My paper today can be considered among those offering a theoretical discussion that aims to enable analytical framework for empirical studies. The latter will be worked out through other papers presented at this conference, as well as at the conference scheduled for the year 2005 in Cardiff. In particular, Marianne Boerch and Henrick Lassen, whom I deeply thank for the organisation of this important first conference of our sub-project dedicated to ‘Oral and written history’, invited me to speculate on the interplay that, in time, characterised the complex relationship between orality and literacy in relation to the ideas of memory/remembrance, as well as to the new technologies of communication. I will try to fulfil their request, introducing, towards the end some open questions concerning what communication theorists now call ‘secondary orality’; and I intend to pursue these questions in the forthcoming months, in view of our second conference in Wales.

First of all, it is important to choose a viewpoint from which to start the investigation concerning the above stated interplay, so to have a clear paradigm that can help to understand the way in which, in time, the processes related to memory and to the way people remember have changed; a change that is inevitably related also to the function associated to the very idea of memory in the various ages and societies. My speculations concern mostly our Western society (Europe and North America) and, given my own scholarly background, I have chosen to use literature and the arts as broader viewpoints to try a cross-reading of
orality, literacy and secondary orality on the one hand, and new technologies of communication on the other hand. The main hypothesis is, in fact, that art and literature offer, in time, an analogical mirror to cultural processes. Needless to say, the most difficult passage to understand is the most recent one, leading from literacy to post-literacy (or, as media scholars say, to secondary orality). In this case, the avant-garde works of the early 20th century seem to offer a useful aid. As a matter of fact, it is possible to assert that the works of the Modernist writers and artists constitute a breaking point not only with the works of the previous period as they establish new canons and new forms, but also and mostly because they mirror new social and cultural forms that, in turn, mirror new complex ‘environments’ moulded upon the development of new forms of communication. Therefore, in the last years, part of my research work has been dedicated to the exploration of this working hypothesis that seems to have also some interesting repercussions in the field of cultural memory (both individual and collective memory): the cross investigation of artistic and literary phenomena and of new forms of communication can be used as a way to test and speculate on the making, in time, of new ‘societal matrixes’ (to use the definition of ‘complex environment’ offered by Katherine Hayles in her book *The Cosmic Web*¹). For instance, to juxtapose the works of Walter Ong or of Marshall McLuhan to Pound’s or Joyce’s poetics helps to enlighten on the process of cultural transition leading from literacy to secondary orality or post-oralit (Ong), that is from mechanic to electric age (McLuhan). Also, such a methodology induces to speculate on the very idea of cultural memory itself, as well as on the various forms and functions of collective and individual memory, because Joyce’s and Pound’s modernist works consciously retrieve ancient strategies of communication and knowledge, in turn linked to primary orality (i.e. epic poetry, mnemonic techniques used to pass on knowledge and experience of the group producing them).

The idea of ‘secondary orality’ pervades, in fact, the complex architecture of Modernist works to the point that some media theorists have often described them as ‘verbo-voco-visual’ works: they translate, in real time, the new media environment designed at the turn of the previous century by new forms of communication.

---

communication (i.e. telegraph, telephone, radio) that retrieved the idea of orality but that nonetheless shaped the new post-literate world. These works possess a sort of hybrid architecture bringing together new media induced experiences, diverse cognitive and communication models, and offer an objective correlative expressing the complexity of the new multimedia environment then in progress. In other words: the architecture of the major Modernist works is designed in a way that recreates the mode of fruition associated to the complex psycho-dynamics characterising the making of what today we call ‘global village’ (think, for instance, of the idea of simultaneity that pervades most modernist poetics); in turn, the new technologies leading to the global village retrieve and reconstitute, even though in an artificial way, psycho-dynamics that belong to the primary oral world. (i.e. In the global village, radio becomes ‘the tribal drum’ of the new electric tribe; the newspaper becomes the land of simultaneity which can annul all space and time barriers and which turns each experience into a group or society experience; and so on and so forth, until the world wide web that brings people together in a media embrace in spite of spatial location, and makes them part of social practices shared at the same time, therefore offering them a sort of new ‘electric body’ and ‘tribal psyche’). These psychodynamics are inevitably linked to a different idea of subjectivity or group identity, of distance and participation, of inclusion and exclusion; an idea which very much differs in oral or in literate world and which, in time, conveys a different value and a different function to the very idea of memory.

