Performing memory on television: documentary and the 1960s

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Despite the rapidly increasing literature on social and cultural memory within film and cultural studies, television has been relatively neglected.¹ Yet television regularly forges cultural memories through its celebration of heritage and national commemorations, its recycling of programmes across generational divides, its forays into ‘history’, and its sometimes incestuous invoking of its own role in the construction of a national ‘past’. Television documentary, unlike mainstream film, purports to bring us the testimony of those capable of remembering earlier eras, but sets this within a framework of commentary and archive footage. By focusing on recollections of the 1960s, this article explores how the performance of memory on British television is inflected by televisual codes and conventions that act both to vivify but also to constrict ‘memory work’.² By offering viewers ‘ordinary’ memories of life in periods of rapid social and cultural change, or at moments of public disaster, television has the potential to make visible the ‘web of interconnections’ binding together ‘public’ history and ‘personal’ memory.³ Critical writing on processes of memory construction within film and photography has tended to concentrate on trauma memories and witnessing.⁴ My emphasis, in line with television’s greater interest in the everyday, is on its production of ‘cultural memory’ of the sixties, and in particular on the ‘cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history’.⁵

The period of the sixties has been chosen for a variety of reasons. Mythologized through popular culture as an era of revolutionary protest and social, political and cultural change, this decade was also the first to bring constructions of its unfolding persona to a mass audience. By 1960,
88% of US homes owned a television set and, by 1963, 88.4% of the British population was able to receive television programmes. British television was shedding its 1950s sedateness, stimulated both by the advent of ITV and, at the BBC, by Sir Hugh Carleton Greene’s activities as Director-General. While technological improvements facilitated television spectaculars (such as the funeral of President Kennedy in 1963, or the moon landing in 1969), the increasing use of colour by the end of the decade added a new dimension to television’s illusion of instantaneous realism. Television was becoming reflexive about its own role in fostering the mood of the times and debate about its capacity to shape the reality it was claiming ‘merely to document’ was being initiated in academic writing. In British cinema, too, the 1960s marked a new focus on contemporary ‘northern’ working-class life, while, for the young, popular music became the primary means of forging a powerful sense of generational distinctiveness.

These developments prompted reflexivity about what the sixties might mean within that decade itself. Two of the defining terms – ‘the swinging sixties’ and ‘the permissive society’ – were already in use before the sixties ended. American journalist Piri Halasz initiated ‘swinging London’ in a Time magazine cover in 1966. Although, in Sheila Rowbotham’s words, ‘always an external definition and regarded as a joke’, this slogan did, she contends, ‘catch something that was happening . . . some process of interaction between music, art and fashion’. Revealingly, metropolitan specificity quickly gave way to temporal diffusion, in a manner that masked differences between the metropolis and ‘provinces’ and between affluent and non-affluent classes. The provenance of the other catchphrase definition of the sixties, ‘the permissive society’, is more obscure, but references to this appear in Marc’s cartoon ‘Life and Times in NW1’ in The Listener in 1967. Roy Jenkins, responsible as Home Secretary for liberalizing legislation in relation to homosexuality and abortion in the late sixties, in 1969 also rejected the pejorative connotations settling around use of the term:

The permissive society – always a misleading description – has been allowed to become a dirty phrase. A better phrase is the civilised society, a society based on the belief that different individuals will wish to make different decisions about their patterns of behaviours.

The focus of moral concerns centred on the loosening of controls on sexuality and on ‘obscenity’. Even if myths of the sixties did not congeal until later, the processes of myth-making were well underway in the decade itself. Memories of this era, even for those who lived through it, cannot escape the influence of its mediation through popular cultural forms.

Cultural and film studies have conceptualized memory’s modus operandi in a variety of ways. With most commentators now agreeing that memory, however individualized in its articulation, is always a
social and cultural process, a diversity of terms have been deployed to explain this process. Maurice Halbwachs advocates the notion of ‘collective memory’, adopting a Durkheimian perspective to argue that memory emerges only within collective contexts, its permutations arising from the kaleidoscopic realignment of differing social groups. 12 James Fentress and Chris Wickham prefer to describe memory as ‘social’, contending that this more accurately attributes agency to its formation. 13 For Raphael Samuel, ‘popular memory’ articulated through the hand-me-down histories of folk-song and ballads, or practices such as miners’ galas, exists in contradistinction to ‘official memory’, inscribed through institutional documentation. 14 By keeping alive alternative ideologies, ‘popular memory’ has the capacity to challenge established hierarchies.

