media texts through their possession of the relevant context knowledge.

## The Interaction of Text and Context Knowledge

The reading process of media texts always unfolds in interaction with its relevant context knowledge as audiences make sense of its connotative dimension. One relevant context of Bill Willingham's comics series *Fables* is the visual tradition of the fairy tale found in descriptions, illustrations and film versions. *Fables* uses its fairy tale context with different strategies: The interaction of text and context, of objectivation and reconstruction central to popular cultural memory, allows both for the stabilisation of a tale through the identification of characters and settings and for its reflexion and problematisation.

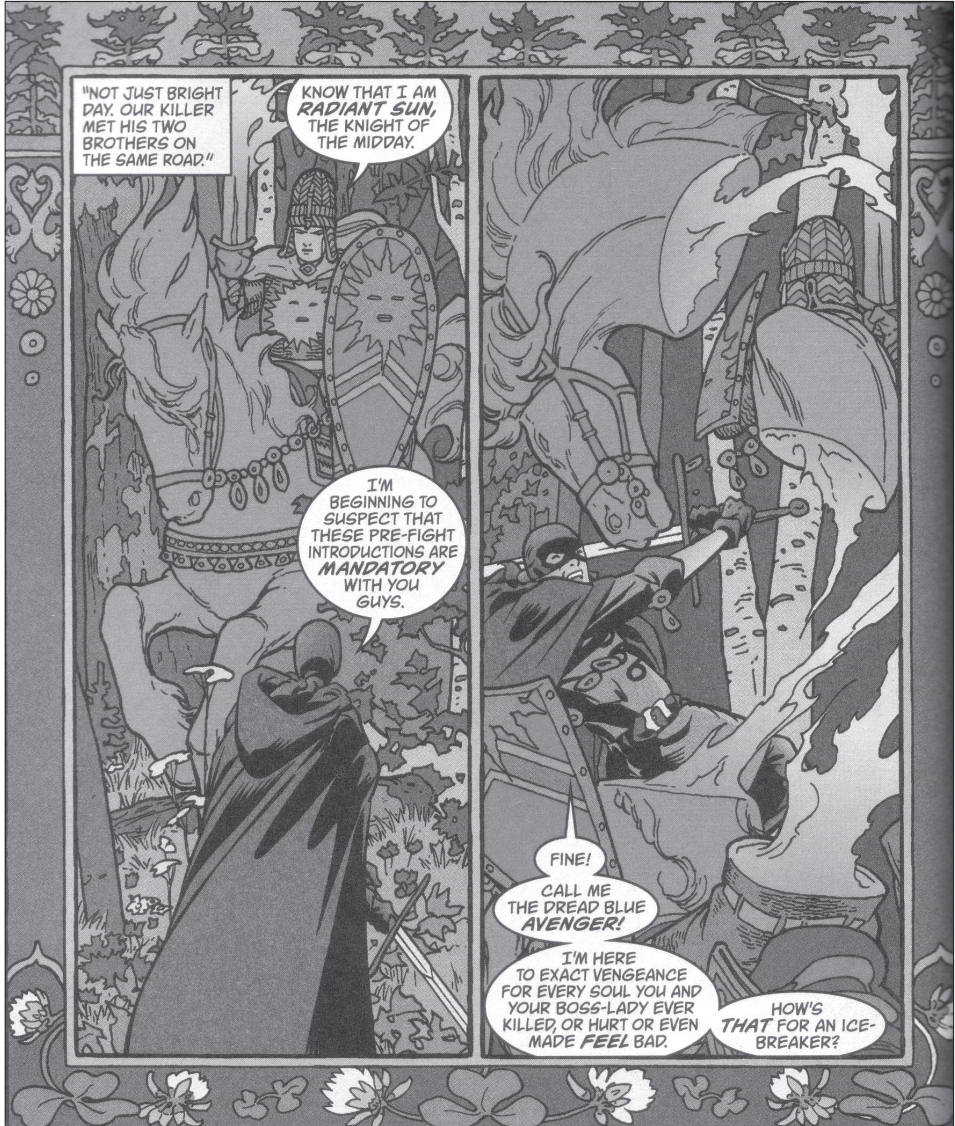
Fairy tale illustrators quite often create a "strange familiarity" (Patten 1988: 20) in their audience by drawing on well-known earlier texts: We encounter the composition of Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* in one of George Cruikshank's Cinderella illustrations or Rosetti's *Lady of Shalott* in Walter Crane's *Sleeping Beauty*.<sup>6</sup> Objectivised elements like poses and iconography are taken up in reconstructions to create this "familiarity". When *Fables* introduces the Snow Queen of Andersen's tale, for example (6: 97<sup>7</sup>), illustrator Mark Buckingham takes up the composition of H.G. Ford's classical illustration of the same tale in Lang's *Pink Fairy Book* of 1897. Buckingham's image is no precise reproduction of its predecessor, but an imprecise reference. It reconstructs objectivised textual elements and creates thus Patten's "strange familiarity" in those readers who have read Lang's *Fairy Books*. This "familiarity" is not based on research into the relevant period, but on a common reimagination. It is, speaking with Patten, a "minutely detailed projection of the audience's dreams" (1988: 25f.) or, in more sober terms, popular cultural memory.

