Memory, Religion and *Museal* Spaces

Jens Kugele  
*Interfaculty Programme for the Study of Religion, Ludwig-Maximilians-University  
Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, D-80539 Munich, Germany  
jens.kugele@lrz.uni-muenchen.de*

Johannes Quack  
*Postdoctoral Fellow, Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe”  
South-Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, INF 330, Room 503, D-69120 Heidelberg, Germany  
j.quack@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de*

Maud Jahn  
*Bavarian National Museum  
Prinzregentenstraße 3, D-80583 Munich, Germany  
maudjahn@gmx.de*

**Abstract**

For centuries, nativity scenes have been used to illustrate, teach, and commemorate central biblical stories in a tangible display. Oscillating between public crib exhibitions at the museum and crib displays in private homes, the dynamics between individual and collective re-narration, re-construction, re-experience, and re-membering lead to the construction of a collective memory within specific political contexts. The article suggests the term ‘museality’ as a heuristic tool to capture the vivid interdependences of museal spaces within and beyond the museum as a cultural institution. The construction, decoration, arrangement, and display of crib scenes are a complex example of such museal spaces. Beyond the institutionalised Christian tradition, nativity scenes have their place in the larger context of the European history of religion and invite future research within the analytical framework of the aesthetics of religion.

**Keywords**

museality, museum, nativity scenes, collective memory, aesthetics of religion, academic study of religion
1. Introduction

With the words “Come to the crib,” the Munich Centre for Museum Pedagogy (MPZ) invites its youngest visitors to special events at the Bavarian National Museum (BNM) that combine a guided tour with hands-on activities. The line from the famous German Christmas carol “Ihr Kinderlein kommet” (“Oh, come, little children”) heads an invitation extended primarily to school children and teachers:

“Come to the Crib …”
Angels, shepherds, and kings: they all celebrate Christ’s birth. Artistically decorated nativity scenes from Italy, Munich, and the area of the Alps visualise the Christmas story in a way that they become impressive and comprehensible for children. The multi-figured scenes made from various materials animate deeper experiences or the wish to creatively design your own school crib. Role plays enable the children to approach the Christmas events in various ways.
The guided tour is also offered in French.
Days: Mon., Tue., Wed., Thur., Fri.
Duration: 60/120 minutes, including hands-on activities¹

Taking a closer look at this short advertisement, one cannot help but notice the many references to the aesthetic experience of a religious narrative that forms the core of what is arguably the most popular Christian festival: Christmas. Three of these aesthetic aspects are of particular interest in the context of this article. First, the advertisement expresses an explicit attempt to provide religious education: the Christmas story is supposed to become ‘impressive and comprehensible’ for the children. Secondly, this attempt is not only pursued on a rational level, through lectures and observation, but also on a haptic level, through creative, hands-on activities. Role plays enable the children to “approach the Christmas events in various ways.” The children also have the opportunity to creatively design their own “school crib.” Thirdly, the above quote indicates that these activities go beyond mere playful interaction with the ritually remembered past.

¹) http://www.mpz.bayern.de/mpz_web/schulklasse_m_detail.php?MUS_ID=12/ (Museums-Pädagogisches Zentrum, accessed 15 August 2010); translation (and all other translations in this article) by the authors. The fact that the programme is also offered in French indicates the wide range of potential visitors addressed here.
Rather, multi-sensorial and physical engagement allows for a ‘deeper experience’ of the collective memory.

In an interview with one of the authors of this article the supervisor of the guided tours for the crib exhibition at the BNM Gabi Rudnicki emphasized the great popularity of these craft projects among children. During the Christmas season, tours are often fully booked months in advance, although the BNM employs eight guides and offers new tours starting every twenty minutes on schooldays. Rudnicki describes the goal of the programme as an attempt to make the children understand and experience the nativity scenes with all their senses—using even curry, cloves, cinnamon, and other ‘oriental’ spices that are associated with Christmas time. Usually, the children are first guided through the exhibition, with seven to eight selected stops, and later they have the opportunity to design their own nativity scene on the basis of what they have seen and experienced.