The concept of ‘cultural memory’, which provides the framework for this article, avoids the suggestion, embedded in some of these terms, that memory is an entity, shared by a particular group. It emphasizes memory’s operation as a process: never static, but open to constant reconfiguration in line with evolving personal and cultural circumstances. Acknowledging the inevitability of a conflict over interpretations of the past, it draws our attention to the interactions between culture and subjectivity in the formation of that contest. ‘Cultural memory’ also testifies to the complexities of disentangling where our memories come from: whether from direct experience, oft-repeated accounts by friends or family, or from the mediation of the popular media. As Marita Sturken observes, ‘Some Vietnam veterans say they have forgotten where some of their memories came from — their own experiences, documentary photographs, or Hollywood movies.’ 15

The concept of ‘prosthetic memory’ — memories synthetically produced which nevertheless acquire the familiarity of being grafted onto our own memory bank — graphically encapsulates the melding of memories ‘owned’ through direct experience with memories originating from encounters with a variety of popular cultural forms. 16

Dominant memories of the sixties have settled around discourses of dissent and youthful rebelliousness. Epitomizing the tendency to ‘begin as surprises and end as cliches’ that typifies all periods of profound change, the 1960s ‘scooped together’ ‘a collage of fragments . . . as if a whole decade took place in an instant’. 17 Whether from memory or mediated images, signifiers of widespread public unrest such as the civil rights movement in the USA, the growing opposition to America’s involvement in the Vietnam war, the troubled reactions to nuclear weapons and an increasing internationalization of student protest have all blended together. The development of the contraceptive pill, the increasing affluence and assertiveness of young people and the growing counter-culture provided the evidence for an apparent sexual revolution. While these developments form the mythology of sixties’ memories, life for many who lived through that era was very differently configured and only indirectly touched by these developments. Writing in New Society in 1969, Bernard Davies comments on the disparity between television’s

15 Sturken, Tangled Memories, p. 20.
image of young people on *Top of the Pops* (BBC 1964–2006) and the youngsters watching this programme on television in a Lancashire youth club. 

In emphasizing contest over meaning, ‘cultural memory’ relates memory to structures of power. Recollections of the past become part of the struggle over identity and the claiming of voice. This has been graphically documented in the reaffirmation of Holocaust testimonials against the claims of the deniers. Within television documentary, production decisions about who speaks play an important part in what gets remembered and what gets forgotten about the sixties. As Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone observe, ‘The focus of contestation... is very often not conflicting accounts of what actually happened in the past so much as the question of who or what is entitled to speak for that past in the present’. Alessandro Portelli has documented how forcefully the present impacts on remembrance of the past in his account of local people’s rewriting of the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine in 1944 to blame the Italian resistance-fighters rather than the German military. This apparently aberrant act of recall can be explained, he suggests, only by understanding the strong anti-Communist sentiments current at the time of his investigations.

All of the memories of the sixties that I have investigated come from the ‘present’ of the 1990s. Why that decade witnessed such a revival of interest in the 1960s is a subject for investigation in its own right, but reasons might include reaction against the repression of the Thatcher era in Britain and the sexual retrenchment of the post-AIDS climate, spiced by nostalgia amongst a generation of programme-makers for the era of their own youth. The increasingly competitive environment that followed the Broadcasting Act of 1990 had its own impact, encouraging documentary-makers to navel gaze by preferring accessible British topics over in-depth or international investigative reporting. Echoes of the sixties were also reverberating in other popular cultural forms, with CD reissues of 1960s hits, the commercialization of annual festivals such as Glastonbury, and films such as Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) and Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992) creating a fresh interest in the politics of the transatlantic scene. Whatever the reasons, the selection of memories in the documentaries discussed below owes much to the version of the 1960s that the 1990s thought fit to promote.

