Keynote lecture

Monday, 18 September 2017, 10.00 s.t.

In Search of Memory. Memorializing the Seven Years War from the 18th to the 20th Century

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The Seven Years War (1756-1763) was not only a global conflict but also a war that contained numerous epic battles on the European mainland. Beginning with an examination of the culture of memory concerning the War's battles, from its end in 1763 up to the present day, I highlight the relevance of intermediality for the constitution and transformation of historical memory. This includes practices like battlefield tourism or 'thanatourism', the desperate search for material evidence, the erection of statues and memorials or the circulation of anecdotes and images within the public sphere. The two main arguments of the lecture concern the productivity of absence and the enhancing effect of intermedial circulation. As soon as the dead were buried a battlefield turned into almost a blank space. It needed to be filled with stories, images or material evidence to produce a historical meaning. The search for memories of an event's past reality that is long lost becomes a mode of production that creates a reality of its own. With the words of Pierre Nora, the "lieu de mémoire" becomes the ultimate sign without any historical object of reference. This cultural production of battlefield memories is furthermore enhanced by the circulation of images of reference turning each battle into a set of symbolic key-sequences. From an etching, the image of a hero can move to a memorial statue, and the statue can be described by a travelogue or shown on a postcard. The postcard combines the etching and the memorial together and connects the visitor with people at home, for example. With these 'chains' of intermedial circulation the symbolic 'branding' of each battle becomes stronger and stronger. Following them can shed new light on the medial production processes of cultures of memory and on the different actors struggling within it trying to turn *their* image of battle into the dominant one.