Fig. 1. School children crafting their own crib at the Bavarian National Museum. Photograph courtesy of Museums-Pädagogisches Zentrum München (Gabi Rudnicki).

---

2) Interviewed by Jens Kugele on 7 July 2010.
Usually, they either build a three-dimensional paper scene, or design folding cards, which they can later post as Christmas cards to family and friends. In previous years, these craft projects have often focused on more neutral motifs, such as angels, in order to create a more integrative atmosphere for Muslim pupils.

This article investigates the complex entanglement of collective memory, media, conceptual presentation, and appropriation of history. It seeks to trace the dynamics between individual and collective re-narration, re-construction, re-experience, and re-membering as constitutive parts of the construction of a collective memory in its specific political context. The aim of the article is twofold; through the presentation of nativity scenes as a complex phenomenon in the European history of religion it seeks to demonstrate the analytical potential of cultural memory studies for the emerging field of aesthetics of religion. On this basis, it attempts to make a contribution to the theoretically informed study of museality and museal spaces within this collaborative project’s larger context.

2. Memory and the Aesthetics of Museality

Since the 1990s, the omnipresence of concepts like ‘collective memory,’ ‘cultural memory,’ ‘nostalgia,’ or ‘trauma’ has grown into an interdisciplinary field of (cultural) memory studies. These developments present scholars of culture and religion not only with a quantitative but also with a qualitative challenge. The enormous number of publications makes it difficult to give an overview of the entire field, while the frequently loose use of the term ‘memory’ requires our conceptual attention. It seems crucial to constantly challenge the notion of memory in order to specify its critical potential and to establish it as a helpful analytical tool for the specific study at hand.

3) For an introduction to research on memory in German, see Astrid Erll, Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung (Stuttgart & Weimar: Metzler, 2005), as well as Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nunning (eds.), A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010). See also the work of the post-graduate program “Erinnerungskulturen” at the University of Giessen. For studies on gender and memory, see Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini & Paul Thompson (eds.), Gender and Memory (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

In this context, Aleida Assmann calls for an active restoration of a certain “shiftiness” and “dubiety” to the term “memory.” This requires constant conceptual work on the term’s “contour, differentiation and methodological potential.”

Any application of memory studies to the field of the aesthetics of religion must take such conceptual work into account. In line with the basic objective of the larger critical-term project presented in this special issue, this article seeks to make first steps towards a framework for prospective research.

In her theoretical work, Aleida Assmann differentiates between three basic dimensions of collective memory: individual memory, social memory and cultural memory. The inextricable link between the biological level of individual forms of memory, its neuronal basis, and the social level of collective memory lies at the core of dynamic concepts of collective memory.

Maurice Halbwachs, in his seminal study *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, dating from 1925, even argues that any individual memory would be impossible without the constitutive frame provided by its social environment. The communicative dynamics addressed in Aleida Assmann’s concept of ’social memory’ further show a parallel to the active social exchange at the centre of Pierre Nora’s historico-philosophical contribution to the study of memory. With great normative fervour, the French theorist juxtaposes ‘milieux de mémoire,’ as an active, vivid and productive form of collective memory, to fixed, dead memory sites, which he famously calls ’lieux de mémoire.’

---


While in Aleida Assmann’s approach a complex network of social processes and events constitutes a communicative, social memory based on a dynamic negotiation of narratives about the past, 11 the media of the cultural memory are characterised by persistency, stability, and institutional as well as ritual safe-guarding. 12 The study of cultural memory therefore focuses on “the dynamic and instable relationship between those aspects that have been entirely forgotten, rejected, and repelled, those aspects that have been saved and collected, and, finally, those aspects that are currently being remembered by many as part of their cultural identity.” 13

Museums and exhibitions are particularly prominent sites for the investigation of such active memory work. In the words of Susan Crane, museums are flexible mirrors whose convex potential for multiple interpretations and participation (that is, by those who have either a kind of personal historical consciousness: as veterans and survivors, or as historians) will continue to make them appropriate venues for active memory work, either ‘on site’ or in the minds of those whose historical consciousness has been activated, nourished, challenged, and revived. 14