In particular, Mary Carruthers has underlined how the difference between orality and literacy is based not only on the use of memory (memory does not, in fact, depend only on the form of communication), but mostly on the cultural aspects and on the relational dynamics of the social constructs in which memory is communicated. Techniques and models of memory are available in both societal typologies (orality and literacy), but what changes is the different function associated to the very act of remembering, that is the cultural value associated to the idea of memory. In oral societies, memory and remembering are a unique process, they characterise group practices which unite and preserve the identity of

---

the group; they immediately translate and perform knowledge and experience and are rendered through the repetition of formulas that are, in fact, complex ‘identity boxes’. In oral societies, knowledge is linked to memory, to the act of remembering and to mnemonic techniques, which are often summed up and rendered through sayings and formulas, that is through ‘language’; they are themselves acts, actions, and not just concise translations of complex theoretical speculations (this is an idea shared not only by many scholars of information and communication technologies, but also by several anthropologists who studied this topic all along the 20th century, such as Malinowsky, Lévi-Strauss, Carpenter, Goody)3. In particular, Walter Ong proved that while in literate society popular sayings and formulas are occasional situations quoted in speech for the sake of rhetoric and embellishment, in oral societies they are, instead, a continuous ritual practice that aims to express and reassert one’s own identity; an identity which is necessarily a group and an inclusive one, deeply linked to the sharing of a common knowledge which is, in fact, that which unites and keeps the group together:

“YOU KNOW WHAT YOU CAN RECALL: MNEMONICS AND FORMULAS. […] In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes. […] Protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic aids recall, even physiologically. […] Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouth and ears of all.”4

Given what above, it is therefore easy to understand that, inevitably, the invention of writing introduces a deep change in the making of individual and collective identity. As Havelock5, among others, proved, writing allows a deeper level of abstraction unknown to oral societies and, in time, it leads to the definition of the idea of ‘subjectivity’ that does not necessarily exists before. Writing does not


replace memory *tout court*, but it certainly changes for ever the idea of knowledge that pervades the very act of remembering; the book (first the manuscripts, then the printed ones) conveys a *distance* that is not allowed in oral societies and allows to diversify and stratify experience in a way that mirrors the making of an idea so far unknown, that is the discovery of ‘the self’ (here understood as ‘other from the group’). This discovery enables to conceptualise individual experiences, as well as more complex experiences that can be articulated through new thoughts now rendered through new rhetorical constructions. With literacy, memory becomes one of the five parts of rhetoric\(^6\), which is the art of persuasion, and becomes functional to an ordered and also persuasive rendering of an elaborated tradition. Also, it is used to preserve knowledge, but in literate societies the idea of knowledge is no longer perceived only as the cohesive foundation of a collective identity; instead, after the invention of writing knowledge (as Plato tells us in his *Phedro*) becomes the privileged condition granting both excellence and power.

What is interesting to notice, is the fact that such a complex passage from one type of societal matrix to the next one (from orality to literacy) has often been investigated in various fields of study (anthropology, communication studies, philosophy, etc.) starting from an artistic form of expression, that is the Homeric poems; these poems have, in fact, been approached as an example of cultural process of transition that underlines the new meaning associated to the very act of remembering as it takes place in the passage from orality to literacy. What I have in mind are, for instance, the famous studies of Parry, published towards the end of the 1920s,\(^7\) as well as those of Lord,\(^8\) that Havelock retrieved towards the middle of the 20\(^{th}\) century, encouraging new speculations on the so called secondary orality:

Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (1963) has extended Parry’s and Lord’s findings about orality in oral epic narrative out into the whole of ancient

---

\(^6\) Inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, delivery


oral Greek culture and has shown convincingly how the beginnings of Greek philosophy were tied in with the restructuring of thought brought about by writing. Plato’s exclusion of poets from his Republic was in fact Plato’s rejection of the pristine aggregative, paratactic, oral-style thinking perpetuated in Homer in favour of the keen analysis or dissection of the world and of thought itself made possible by the interiorization of the alphabet in the Greek psyche.\(^9\)