When Little Boy Blue, a character from a British nursery rhyme, embarks on a trip through the Russian fairy tale homelands, the Rus, in *Fables 6: Homelands*, he finds himself in a comparatively familiar visual realm: that of the illustrations of Ivan Bilibin. Bilibin's illustrations of *Vasilissa the Beautiful* are, probably due to Bilibin's working period in Paris, the best-known Russian fairy tale illustrations in the West. Illustrations like "The Knight of Middy" (1900) came to signify "Russian fairy tale". Thus, when Little Boy Blue enters the realm of the Rus, his surroundings look very similar to those of Bilibin's illustrations (Fig. 1).

In both instances, that of the Snow Queen and that of the Rus, popular cultural memory takes a specific instance and turns it into a general context. The specific source texts, Lang's *Pink Fairy Book*, or actual circumstances, like Bilibin's illustrations for Western publications of Russian fairy tales, are not relevant. As a Western audience, we are likely to associate Bilibin's illustrations and Russian fairy tales, because we are used to Bilibin's style as their visualisation, without necessarily knowing that it refers to one particular artist or knowing that artist's name. When we thus see the knight of Fig. 1, we associate "Russian fairy tale" with its style of depiction. Similar to the process Barthes describes for contemporary myth, the original context is "forgotten" (1993 [1956]: 707). The specific instance with its complexities and contradictions is no longer important, as the simplified myth becomes "natural" (1993 [1956]: 699) – an element of popular cultural memory. The creation of Barthes's contemporary myth is a process similar to the emergence of the objectivised cultural elements in J. Assmann's cultural memory (1988: 13f.) or the formation of Halbwachs's *cadres sociaux* (1952 [1925]: 152f.). What we remember is a myth that is part of our popular cultural memory (cp. Gedi & Elam 1996: 48). This myth creates stability and simplification. Of course, the individual reader may be able to identify Bilibin's illustrations and may be informed about the artist's contemporary cultural contexts, yet instances of cultural memory always work with greater generalisations.



**Figure 1.** *Fables 6: Homelands* (2005) Mark Buckingham (pencils) & Steve Leialoha (inks). New York: DC Vertigo. © DC Comics; used with permission.



This imprecise intertextuality of the objectivation/reconstruction process in popular cultural memory gives stability to the connotative dimension because it precludes the infinite regress of references. Similar to Assmann's cultural memory, which prevents the infinite regress of memory through a fixed canon, popular cultural memory establishes, through the process of objectivation, sign posts and fixed meanings to remember.

A text cannot only locate a story but also establishes characters visually through this process of stabilisation. In the classical fairy tale versions of the Grimms or Perrault, fairy tale characters are usually not described visually.<sup>8</sup> Most of the classical illustrators did not endow the fairy tale characters with distinctive features. Cruikshank's Cinderella

looks like any blonde and Crane's Snow White could be easily mistaken for Briar Rose as she lies sleeping. These early illustrators, however, worked in the context of one story at a time, and the lead characters were clearly identified through the title of the tale, as the stories were published as individual issues of a series. Because of this publication convention, illustrators did not have to distinguish the characters from each other. *Fables*, however, brings fairy tale princesses like Snow White and Briar Rose together and has them interact as individual characters. The comic therefore has to present them in a visually distinct way.