The scope of this memory work, however, transcends the institutional boundaries of the museum per se and points beyond Susan Crane’s approach. As our example of nativity scenes and crib exhibitions illustrates, museums, museum education, and museum practices interact with the dynamic social spaces surrounding them and create a complex network of symbolic systems and social behaviour, for which we postulate the term museality. 15

---

11) Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 32. On the concept of ‘communicative memory’ see Aleida Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schriften, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, chapter II.
15) We suggest the term in clear distinction from recent approaches in museology; cf. the introduction by Jens Kugele and Katharina Wilkens to this volume, as well as
Theodor Adorno famously argues that the “German word ‘museal’ has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying.” 16 Quite to the contrary, our notion of museality in this project points to the vivid relationships and interdependences of museal spaces within and beyond the museum as an institution. 17

In this context, the aesthetics of religion approach aims at regarding such museal spaces from an integrative perspective, and analyses the interplay of perception, senses and body on the one hand, and the cultural presentation and organization of tradition on the other. It investigates the relationship between the perception and the semiotics of cultural phenomena with particular focus on the ways in which religion shapes and uses this correlation.

The pioneering theoretical work of Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr on the aesthetics of religion points us to the interdependencies between an individual and an institutional/collective level. Cancik and Mohr delineate future research projects in three basic areas: 18 firstly, signs, objects and actions in religious communication (arts in and as religion); secondly, the work of the senses and the ways of perceiving visual signs, as well as colours, odours, sounds (but also the lack thereof) and communication markers employing them; thirdly, the perceivers’ sensation and response to inner emotions and their expression through gestures, or through the production of signs, narratives, and works of art. 19 All three aspects are combined,

---

17 See the introduction to this volume, as well as Hubert Mohr’s contribution. See also the discussion of these interdependencies in Susan Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum,” 22.
19 For insightful reflections on material culture of religion and the role of materiality in the current study of religions see Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine & S. Brent Plate,
for example, in the private and public assembling of nativity scenes during the Christmas season, in their display at museums, and in the performance of living nativity scenes in church services. Their chronotopic character weaving together a rich tapestry of time and space culminates in school children designing their own little nativity scenes under the guidance of museum educators and sending them as Christmas presents to family and friends. To use the words of the MPZ once more, all these facets make the Christmas story an “impressive and comprehensible” part of individual and collective memory.

Engaging with these interdisciplinary research areas, our collaborative research project seeks to offer new perspectives on the complex cultural phenomenon of nativity scenes as part of the European history of religion. Our special focus lies on aspects of media, politics, and nostalgia, which situate these nativity scenes in the collective memory.

3. The Aesthetics of Nativity Scenes

Crib displays usually consist (at the minimum) of separate figures representing Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. Freely movable, they are arranged to illustrate episodes of the biblical tradition, most often depicting the classical events associated with the birth of Jesus.

While figurative depictions of the Bethlehem birth scene can be traced back to the fourth century, the kind of nativity scenes that are assembled

“Crèche” and “nativity scene” are widely used terms in English for crib displays. While the former is more prevalent in art history literature, the latter bears more encompassing semantic layers that go beyond the display of cribs per se and include nativity plays in churches or schools.

and displayed until today have their origin in the Jesuit church displays, which were primarily used for the religious education of novices and common believers during the Counter-Reformation. These cribs were meant to help to teach and memorise the biblical stories. At the same time, the vivid scenes constituted a supportive element in meditation, devotion, and prayer. It is no surprise, then, that emotional experience figures prominently in the comprehensive definition by Rudolf Berliner, the acclaimed art historian and founder of the scholarly research on cribs:

Christmas crib scenes are depictions of events related to the birth of Christ by means of figures that are set up in a three-dimensional space to look as real and alive as possible, in order to evoke in the viewer the feeling of being part of it, to stimulate religious feelings of an intensity that is appropriate to the experienced wonder.  

According to the folklorist Nina Gockerell, supervisor of the collection of nativity scenes in the Bavarian National Museum and its long time curator, this tangible dimension also played a central role in medieval culture: “In 1223, St. Francis had a manger and an ox and donkey in order to make the Christmas liturgy more tangible and comprehensible for the ordinary people.”