Investigated as *cultural process of transition*, the Homeric poems have often offered interesting suggestions to speculate on the passage from orality to literacy and on the culture of the social group characterising both the former and the latter form of society. It is not by chance that Parry’s studies are often quoted also in the work of the above mentioned anthropologists who, starting from the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century, have investigated the idea of ‘primitive’ or ‘civilised’ society using the ideas of orality and literacy as a distinguishing element. According to these seminal studies, in oral societies the production of knowledge and the dynamics of remembering have a primary importance because, as I was saying, they are constitutive acts of the group identity. In these societies, the most peculiar mnemonic structures are those related to the idea of *storytelling*, that is of an oral tale built around a plot; and yet, the idea of plot in oral societies seems to differ from the idea of plot characterising storytelling in literate society, at least as stated in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Even though it was conceived for oral performances, Greek drama (as per Aristotle’s work) is built upon an idea of plot envisaging a clear order granted precisely by literacy and writing; it is conceived according to linear and ordered patterns: a series of more or less complex events are brought to a climax that is then undone, always in a carefully conceived way. On the contrary, the ancient Greek epic, the oral tale, was conceived according to mnemonic categories that bring listeners in *medias res* and involve them directly into the action. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace writes that the poet *hastens all action* and *dives into the middle of things*;\(^{10}\) linear and ordered time sequence is here an unknown concept and the ideas of simultaneity, involvement and participation become crucial (these ideas are later retrieved also by modernist authors who translated them into new narrative forms aiming to recreate the effect of participation and simultaneity induced by new media discoveries at the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century; an idea or effect investigated an theorised also in the fields of

\(^9\) Ong, cit., pp. 27-28  
\(^{10}\) See: Ong, cit., p. 139
hard sciences and of social sciences, as well as in the humanities especially in philosophy). Therefore, to investigate the artistic form (from epic to drama) helps to speculate on the passage from orality to literacy, confirms the scientific studies carried out in other areas of research, and enlighten on complex and articulated societal dynamics.

Similarly, the works of the Modernist writers can help to grasp the implications concerning the following passage, from literacy to secondary orality, therefore enlightening on the societal matrix leading to our global village. By definition, this is a place in which new forms of communication induce new aggregative modes that recall those typical of ancient oral societies, even though they are enacted within an environment which is deeply pervaded by literacy. Today, it is precisely this so called ‘post-literate world’, characterised by what has been defined as ‘secondary orality’ by media scholars, that must renegotiate both the idea of culture and the idea of memory as it must redefine, in a very short span of time, a key concept that is necessary to determine both the former and the latter: the concept of identity, both at the individual and at the group level. And it is interesting to note that today our bookstores are full of books that try to establish new paradigms capable of telling us who we are and how we position ourselves in relation to our traditions, to the languages that we speak, to the worlds that we inhabit, but also in relation to the new global flows that continuously change our way of being together. What is therefore fascinating for someone who studies literature and who sees a way to retrieve some heuristic potential to a disciplinary area (the humanities) so often neglected because it is not so ‘productive’ and ‘convenient’, is to realise that Modernist avant-garde (literature, the arts) has somehow succeeded in understanding some complex implications belonging to our new electric media world. Not only that: these works have been so successful in doing it that very often media scholars themselves have used them as keys to better render or understand new cultural, environmental and media situations pervading post-literacy which have further characterised our world all along the 20th century. For instance, to recall here that Marshall McLuhan (the ‘media guru’) used to define his media investigations, as well as his investigations on the cultural aspects of the so called ‘electric-era’, as ‘applied Joyce’ is somehow exciting and, also, encourages to overcome a typical commonplace that states that
all those dealing today with new forms of communications are inevitably against literate culture and against books. This is certainly a commonplace and, even, it is a false one. Also, the above stated ‘excitement’ becomes even more overwhelming if we consider the fact that, from McLuhan onwards, many media scholars investigating complex media environments, recommend to use art and literature to counterbalance the side effects of new forms of secondary orality (namely, the numbing effects of technologies that tend to standardise and uniform our idea of knowledge, culture and experience), and therefore implicitly suggest us to retrieve the concepts of originality, knowledge and memory that characterised, instead, primary orality. These scholars, (I’m thinking, for instance, of Donald F. Theall, Frank Zingrone, Derrick de Kerckhove, Arthur Krocher, Neil Postman, Robert Logan)\textsuperscript{11}, conceive art not only as a technology of memory, but also as a technology of remembering, an idea that underlines a more active involvement of the subject, both at the individual and the group level. In other words, art (literature, visual arts, new installations and performances) become the counter-environment suggested to speculate, in real time, on the effects that, in time, new technologies have on the environment and on our societal matrixes; it offers to individuals a way (one among others, not the only one) to retrieve an active role in the making of individual and collective identity, something that is to be defined (or redefined) also through the act of remembering. In particular, since the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, art has been more and more modelled on the ideas of inclusion and participation: the audience is no longer asked to ‘observe’ a work of art, but is more and more asked to experience it, to ‘live’ it as a sort of artificial experience aiming to stimulate thought, feelings, memory and remembrance (good examples are, today, the works of Vera Frenklen and Eddo Stern).