As the Disney versions have been the most thoroughly mediated versions of the tales in the West owing to the Disney Corporation's immense publication and merchandise machine, these versions of the characters have come to dominate Western popular cultural memory. The simplification achieved through the reduction in cartoon animation helps us remember the Disney characters easily.

Even though characters like Cinderella and Snow White do not interact in the Disney films, the makers of these films rendered them visually distinct in order to make them instantly recognisable. The authors of *Fables* take up this iconography and the background of the stories themselves to distinguish the characters. Snow White looks like the description in the fairy tale "with skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony" (Grimms 1993 [1819]: 215). When she first appears in *Fables*, her overall looks, fair skin, blue dress, red nails (1: 8f.) match the white-blue-red colour scheme of Disney's Snow White. Later on, as the character has been established, she wears a range of different colours. Cinderella, too, is presented in the same colour scheme as her corresponding Disney character: She is a blue-eyed blonde who often dresses in white and blue.

With *Fables*' Cinderella, we can also observe the mechanisms of iconography at work: She often wears ornaments, like necklaces (8: 98) or hairclips (5: 9), in the shape of her trademark slipper. According to Erwin Panofsky's model for visual analysis, iconography is the employment of a set of learned conventions in order to convey meanings and narratives (1979 [1932]: 219). Usually, iconography is employed for standardised symbolism in what is considered high culture. Yet I would argue that the same process may be at work in popular culture as well. Little Red Riding Hood wears a red cap and coat – Pallas Athene sports an owl and a helmet and the narrative of both is elicited from their attributes. The main difference is the attributed status of the portion of collective memory recipients must have to decode the symbolism and identify the character and story, not the image or narrative itself.

Similar to iconography, caricature and physiognomics can also be understood as a matter of cultural literacy.<sup>9</sup> As some fairy tale illustrators come from the field of caricature (e.g. George Cruikshank), it is quite common that dress code and physiognomics are used to depict the moral qualities of a character (cp. Bottigheimer 1988 or Patten 1988). Yusuf, Sindbad's evil vizier in *Fables 7: Arabian Nights and Days*, is characterised by his lean and crooked figure. This strategy of signifying meanness through physiognomy has also been employed in the depiction of Jafar, the evil vizier in Disney's *Aladdin*.

As *Fables* refers to its context, the popular cultural memory of fairy tales, it follows different ends: localising, identifying and characterising. A fourth instance of such a stabilisation of meaning in *Fables* would be the general page layout. We usually have decorative frames on the sides, which denote the place of the action in the panels in the middle, and an emblem signifying the interacting characters on the top of the page. This layout not only has the narrative function of indicating which focalisation or perspective the story takes, it is also reminiscent of the classical fairy tale illustrations by artists like



Walter Crane, who used a similar technique of frames and emblems. Similar to locating the story of Little Boy Blue in the Rus through imagery, this layout describes the mode of the story: It locates *Fables* itself in the discourse of fairy tales.

As we have seen, through popular cultural memory a text can simply identify locations or characters or set a general mood. The objectivation/reconstruction process of popular cultural memory then stabilises a text through its employment of context knowledge. The “Vorwissen” is invoked, but not modified. However, a text can also evoke conflicting instances of context knowledge and modify the readers’ “Vorwissen” through the dialogue it elicits between them.

*Fables*’ treatment of the character Hansel from the Grimms’ tale “Hänsel und Gretel” is a good example of such a conflicting and modifying use: Hansel appears for a short cameo in the first volume of *Fables*’ spin off series *Jack of Fables*, where his story is described as an example of the cruel tradition of fairy tales. When Mr Revise, the personification of all attempts at fairy tale sanitation, asks Jack “Do you even remember anymore, Jack? How much more sensual it used to be? How violent? How concupiscent?” (*Jack* 1: 49), these questions are posed in a panel drawn in the style of the French fairy tale illustrator Gustave Doré. Gustave Doré’s illustrations of Perrault’s fairy tales are among the most sensual ones, both in style and content: He depicts Little Red Riding Hood in bed with the Big Bad Wolf, a narrative fact that other contemporary illustrators like Arthur Rackham or Walter Crane chose to leave out. The general sensuousness of the Doré imitations and the popular cultural memory (some) readers have of his actual illustrations serve to illustrate the point that fairy tales used to be much more sensuous and violent. Hansel is part of this gruesome tradition through his complicity in the murder of the old woman in the gingerbread house.