The actual function of this medium of collective memory can vary between the poles of devotion, worship and prayer on the one hand, and ‘toys’ or collectibles on the other. Today, nativity scenes can be found in private as well as public settings. Outside of specific museums, magnificent and well-maintained nativity scenes are often owned by churches and monasteries. Further, municipal authorities, crib societies, schools, and private individuals own and collect nativity scenes, which are usually displayed at Christmas time. Although the movable figures are one of the central characteristics of such scenes, their unvaried arrangement in one single setup is most common. Long-term studies elucidate, however, how current fashion and general Zeitgeist continue to shape their aesthetics.

The current exhibition at the Bavarian National Museum and its catalogue illustrate this variety. Besides the differences in material, size,
colour, atmosphere and artistic detail, the visitor encounters an aesthetic diversity with regard to the various models: one piece displays the ‘holy family’ in the middle of a snow-covered landscape. The historicising style of the crib shows common men and women hasting to see the newborn child, dressed according to nineteenth century German fashion.\footnote{Position No. 88, Munich around 1840.} In contrast to this piece, a slightly older scene from Munich shows an orientalistic depiction of Maria, Joseph and Jesus crossing the Nile on a vessel and surrounded by mythical creatures and exotic fauna.\footnote{Position No. 94, Munich 1820.}

Two scenes from Italy surprise with their contrasting focus. On the one hand there is an unagitated terracotta crib scene, displaying merely the newborn Jesus as well as Maria and Joseph bending over him in awe and veneration.\footnote{Position No. 104, Italy, around 1730/40.} On the other hand, there is a depiction of the shepherds’ adoration of Jesus, which, however, is rather marginalized by a group of Neapolitan citizens. The flamboyance of the latter group is augmented by its colourfulness, but also by the spatial composition of the scene. Two-thirds of the scenery, set in front of Mount Vesuvius, are dedicated to them, directing the viewer’s attention away from the ‘holy family’ and towards the depiction of Neapolitan culture.\footnote{Position No. 106, Naples, around 1750 to 1770.}

Some of these Neapolitan exhibits consist primarily of detailed depictions of local market scenes, featuring miniature pieces of fruit, cheese, fish and butchered meat as well as roaming dogs and cats, beggars and gleemen. The impressive decoration includes art work such as laces, braids and the garments of market women.\footnote{See Position No. 100, Naples, around 1750 to 1770.} As Nina Gockerell points out, this can be regarded as part of a more general aesthetic trend: in the course of time, “the wealth of colourful scenes from the everyday life of the people tends to marginalise the actual Christmas event.”\footnote{Nina Gockerell, \textit{Krippen}, 56.}

Reaching from the accurate reconstruction of the Christmas night in Bethlehem to the market place in eighteenth century Italy, these chronotopic displays embedded in their cultural environments and social activities illustrate the multifaceted character of crib scenes as an object of study.
The complex interrelatedness of the phenomenon with numerous social and semiotic fields outside the museum requires a set of nuanced heuristic tools for its description and analysis. In this respect it is neither possible to speak of a static museal space or the museum as a mere institution, nor is a reductionist notion of religion able to capture the historical dynamics that unfold here between religion and culture. Rather, a heuristically open conceptualization of ‘museality’ and ‘religion’ provides the necessary basis for further analysis.

4. A Medium of Collective Memory

For people who have grown up with the Christmas crib tradition, assembling their own has become a central part of celebrating the social memory of Christmas and is often framed by a multitude of events. These range from crafting the figures at home to visiting displays at the homes of friends and relatives, or in public places such as churches and museums. In some communities it has become a custom to visit as many crib scenes as possible during the Christmas season. Many municipalities are proud of their Christmas crib pilgrimage routes, which have long become tourist attractions. While some scenes are displayed only during the Christmas season to bring the memories of this festival ‘to life,’ others are displayed throughout the year and constitute a medium that creates a continuous presence of the Christmas event in the collective memory.

In her 1996 article, Aleida Assmann draws our attention to such media of collective memory and suggests a focus on the “communication channels and transfer methods, the anatomy of tradition, and the structure of the cultural memory.” With reference to the work of Stephen Greenblatt, Assmann calls for an academic study of the material conditions of art and culture that would go beyond the text level and include “cultural practices

---

31) For example the Bavarian tradition of “Kripperlschauen.”
as well as material interests.”