Therefore, art and literature can become useful tools to define the very concept of cultural memory and can perhaps help us to formulate not ultimate answers.

encapsulating the quick cultural remodelling that seems to characterise our post-literate world today, but instead questions that can put us in an ‘alert position’, that is in an active and not numbed position. Can the passage to a new technology change the idea of memory and/or the processes connected to the very act of remembering? Which is the relation between orality and literacy on the one hand, and collective and individual memory on the other hand? And how does this relation - which, by nature, ‘shifting’ - affect the making of our collective and individual ‘identity’? All answers to these very simple questions can be explored starting from the artistic sign, therefore combining the technological and scientific analysis to forms of expression linked to creativity and humanistic knowledge. This mode of investigation could look as anachronistic or even ‘utopian’ (but, after all, why not?), but it can also become a strategy, even an amusing one, to explore a situation in progress that somehow can frighten us precisely because of its speed and dynamism: today, times of change are strongly accelerated and, for this very reason, at the local level they seem to trigger phenomena that oppose all ‘global flows’ (something which is, by its very nature, fluid and inclusive), phenomena that seem to ‘protect’ groups of individuals on the basis of ‘closed’ traditions and memories. On the one hand, this is an important reaction and it is even a useful and a positive one, if it leads to rediscover, at the local level, cultural elements that can now be relocated in the foreground in an open way. But it can also be a very dangerous one, if the retrieval leads not to a necessary harmony between local and global flows, but to a strict closure and to the denial of today reality, which is more and more characterised by global exchanges encouraging new forms of hybridism, new forms of inclusion, often introduced through new media and new technologies of communication. Therefore, it is important to find new forms of mediation between these opposing cultural movements (one centripetal, one centrifugal) and work out new societal matrixes capable not only to appreciate local traditions, but also to overcome the risk of a sterile ‘garrison mentality’. Of course, in Europe today the situation is strongly complicated by the fact that in many areas the retrieval of the local is often associated to a newly gained cultural and political independence which charges the centripetal movement of complex and strong values and symbolism. This is why the definition of cultural memory, if developed in a complex way capable of taking into consideration the uneasy and articulated historical dynamics, could
become the starting point for the definition of a European identity conceived less as a melting pot and more as a colourful mosaic. Today we have the chance to do something new and different, looking for other societal and political models that, starting from a clear observation of the world in progress, work out a vital and necessary compromise between local and global dimensions. More than never, art and literature can be our tools ‘without frontiers’: the cross investigation of art and new technologies can become an interesting techniques to understand secondary orality in its complex forms, precisely because art (even in its contemporary meaning of ‘installation’ and ‘performance’) is a practice capable of translating the spirit of our time, even if in ugly or uneasy way, and, therefore, can alert us on the world in progress.

Therefore, if, on the one hand, it is widely acknowledged that our idea of memory, especially our idea of cultural memory, is dynamic (Assmann) and that, coherently, it must be re-negotiated each time that our social frame changes (by social frame meaning here the complex of social, cultural and political situations that, in time, conditions each historical moment); yet, on the other hand, it is also true that our social frame itself changes in relation to new forms or technologies of communications, which, in turn, reflect our way of ‘being together’, of being either a community or individuals (Havelock, Ong, McLuhan). Therefore, it becomes important to reread the processes connected to the making of new social constructs in relation to the development of new technologies of communications (from orality to manuscript, to print, to new electric and electronic media) by following not a deterministic approach, but instead by encouraging broader speculations that take into consideration all those complex cultural processes which, in time, mould our historical sense, our sense of belonging, as well as all the questions related to the making of our own identity, as a group (community, state, nation, confederation) and as individuals (the making of our own self).