He makes his next appearance in the 9<sup>th</sup> volume of the main series, *Fables 9: Sons of Empire*. Here, Hansel has changed from a plump, sensuous child to a lean, restrained man. He is portrayed in the context of New England Puritanism, as his general attitude and the visual attribute of the 17<sup>th</sup> century hat suggests. *Fables*’ retelling of the “Hänsel und Gretel” tale, which follows Hansel’s arrival in Fabletown, traces Hansel’s conversion to the witch-hunter. This retelling, which contextualises the character for those readers not familiar with the Grimm tale, portrays Hansel and not Gretel as the one who pushes the witch into the oven (cp. Grimms 1993 [1819]: 94). He develops a fascination for killing witches: “I want to tarry and watch for awhile [sic]. – To make sure she burns complete.” (9: 64). In the following extension of *Fables*, which goes beyond the Grimms’ story, Hansel displays Puritan ideas (“I have an inkling God above has a specific plan for our lives.” 9: 64), he rejects the Fabletown amnesty for evil deeds of the fairy tale characters and leaves the community of fairy tale characters to join the European witch-hunts. Hansel comes to the US, where Fabletown is located, at the time of the Salem witch trials. It almost seems as if Hansel were a personification of witch-hunts: He has to re-enact his story over and over again in order to serve his narrative purpose, to fulfil his “function”, speaking with Propp.<sup>10</sup> As the historical belief in witches and their persecution vanes, he leaves Fabletown for the Homelands, the original realm of fairy tales, and the rule of Hansel is over.

Hansel’s iconographic attribute of the Puritan hat and his lean physiognomy contextualise him in the Puritan and Salem witch trial tradition on the one hand. However, they also associate him with the witches of classical fairy tale illustrations on the other. The hat was a standard dress item of the 17<sup>th</sup> century but in the iconography of the English fairy tale illustration 200 years later, it turns into the signifier for an old woman, be

she the good fairy in George Cruikshank's *Cinderella* illustrations or the bad fairy in Rackham's illustrations for *Sleeping Beauty*.

Thus, the iconography presents two conflicting contexts for Hansel in *Fables*: Through the association with the Puritans, he connects to the tradition of the witch-hunter, through the association with the fairies, he is brought into the position of their victims. Popular cultural memory contextualises Hansel and describes his role in the story ("inquisitor general" 9: 25), yet at the same time, its diversity reflects this role: Is Hansel a witch in fact, through his righteousness?

Juxtaposing objectivised instances of popular cultural memory, as the text reconstructs them, can serve different purposes: It can help to create a round character<sup>11</sup> like Hansel, it can give clues to the solution of a suspense story or it can create parody. The frontispiece of the story "Cinderella Libertine" (5: 6), for example, shows a headless horseman. The horseman is reminiscent of Jacques-Louis David's horse portrait of Napoleon and, thus, points towards the setting of the story, which is France. It helps to identify one of the main characters, Ichabod Crane from Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1822), and suggests the demise of that character as he is killed by the statue. Taking the image popular cultural memory has of Napoleon into account, the headless horseman can be seen as a parody on the delusions of grandeur Ichabod Crane displays in the story.

As text and context knowledge interact in the reading process, readers' objectivised context knowledge of popular cultural memory can be used to establish familiarity and to stabilise meaning. However, the reconstruction of objectivised textual elements can also lead to a modification of this "Vorwissen", its extension through the creation of round characters or to unsettling it in parody.

## Conclusion

The concept of popular cultural memory is a concept which touches both upon the microlevel of the individual reading process, which is marked through the interaction between text and the recipient's context knowledge, and the macrolevel of audience communities, which are based on a common context knowledge.