‘Cultural memory’ provides a valuable overarching paradigm for this analysis, but it is insufficiently discriminating to account for the differences between memory evoked spontaneously in face-to-face communication, and memory selected and produced through the specific requirements of televisual codes and conventions. Annette Kuhn, in her ethnohistorical study of 1930s cinema audiences’ recollections, draws helpful distinctions between the varying ways of ‘doing memory work’
and ‘staging’ or ‘performing’ memory amongst her participants. She distinguishes between anecdotal (or autobiographical) memory, repetitive memory (discussing personal experience in terms of habitual practices – ‘what we used to do’), impersonal memory (memories that circumvent personal experiences) and past/present memories (producing fluctuating accounts of the relation between ‘then’ and ‘now’ that are indicative of deeper engagement with the remembering process). In Kuhn’s work, these relate to direct methods of relaying memories, mediated only by the research process. Even so, the dominance in her study of ‘repetitive’ memory is likely to have been conditioned by the participants’ understanding that the research process invited recollections with collective validity.

Within television documentaries, further conditions apply to shape the performance of memory work. From the process of selecting participants, to the establishment of location, choice of interview method, filming and editing conventions, memories on television are ‘staged’ within particular parameters. In order to explore these further, I will consider the performing of television memories in terms of narrational style, bodily expressiveness, physical location and distance or proximity to the object of recollection. Kuhn’s ‘past/present’ mode of performing memory, in which ‘informants, usually unaware of doing so, shift or “shuttle” back and forth between past and present standpoints’ is especially nuanced by television documentary’s use of commentary and editing practices, most especially when these interleave memories with archive footage or images. The latter part of this article will consider how these constrain or open up the interrogative capacity of witnesses’ memory work. In Walter Benjamin’s words, ‘To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” ... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.’ Memory is most interesting when it raises more questions than it can answer. Whether the confines of the television documentary enable or limit that capacity will determine its ability to challenge the hegemony of what the sixties have come to mean.

In any verbal performance of memory, the style of narration communicates a great deal about the processes of memory evocation. Features such as pace, hesitations or a sudden rush of recollection, emphasis and voice tone indicate both the degree of comfort or discomfort that particular memories evoke and the complexities of the emotions being aroused. Television has the advantage over oral history of allowing us seemingly direct access to non-verbal and paralinguistic cues. Yet it is rare for interviewees to be granted more than a maximum of one to two minutes of airtime before an edit diverts us towards some other source. Even in the process of narration, cutaway shots act as punctuators of the original rhythm of delivery. Interviewers’ questions and prompts are habitually removed, so that we gain no sense of the interaction underlying the formation of recollections. The oral


23 Ibid., pp. 9–11.

24 Ibid., p. 10.

historian Luisa Passerini notes the crucial role played by the interviewer in any memory work:

Since the interview is always the result of two subjectivities which meet . . . corps-a-corps, our place in the construction of memory is essential. Such construction is possible only on the basis of empathy.26

Alessandro Portelli comments that the historian acts ‘as an “organizer” of the testimony – and organization . . . is not technical, it is political’. 27

The notion of memory as contingent, and elicited – sometimes hesitatingly – through interactive and social exchange is replaced in television by the solidity of coherent sound-bites delivered seemingly spontaneously to camera.

Oral historians have discovered the benefits of the collective exchanging of memories in ‘witness seminars’, but television documentaries rarely depart from their customary preference for ‘serial monoglossia’, interweaving a number of individual remembrances around a shared theme.28 In the documentaries I surveyed from the 1990s relating specifically to the sixties, I found no examples of interaction between participants, but in one of the Century Road series (a pre-millennial BBC series that imaginatively surveyed contemporary and past life in a number of streets of this name), there is an exchange between two women and the interviewer about attitudes to single women who became pregnant outside marriage in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The friends are filmed together on the street in medium-long shot, sharing reminiscences about how quickly they were married off once they were discovered to be pregnant. Tapping her friend on the arm, with a conversational ‘And it was ever so funny, Sylvia’, Pam Cook relates with graphic humour how the grandeur of the taxi supplied for her wedding contrasted with its dilapidated state inside (‘I could see the road’). A recollection of the food at their receptions prompts a sudden change of mood:

Pam Cook: We catered, well my mum catered for quite a number – I can’t remember exactly who now, but (eh) very sadly they didn’t turn up.