In the second half of the 20th century, many scholars have carried out this investigation,12 but it is Marshall McLuhan who started to pursue interdisciplinary

investigations juxtaposing, in a systematic way, the new media environment and the new time ‘sensibility’ monitored through a constant analysis of art and literature.\textsuperscript{13} McLuhan’s example is relevant if we are to design new models of investigation based on the cross reading of cultural and identity processes read in the light of various disciplines. Not only the Canadian critic has always defined his explorations as ‘applied Joyce’, but he has also confessed that it was a short story by Edgar Allan Poe that suggested him a way to explore the new media environment. In ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom’ Poe tells the story of a sailor who survives a shipwreck and saves himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by co-operating with it. Similarly, McLuhan admitted that he studied the new media whirlpool, had fun and started to co-operate with it: he avoided all ultimate explanations and simply pursued new explorations which were carried out mostly through questions, and language. He started to explore secondary orality through language, literature and art: as a well-learned professor of English he investigated the new artificial media-scape through words, and rhetoric, therefore retrieving ancient forms of knowledge, as per the ancient idea of \textit{paideia}.

As a matter of fact, his study of the three liberal arts of the \textit{trivium} (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic), that he carried out in his doctoral dissertation dedicated to the \textit{querelle} between Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey in English Renaissance,\textsuperscript{14} stands at the core of his ‘laws of media’.\textsuperscript{15} These laws retrieve ancient forms of knowledge and memory pertaining to primary orality (and to the

\textsuperscript{14} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time}, University of Cambridge, 1943.
value that memory has in oral societies), re-enacted by the new electric and electronic environment (which is a hybrid one, characterised by secondary orality); quite surprisingly, McLuhan grasps some implications of this new environment simply by juxtaposing oral tradition and Modernist tradition. The tetrad, is the investigative model elaborated by McLuhan in order to carry out his media investigations, and is introduced as a ‘heuristic verbal tool’ found by asking four main questions: what does each medium enhance or intensify? What does it render obsolete or displace? What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced? What does produce or become when pressed to an extreme? Just like the metaphor, the tetrad offers a strategy to explore the new ‘rerum natura’ of the post-literate world; it operates as a sort of verbal equation that embraces all knowledge and reveals the new media landscape through language; it retrieves the function given to memory in oral societies as it is enacted through participation and active performance. Symbolically, on the written page the tetrad is rendered not in a linear way, but through a visual model or scheme that immediately recall the idea of simultaneity: the four questions are not asked according to a time sequence, but all at once, as they refer to effects taking place all at the same time and that, inevitably, recall (make us remember) previous experiences and knowledge. Tetrads lead to different results depending on the level of participation and knowledge of each explorer and, visually, look like complex boxes of memory.

In this model, words are conceived as complex systems of metaphors and symbols “that translate experience into our uttered or outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols, the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant.”\textsuperscript{16} The intention is to retrieve the encyclopaedic value associated to language (and to memory) in oral societies. Unfortunately, the new media landscape affects the reception of these verbal ‘probes’: the quick flow of information assured by a very powerful media circuit, and the simultaneous impoverishment of education and knowledge, turns them from archetypes into clichés or slogans, that is in all-fitting formulas. Secondary orality seems to

\textsuperscript{16} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{Understanding Media}, op.cit., p. 64
retrieve forms of primary orality (i.e. aphorisms, mnemonic sentences perceived as group experiences), but mediated through literate experience in a way that does not enable to retrieve also the same original function.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Joyce grasped both limits and advantages of the passage leading from literacy to secondary orality: his modern Ulysses is a sandwich-man trapped in a urban maze designed by post-literate new media forces, read and enacted through forms of primary orality (the epic poems). What is interesting to note is that Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and even more his *Finnegans Wake* are works built on the heuristic potentialities of words that tell the new world (post-orality, electric age) in the light of an ancient knowledge (primary orality, inclusion).