Museal spaces—and the display of nativity scenes in particular—constitute, to use Assmann’s terminology, a part of the ‘functional memory’ that is continuously being negotiated within a society. As the following passages will show, particularly characteristics such as guided tours for school classes, the conceptual design of the exhibition, exchange between individual collectors, public crib-crafting events, and the custom of visiting crib exhibitions are embedded in the local tradition and indicate the active and vivid role of crib scenes as a medium of this ‘functional memory.’

The initial inventory of the crib collection entered the BNM in 1900 as the private collection of the collector and banker, Max Schmederer (1855–1917). Schmederer was not only a prominent donor, who also bore the costs of construction, installation and fire insurance. More importantly, he was also significantly involved in the aesthetic composition and conceptual design of the BNM’s collection of nativity scenes. He constructed background buildings and decorative landscapes for some of these most impressive memory landscapes that can be seen to this day. The role of Schmederer is therefore a prominent example of a phenomenon that Peter Bräunlein has described for the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the role of collectors and patrons as culture-endowing personalities in the context of the European invention of the museum.

During the Second World War, most of the BNM’s permanent exhibition was destroyed or damaged. Eventually, the art historian Wilhelm Döderlein was charged with the reconstruction of the crib section. He copied Schmederer’s style, and integrated new objects into the existing concept. When renovation of the crib section was due after forty years, museum officials shied away from major conceptual changes, as a visit to the museum’s cribs at Christmas time had long become a ritual for many people in Munich, rendering radical innovation impossible.

---


36) In the 1970’s, Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck’s daringly modern crib exhibitions at the BNM were widely disapproved as “blasphemous” and “degenerated.” Such extreme reactions further highlight the complex position of cribs in the discursive field of religion.
It is a striking detail that Schmederer developed his exhibition concept for the BNM primarily from childhood memories of his own Christmas experiences and the custom of building, arranging, and displaying nativity scenes in his home town of Munich. Thus, the BNM exhibition can be regarded not only with respect to its close relationship to the general nativity scene tradition in Bavarian culture, but also as a significant example of the relevance of personal experience and the socialisation of an individual, and their stabilizing role within cultural memory.

Collectors and designers in charge of the initial arrangement therefore play a central role in the aesthetic composition of this medium of collective memory. Due to their influential position on the nexus between functional memory, cultural memory, and repository memory, careful consideration of the role of collectors and designers promises to be most fruitful for future studies of museality.

Nativity scenes constitute a medium that connects and merges various memory spaces. In recent years, such scenes have not only been displayed in the specific religious context of sacral sites or domestic spaces, but they increasingly also decorate public spaces like shop windows. While the seasonal exhibitions in museums mainly serve an educational purpose, the distinctive characteristic of nativity scenes in other places is that people like to visit them at Christmas time as a fixed point in the Christian calendar. In Bavaria, this tradition is known as ‘Kripperschauen’ (crib-visiting, looking at the cribs), whether in churches or in Christmas markets, or in the different exhibitions.

The specific religio-historical character of the nativity scene as a medium is manifested on the lexical level: while the nativity scenes in church, which are assembled for the annual Christmas festivities and which are referred to in sermons and in the liturgy cannot be called an ‘exhibition,’ although they are certainly considered as exhibition pieces rather than cult objects by many church-goers, there are often nativity exhibitions outside churches. Unlike consecrated cult objects or pictures, Christmas cribs are not worshipped directly. Their primary function is to instruct and to impress. Pictures that are believed to bear miraculous powers, monstrances, or specific figures of the newborn Jesus are explicitly not exhibited, but exposed (“ausgesetzt”) to adoration. 37 Christmas cribs are thus situated on a continuum between cult objects on the one hand and ‘secular’ exhibition pieces on

37) For example the “Augustinerkindl,” Munich, Bürgersaalkirche.
the other. It is this oscillating situatedness that constitutes one of their most distinct characteristics as a medium of collective memory. Through the museum, many visitors get inspiration and hands-on knowledge of how to make their own nativity scenes. Some larger nativity scenes even come to life in the hands of children during traditional public performances, as the popular example of the ‘Herrenkramersche Krippe’ in Rottweil illustrates.