Contemporary communities of media recipients emerge through the consumption of contents of globalised mass media and are not limited by the border of the nation state. These new communities are not mutually exclusive: Just as Halbwachs describes the individual as being embedded in the different social memories of his/her family, religion and class in *Les cadres sociaux*, so can today's mass media recipients be members of various communities of popular culture, be they as diverse as samurai films and Western fairy tales. Also, these new community affiliations and identities always exist alongside the more classical formations of nation and social standing.

The repeated consumption of media content constitutes a socialisation process of its own, providing mass media readers with a common context knowledge, i.e. a share in the popular cultural memory of the field, the resulting increased competence in reading these texts and, eventually, a sense of identity. Of course, some members of an audience community have taken an extra turn in the hermeneutic circle, have read more and thus acquired more detailed context knowledge of a particular genre. However, it is still the same context knowledge that provides the mark of the in-group member and the basis of communication within such an audience community. The audience community *Fables* addresses is a Western audience raised on fairy tales in different media versions (like

illustrated storybooks and films) and the series gives prominence to the Anglophone heritage, as characters from specifically English nursery rhymes like Little Boy Blue or King Cole have central roles. The story can be understood with a fairly general level of context knowledge in Western fairy tales already. *Fables'* finer points, however, require more detailed context knowledge in illustration traditions and the history of the fairy tale.

Popular cultural memory allows us to combine the social dimension of the audience, the material dimension of media texts and the mental dimension of codes and conventions for a discussion of the workings of context knowledge. It accounts both for the phenomenon of audience communities and for the interaction of texts and contexts in the individual reading process. Here, the objectivation/reconstruction process has the potential for ideological foreshortening by reducing complexity, but is equally capable of providing the resources for showcasing a complex interplay of references. The coming together of the audience, the texts and the conventions in popular cultural memory does not determine its functions. It only provides a matrix of possibilities.

## Notes

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2. Of course, texts can always be read against the grain, be it intentionally, as through practices of "textual poaching" (cp. de Certeau, M. (1988) *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press or Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers*. New York & London: Routledge) or unintentionally, as Gombrich describes the misidentification of the Angel of Christian Charity for Eros on the fountain in Picadilly Square (1979:388f.). However, in all of these cases, the text in question is compared against the context knowledge of the audience for identification and meaning construction.
3. I refrain from a discussion of all of Assmann's criteria, because only concretion of an identity, reconstruction and objectivation are central to popular cultural memory. The remaining criteria can be found in Assmann 1995.
4. See for example Zipes, J. (1991) *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation*. New York: Routledge or Tatar, M. (1987) *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton, Princeton UP.
5. Title of a film by Hiroyuki Nakono dealing with the samurai tradition in a self-reflexive way (Japan, 1998).
6. For the similarities of Tennyson's poem and the fairy tale from an archetypal perspective, see Poulson, C. (1996) 'Death and the Maiden: The Lady of Shalott and the Pre-Raphaelites', in Harding, E. (ed.) *Reframing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays*. Aldershot: Scholar Press.
7. I cite instances from the comic *Fables* according to the following convention: (volume: page number).
8. With the exception of tales like *Snow White*, for which the looks of the characters are an integral part of the story.
9. The debate about whether the associations with specific facial features are naturally conditioned or culturally learned is centuries old. See for example J.K. Lavater, *Von der Physiognomik* (Of Physiognomy) and G.C. Lichtenberg's satirical reply *Fragment von Schwänzen* (A Fragment of Tails). As the physiognomics discussed here have already clear precedents in cultural texts, they can be regarded as a cultural convention. Current discussions on stereotyping as a cultural/social practice are also of interest here. See Hinton, P.R. (2000) *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture*. Hove: Psychology Press or Pickering, M. (2001) *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
10. Vladimir Propp identifies 31 functions characters can have in fairy tales in his *Morphology of the Fairy Tale*.
11. According to the classical definition in E.M. Forster (1962 [1927]). *Aspects of the Novel*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, "round" characters have divergent characteristics, whereas the characteristics of "flat" characters are streamlined into stereotypes.

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