Traditionally, it is understood that writing (a technology that fixes orality on the written or the printed page) seems to privilege an idea of *memory* perceived as “cold storage rather than hot use” (Hutton); if this is true, orality, should privilege, in reverse, the act of *remembering* perceived as a dynamic process, that is as a phenomenon strictly linked to the relational sphere (Havelock). In time, this idea of ‘memory’ as ‘cold storage’ triggered by the invention of the alphabet (various types of alphabets) first, and by writing and printing later, has encouraged the establishment of official collective memories encapsulated by written sources that have been perceived (or imposed) as bearers of ‘established truths’: written memories handed down to posterity lead to the cancellation of all ‘subjective variations’ which, instead, are a peculiar feature of oral story-telling, (where the narrator’s subjectivity plays a major role). The process of selection which, as it has been proven, characterises the very act of remembering *tout court*, is therefore institutionalised and enhanced through writing (a ‘medium’ that, in turn, is itself a selective one): memory becomes ‘official’, ‘established’, and the act of remembering is not always a dynamic process, as it risks to become the mere repetition of data preserved and protected (sometimes imposed) by literacy. The paradox is here a clear one: in time, writing, an invention which brings subjectivity on the foreground and that introduces the ideas of ‘individuality’ and ‘self’, helps to fix and preserve collective and official memory. The written text becomes the depositary of a tradition that is acknowledged by the group not when
it is told and, therefore, ‘lived’ and ‘shared’, as it is in oral societies, but only through the authority of the source (the book) which can be read and experienced simply by a single subject, privately and secretly. In this way, the memory of a group or of a nation becomes part of the written history of that very group or nation, a code whose authority is not a ‘shared’ concept, but an abstract one, something that is either inherited or imposed. And yet, given to the fact that writing does not automatically cancel orality tout court, the two often overlap and interact so that, in time, their cross-reading enables to grasp and to reveal the simultaneous and lasting presence of official memories and of counter-memories. It is therefore relevant to question the ideas of collective and individual memory in relation to the development of new technologies, knowing that the latter do not alternate according to an evolutionist logic, but combine in different ways depending on the relevant social frame, as well as on various cultural settings. In particular, artistic processes can be used as interesting view-points for the cross-reading of official memories and counter-memories; by so doing, they can help to reveal what, in time, groups and/or individuals have (consciously or unconsciously) ‘removed’ (it was, for instance, the case of Parry’s studies on Homer enlightening on the passage from orality to literacy, as well as the case of Modernist avant-garde poetics enlightening on the passage from literacy to secondary orality). Today, the idea of divided memory (or memories) is not only possible, but also necessary; it is urged by the fact that each ‘memory’ is inevitably the result of a compromise linked to the context and time in which the act of remembering took place, as well as to the author’s life history. It is interesting to note that today the idea of oral history is no longer an experimental discipline, but a real and well established one that completes and integrates traditional historiography and that uses sources and documents which were once neglected: life histories, interviews, literature, art. (Think, for instance to the by now classical work of Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, published in 1978). The juxtaposition of historiography and other sources is, for instance, at the core of an interdisciplinary research project of Acume dedicated to memories and representations of war experiences (in particular of WW1 and WW2): the aim is to speculate, by juxtaposing different documents (official historiography, novels, autobiographies, works of art, etc.), on the making of national identity, as well as on the making of our European identity and understand the role played, in time,
by the political and social macro-structure in the definition of the processes of remembrance and oblivion.

Starting from the beginning of the 20th century, the situations gets more and more complicated, as new technologies of communications develop starting from a carefully conceived technological mix of orality and literacy, and combine at once, already in their structure, forms that, up to that moment, coexisted as separated and autonomous ones. The new electric and electronic forms of communications (which are now referred to as ‘mass media’, that is as technologies of ‘mass communication’) blur the two aspects: ‘the electronic age is the age of secondary orality, that is the orality of telephone, radio and television whose existence still depends on literacy and printing.” (Ong). Also, what complicates the analysis even further is the fact that very often new forms of mass communication become, at once, also new forms of imagination (‘mass imagination’ or ‘entertainment’) and trigger creative processes that, nevertheless, have a deep impact on the making of our own identity and, as a consequence, on our own idea of collective and individual memory. It is, for instance, the case of cinema, a technology that is often associated to the world of ‘entertainment’ but that, nevertheless, has been playing a fundamental role in the making of both collective/individual memories and counter-memories since its debut.