5. Memory Politics

The history of nativity scenes as a medium of collective memory is also a history of politics in museal spaces. Individual as well as collective agents shape the discursive power relations that define the parameters of memory. Conceptual decisions situate the museum, as an institutionalised site of knowledge construction, within its discursive environment and are manifest in such concrete aspects as didactic approaches to guided tours. Long before the rise of the modern museum, nativity scenes were regarded as an effective tool for the enculturation of individuals into the social value system and its collective memory.

The tensions between church authorities and so-called ‘folk religiosity’ exemplify this dimension of crib politics. In the context of the formative years of the Bavarian kingdom and under the influence of the Enlightenment movement, the Catholic Church carefully marked the boundaries between the institutional church and folk religion. To avoid unnecessary distraction from pure doctrine in church buildings and during service, the display of cribs was banned entirely.

In her analysis of historical sources, Nina Gockerell describes vividly how such orders were implemented in Bavaria in 1803 and 1804. She quotes,


Fig. 2. The crib at Rottweil brought to life by young performers. Photograph courtesy of Stadtarchiv Rottweil, D. Kolata.
for example, an episode from the Frauenkirche in Munich, whose priest was not allowed to assemble carved figures “in a small barred chapel behind the side altar” depicting the birth of Jesus Christ, although this had been the local custom for the past 200 years.  

In the following years, several attempts were made to regain permission to assemble the figures. For instance, a proposal that was submitted to the regional court in the city of Ebersberg, on 24 November 1812, inquires, whether it would not be possible to allow the pure depiction of biblical stories,” because “the most fundamental pedagogical experience shows that nothing is comprehended and kept in the memory of children as easily as what impresses itself on the mind [Gemüt] of the children by visual means [Anschauung]. The exhibitions therefore serve both to lessen the barbarism of the common people and to provide a foundation for further education [Bildung].  

This proposal was rejected at once. Others argued for the “promotion of aesthetic knowledge” through the nativity scenes, and pointed to their “importance for the general promotion of art,” but without success. Besides theological concerns, the authorities argued that such cribs could “only provide pleasure to small children,” while they would merely distract adults’ attention from the essential doctrine.  

In most cases, however, such edicts remained without any impact because the authorities did not have enough resources to enforce their orders. Gockerell summarizes:

Around 1800, the storms of the Enlightenment in Southern Germany swept away numerous expressions of folk piety; the erection of cribs in churches, for

---

41) Rudolf Berliner, Weihnachtskrippe, especially the chapter ‘Gegner der Weihnachtskrippe,’ 38–41.
42) See in this context Nina Gockerell, Krippen im Bayerischen Nationalmuseum, as well as Georg Hager, “Die Weihnachtskrippe.”
43) Engelhart Eisentraut, Die Feier der Sonn- und Festtage seit dem letzten Jahrhundert des Mittelalters (Würzburg: 1914), 162.
example, was prohibited. The rigorous ban, however, contributed to a florescence of the custom of the Christmas scene, as individuals took the church Nativity Scenes to their homes and thus awakened in others the wish to have such lively Christmas representations in their homes as well.\footnote{Nina Gockerell, \textit{Krippen, Nativity Scenes & Crèches}, 19.}

In retrospect it seems likely that the attempt to forbid the exhibition of Christmas cribs contributed to their spread into private households. While they were banned from churches they were granted refuge in the homes of the people. Here the tradition was all the more lively and beyond the control of church and theologians. The later development of printed cut-out sheets also enabled less affluent people to install their own crib.

While the prohibition of nativity scenes in Bavaria at the end of the eighteenth century exemplifies this first political dimension, the material design of crib displays draws our attention to a second aspect of crib politics: the narrative depiction of the ‘orient’ as well as discursive strategies of exclusion and inclusion.

