

Postscript

After death

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War remains have various meanings. In this volume, for example, they signal a specific interest in how narratives materialize in a range of media forms and genres. In the introduction, we identified a lack of connect between media studies of memory and historical studies of memory, and our solution has been to approach the field by launching a different type of history: a media history of war remains.

The different cases brought up by the authors testify to the very real potential of such a venture. In this postscript we will reflect upon the core arguments of the book, and suggest some possible orientations and promising lines of enquiry that we hope this collection will help fuel.

First, this book has not only focused on media representations and narratives, but also how they were anchored in different media forms. We have presented a selection of cases, which combine the study of media representations with a historical sensibility for the importance of how media forms shape messages or—at the very least—set the limits for what can be represented. Surely, as the chapters by Sofi Qvarnström, Kristin Skoog, Sara Kärrholm, and Laura Saarenmaa would have it, it would be worth investigating systematically what continuities and changes arise when war narratives migrate from one medium to another, or when experiences from one war are retold and reframed in another wartime context.

Our second point, a general conclusion worth stressing, is the overall priority of the visual. The broad spectrum of different cases and sources presented here has allowed us to acknowledge the importance of the visual in mediating war in the twentieth century; not only in more

obviously visual media such as film and comics, but also in novels, the radio, and reportage. One common finding is that sight was the privileged sense when it came to narrating and remembering the emotional and sensory experiences of the world war era, and when mediating and overcoming its traumas. The insistence on ‘seeing suffering’, which Lina Sturfelt develops in her chapter, is thus a key aspect that seems to have bridged both lapses in time and otherwise media-specific differences between ‘slow’ and ‘rapid’ media, or between traditional news and the more subversive media such as comic books or men’s magazines. Is it possible to talk of a common ‘visual regime’ in the world war era? How can this historical research be used to nuance and challenge the claims of novelty often made about contemporary conflicts being a new form of war defined by its visuality?

Third, we would like to underscore the relevance of historical and cultural contexts, and the value of shifting temporal and spatial foci when studying war remains. For the benefit of coherency and comparability, all the chapters have been broadly restricted to the period from the 1910s to the 1970s, but we are confident that the timeframe for analysing the long era of the two world wars might with advantage be extended into the late 1970s and beyond. And although we have stressed the lasting cultural impact of the world war era when it comes to mediating modern war and its suffering, our overall perspectives and more general conclusions should not necessarily be reserved for understanding the era of total war. ‘Visual’ wars such as the Vietnam War, ‘forgotten’ wars such as the wars of decolonization, or raging conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, to mention just a few, would be worthy of attention within an extended media history of war remains. Similarly, other media left out here—perhaps most notably television, but also letters and monuments—deserve to be analysed from the perspectives developed in this volume.

Some of the cases presented here may also be seen as an attempt to move beyond the conventional British, French, and German framing of the world war era, to make a significant contribution to the field by adding another geographical and cultural area—which in this case happens to be Sweden—to the scholarship on war remains. We encourage other researchers to continue investigating and presenting such less known empirical cases to the cultural study of war, by for example

refining the Nordic perspective or tackling non-Western narratives and memories of the world war era. Above all, just as our approach has favoured an interdisciplinary outlook, we do believe in moving beyond nationally oriented histories to instead apply a transcultural perspective on the entangled media histories of war remains.

There is also a point to be made about the gendered aspects of war remains. Although not a unifying theme of the book, many of the chapters raise the subject of gender and the ways sensory narratives and memories of the world war era have been gendered, shaping both *what* and *who* was seen and heard. These observations point to possible further research on the roles of men and women in war stories, and of historical constructions of masculinity and femininity in relation to different media. Is there a difference between ‘male’ and ‘female’ war media and narratives? What were the roles of media actors such as feminist journalists or subversive comic artists in challenging the dominant male narratives of the world war era? Another avenue only hinted at here, but certainly worth exploring, would be to pay closer attention to the historical relationship between media creators and media consumers, and to the changing role and attitudes of media audiences.

Our fifth and final point concerns memory and grief. In the introductory chapter we emphasized that stories about death always seem to be less about the dead than about the living. Through a wide range of cases, this book has shown how the dead body was itself a medium, making it possible for the living to work through and communicate their pain, agony, and grief. At the same time, as for example pointed out in Åsa Bergström’s chapter, there was often a curious absence of the ever-present dead in various media. The dead body itself was evaded, as the war narrative moved on to the needs and desires of the survivors.

Against the background of these five points—the significance of war representations alongside media forms, the importance of the visual, the value of shifting both temporal and spatial foci, the highlighting of the gendered aspects of war remains, and the intractable focus on the remembering and grieving survivor—it is our hope that this book will inspire the reader to reflect on the mediations of war and conflict in our own time and on the media dependency of all war experiences. What are the media-specific qualities of today’s

so-called 'new media' interactive environments, and what are the possibilities of war 'remaining' in such constant flows? How do the sensory or cultural aspects of war materialize in the dominant media forms of our day? And how does the increasing use of a human rights language affect contemporary media narratives of human suffering and abuses? Perhaps our findings could be used to better understand the mediated conflicts of the present—and not only by other scholars and students expanding on the subject, but by journalists and attentive media audiences. As Marie Cronqvist argues in her chapter on John Hersey's reportage 'Hiroshima', by decentring journalism we could challenge and possibly alter the destructive media discourses of war and mass atrocities.

Finally, this brings us back to the opening quote from Tomas Tranströmer's poem 'After a death'—that the long comet tail of the deaths and suffering of the world war era is ever visible today. It looms above us, still portending fierce conflict and terrible human destruction, but now in the Middle East, in Central Africa, and elsewhere. War remains with us. The remains of war are everywhere, forever imminent. If we refuse to let the shock keep us inside, or make the TV pictures snowy, but instead respond by actively remembering and collectively making sense of the most appalling circumstances, perhaps the mediated memories of twentieth-century war trauma can be worked through. At best, this will even encourage empathy for the war victims of our own time.