It is always Walter Ong to assert that the secondary orality introduced by new forms of electric, electronic or digital communications ‘has striking resemblance to the old one in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas […]. But it is essentially a more deliberate self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well. […] Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality” (pp. 133-134). Therefore, starting from the 20th century, the ancient ‘oral’ idea of art or techne of memory seems to acquire a new relevance due to the development of more complex technologies that reshape both the making and the understanding of cultural memory: this complex idea (art or techne of memory) combines, in its very term, the opposite (or complementary) concepts of artificial construction of memory (memory as a
human artefact) on the one hand, and of mnemonic techniques or *techne* on the other hand. As a consequence, in our post-literate world the idea of memory is again linked to the ideas of ‘manipulation’, ‘technology’, ‘mnemonics’ and its ‘construction’, ‘preservation’, ‘delivery’ lead to complex side-effects that condition the making of our new social frame and whose side-effects we are compelled to understand and monitor.

In *De memoria et reminiscentia* and also in *De anima*, Aristotle describes memory as a mental image (phantom, in Latin *simulacrum* or *imago*), that is an apparition that leaves a physical trace on the part of our body that forms our memory. This phantom is the final product of a perceptive process that can have a visual or tactile origin, (a phantom which is originated by a sensorial process). Today, scientists talks about various types of memory, including acoustic, tactile, and other sensorial ones; in any case, these expressions refer to ‘sensible’ marks associated to a given experience lived by the subject who later remembers. If this is true, the question is what type of trace is left today in a world in which experience is often achieved indirectly or even virtually through mass media?; is it a sort of ephemeral trace experienced not by our physical but by our virtual body? And if it is possible, as it has been proven, to induce a given reaction through a medium or through an instrumental use of our new mediators of memory, where do we position today the idea of free will and self-assertion in relation to the processes of selection, remembering, and forgetting? These are questions that the subproject ‘Oral and written history’ can perhaps try to pursue so to investigate the complex relation juxtaposing individual and collective memory in comparison to the making of a new European identity (something that, ideally, should be supranational).

Similarly, in oral society memory, that formed the very core of the group identity, was supported by models and techniques capable to recall the ‘phantoms of the mind’, here understood as sensible traces of the group experience (knowledge). Today, in our post-literate society, collective memory seems to be conditioned by technologies and means that seem to remember for us and that seem to quickly translate all group experience in a fixed icon. If, on the one hand, the so formed icon seems to preserve memory, on the other hand, it also seems to limit, simplify
and uniform it. The art of memory, the process of remembering is therefore
delegated to a medium (to a technology) that while archives the events, it
nevertheless turns them, into a homogenised cliché: each icon is elaborated less
and less starting from a truly shared and ‘real’ experience, and more and more
starting from a metonymic process that simplifies and translates quick and
complex events in a fixed image having a symbolic value, but often a very
superficial or schematic one.

It seems that today the forms of post-orality favour more the cold idea of memory
than the act of remembrance. The difference between the former and the latter is
the one already established by Alberto Magno in his commentary on Aristotle’s
De memoria et reminiscencia: memory understood as the mere repetition of a
given fact is not the real task of memory, but instead a simple classification of
information; to remember is, instead, the act that brings to retrace what has been
stored, a situation which is not just ‘iterata scientia’, mere repetition. To
remember is a process which is performed in a rational and conscious way by
means of associations: you recall through associative procedures that you learn
while learning mnemonic techniques.

Today, new installations or multi-media performances seem to amplify precisely
this side effect that new forms of communications have on the making of cultural
processes, that is the risk to deny all cultural differences and identities: the
creation of media and artistic environments that embrace the spectators and numb
them through the repetition of visual icons constantly shown in rapid sequence is,
in fact, a troubled warning signal. We have better look for new outpost not to
resist, but to observe the overwhelming whirlpool and try to retrieve original signs
and real experiences that, lived today, will be the content of our future post-
literate cultural memory.