With increasing popularity, elaborate backdrops entered crib displays. Cultural details such as nuanced clothes, opulent architecture, and elaborate landscapes created specific museal spaces that merged the narrative memory of the Bethlehem scene with imagined cultural landscapes. Two very different styles gained particular prominence: on the one hand the so-called ‘oriental’ cribs, and on the other hand the ‘Heimat’ crib. The latter term refers to nativity scenes that depict common folk set in an architecture and landscape that resemble the creator’s local environment. Through the aesthetic design, visitors could easily identify with the biblical events surrounding Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Staging the birth of Jesus in Bavarian wooden architecture, surrounded by the ‘holy family’ in local Bavarian traditional costume, quite literally brings the story home to the viewer. “As a result,” Nina Gockerell argues, “beholders could more easily identify with the figures involved in the events,” as “this feature also emphasized that salvation is an on-going process, taking place at all times for all men.”\footnote{Nina Gockerell, \textit{Krippen, Nativity Scenes & Crèches}, 16.}

In stark contrast to this kind of socio-historical annexation, other nativity scenes stand out for their exoticising and orientalising style. This was especially due to the Nazarenes, a group of artists based in Rome who were committed to producing historically more appropriate depictions of
biblical themes. Under the Nazarenes’ influence, the ‘oriental’ nativity scene emerged in the early nineteenth century and introduced a model that was later adopted by many Munich carvers.\textsuperscript{47}

From the realm of the institutional churches to private households around 1800 and to the exhibitions in the BNM today, memory politics are thus tangibly manifested on an aesthetic level. Further research could address the various processes of selection, as well as the conceptual design of specific crib exhibitions, including normative distinctions such as ‘high’ culture and aesthetic subversion by the comical, burlesque, and ‘profane.’ Vivian Patraka’s\textsuperscript{48} work on conceptual designs in museum spaces, which she has developed on the basis of Michel de Carteau’s theoretical reflections, would help to relate these reflections to the field of performance studies and to investigate strategies of positioning visitors in the narrative of the museum. Finally, research on the aesthetics of religion might include studies on the funding of crib collections and exhibitions, particularly in the light of the cultural scaling of ‘folk’ versus ‘high’ art, as well as ‘folk’ versus ‘high’ religion, which are integral parts of normative memory construction.

6. Of Nostalgia and Teddybears

The interest in forms of memory that exhibit nostalgic quality has long been a commonplace in the field of memory studies. Their exploration casts additional light on the interplay of individual realms of experience and the collective memory. In the context of nineteenth-century modernisation processes and as an implicit reaction to the Second World War, crib exhibitions exemplify a specific form of nostalgic memory formation in German culture.

In reference to Walter Benjamin’s ‘angel of history,’ Svetlana Boym draws our attention to the dialectical, at times multi-directional, character of nostalgia. According to Boym, “nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed towards the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed towards the past either, but rather sideways.”\textsuperscript{49} A “utopian
dimension” in this sense also counts among the characteristics of the modern Christmas tradition. At the core of the festival, the celebration of an ideal nuclear family points to an ideal familial world and is manifest in many Christmas narratives, songs and activities. Families assemble figures of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus as a model family, gather around the decorated tree, exchange presents, sing carols and commemorate the birth of Jesus. In an atmosphere of cosiness, the depiction of a father-mother-child idyll correlates with the contemporary bourgeois fantasy of the ideal Christian family. Even though reality may be very different from this utopia, the idealized representations of the family celebration under the Christmas tree merge with the individuals’ specific Christmas experience to form the nucleus of a nostalgic memory.

On a functional level, Christmas nostalgia bears similarities to crib exhibitions as they have emerged in the museums of the nineteenth century and still prevail at the BNM. In the light of such functional parallels, Peter Bräunlein characterises the museum’s status during the nineteenth century as “therapeutic against the impositions of the modern age.” With reference to the studies of Hermann Lübbe (1981) and Odo Marquard (1992), Bräunlein discusses the compensating dimensions of museums, for which he has coined the term “cuddle factor” (Kuschelfaktor). In Bräunlein’s view, the museum compensates the modern experiences of acceleration, alienation and fear of loss. Bräunlein’s dictum as well as Marquard’s notion of “the functional equivalent to teddy bears for the modern people” can also be applied to crib exhibitions. As a transitional object guaranteeing a certain continuity, popular crib exhibitions create a nostalgic museal constellation at the confluence of individual socialization and the crib exhibition in the national museum. This nostalgia shows “an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world,” a defence mechanism that, according to Svetlana Boym, “inevitably reappears (…) in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.” The custom of visiting Christmas cribs (‘Krippel-schauen’) during the post-war depression underlines the affective dimension

at a time of radical disruption and reorientation, when the (re-) construction of a collective memory was essential.

After the Second World War, it was the crib collection that was displayed in the first special exhibition at the severely damaged BNM in Munich. During the troublesome post-war years, the crib tradition was dug out of the collective memory box and destined to convey a conciliatory message. In 1959, the permanent crib exhibition was reopened.

This role and function of the museum as ‘therapeutic’ can be embedded in a wider context, especially the multiplicity of crib societies (Krippenvereine) and the phenomenon that crib paths (Krippenwege) have been established in many places, offering the opportunity to see many different crib scenes (and their construction).  

Future research projects in the field of aesthetics of religion might extend their object of inquiry beyond the crib phenomenon to miniatures more generally. Such projects might explore parallels to the cultural history of dolls’ houses, tin soldiers, model railways, and other tangible and manageable microcosms, in order to shed light on a nostalgia which is only “at first glance a longing for a place, but actually (...) a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood.”

7. Conclusion

The relevance of crib exhibitions for the European history of religion goes beyond the specific Christian tradition and its doctrine of salvation. A statement by the president of the World Crib Congress, Johann Dendorfer, illustrates this point. During the World Crib Congress in 2008, Dendorfer argued that, in his view, a comforting universal message forms the core of nativity scenes: “What remains? In front of and with the crib nobody is alone—no matter whether in Brazil or in Bavaria. This is because the message of the crib is so simple while so elemental: God became human.”

Saturated with religious semantics, this statement illustrates the place of the nativity scene in the larger context of the European history of religion.

54) On the crib-visiting tradition at Christmas time, see Beate Spiegel (ed.), Krippenkunst (Lindenberg: Josef Fink, 2007).
It further highlights the imperative of nuanced research in the cultural sciences and religious studies, aiming for a self-reflexive meta-language. The object of inquiry of this article lies at the intersection of academic disciplines such as religious studies, folklore studies, anthropology and (art) history. From this interdisciplinary perspective, the construction, decoration, arrangement and display of nativity scenes represent a complex example of museal spaces. Hereby, the term museality offers a heuristic tool to capture the dynamic interdependences of museal spaces within and beyond the museum as a cultural institution. Oscillating between official exhibitions at the museum and displays in private homes, the dynamics of individual and collective re-narration, re-construction, re-experience and re-membering lead to the construction of a collective memory within specific political contexts. Beyond the institutionalised Christian tradition, nativity scenes have their place in the larger context of the European history of religion, and invite future research within the analytical framework of the aesthetics of religion. Guided tours for school children, the conceptual design of the exhibition, the exchange between individual collectors, crib-crafting events at the museum, as well as live performances bringing crib figures to life, indicate the active place of cribs in the ‘functional memory.’ Moreover, hidden in the stacks of the Bavarian National Museum, a multitude of cribs constitutes a “repository memory” par excellence that is still waiting to be discovered by scholars of culture and religion.

References


Eisenraut, Engelhard, Die Feier der Sonn- und Festtage seit dem letzten Jahrhundert des Mittelalters (Würzburg: 1914).


——, Krippen im Bayerischen Nationalmuseum (Munich: Hirmer, 2005).


Hecht, Winfried, Die Herrenkramersche Krippe in Rottweil (Rottweil: Stadtmuseum Rottweil, 1989).


Spiegel, Beate (ed.), *Krippenkunst* (Lindenberg: Josef Fink, 2007).


Wilke, Annette & Esther-Maria Guggenmos (eds.), *Im Netz des Indra: Das Museum of World Religions, sein buddhistisches Dialogkonzept und die neue Disziplin Religionsästhetik* (Münster/Hamburg/Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008).