Sylvia Staniland: Oh!
Interviewer: Why not?
Pam Cook: I don’t know. I don’t know. They just didn’t.
Sylvia Staniland: Oh dear!
Pam Cook: There was (eh) Jeff’s mum and dad came, his brother and, his brother and his sister and my father was ill – he was in bed at the time – (eh) there was my youngest, my sister and my brother (um).

Interviewer: Do you think it was because they didn’t approve? That’s why they didn’t come?
Pam Cook: Um. I feel, I . . . It’s never been said, but yes.29

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This personal vignette reveals much about social class, moral codes and notions of respectability prevailing at the time, but it emerges by chance out of a conversational exchange. Although it requires the prompting of the interviewer to anchor its social significance, his role is more that of a third interlocutor than a controlling voice and our ability to hear his intervention brings into evidence the intersection between personal and public histories.

Witnesses on television are generally denied full authorial control over their autobiographical recollections but they do nevertheless demonstrate variegated storytelling techniques. Sometimes, complete mini-narratives recreate background, dialogue, suspense and conclusion in a manner that brings accompanying archive footage to life. In ‘Half the People’ (*People’s Century*, BBC1, 26 January 1997), Joyce Wheedon, a leading player in the strike by women machinists at Ford’s Dagenham plant in 1968 (they were paid 20% less than their male colleagues), recounts her role in initiating the walk-out:

> We’d been getting nowhere with our arguments. It was just ‘they’re women, they’re just getting in a dander, they’ll calm down soon, they’re just getting a bee in their bonnet’. Nobody was sure of what they were going to do and one of the girls said to me ‘Are we going out, or should we wait till?’ And I just picked up me bag, switched the machine off, put me scissors in me bag and said ‘Right, I’ve stopped work. Who’s coming?’ And one hundred and eighty seven women closed the Ford plant down.

The re-dramatization of this episode suggests an often-repeated account, with clearly demarcated positioning of the key players. In its confident and unhesitating delivery, its reporting of direct speech, its temporal elision, its compressed narrative form with clear beginning, middle and end, it tells us little about the process of memory work, however graphically it recreates the intersection of personal and public spheres. The effort to synchronize testimony and archive footage, to overlay ‘then’ with ‘now’, does, however, impede fuller exploration of that intersection. As we watch Joyce Wheedon, on archive film, participating in the campaign committee and the lobbying of parliament, we are given a hint of her own political transformation in her voiceover commentary: ‘The biggest surprise of all was when I found myself on a march and protest rally along the Embankment’. This slickly edited sequence, with its privileging of the visual interest of film extracts, disappointingly leaves no space to probe further into how this woman became so unexpectedly politicized.

In ‘Double Lives’ (the second part of BBC2’s series on ‘lesbian and gay history’, *It’s Not Unusual*, 25 May 1997), the witnesses are given more space between edits than is typical for television documentaries to tell their own stories. In the following vignette, storytelling departs from a linear structure, cutting in, instead, to the core of the changing mores of the times through an epiphany-style subjective revelation. Lucia
Fitzgerald, who came to the north of England from Ireland in the early 1960s, tells with some humour how she discovered her lesbianism and the existence of a world in Manchester to which she could belong, but also how that world pushed her into adopting a butch identity against her will. Her joy at the opening up of less rigidly defined butch/femme roles in the late sixties is recreated in her account of a particular memory moment (italics indicate emphasis):

I overheard a conversation (eh) with some girls at the back o’ me and they were dressed a little bit peculiar really they had (eh) an odd smell of them – whatever kind of oil it was – petulie oil, I thought their clothes was damp and that they were living in cellars and stuff like that and they had these (eh, eh) these shirts on with (eh) little mirrors in and their hair was long and I wondered if they were lesbians actually to be perfectly honest wi’ you, but y’know we soon established that they were and stuff like that, and (eh) that they were talking (eh) about how ghettoized people are, and the butch and the femme thing is not right, and and really speaking we could do really with enjoying being a woman and all this type of thing without having to dress up as men and oh I thought all my birthdays come at once. I thought ‘ere we go. This is music to my ears.

This evocation of a moment of memory signals a shift in cultural attitudes that is achieved through the sensual recall of details of smells, dress and hair styles and the reproduction of overheard snippets of conversation, all addressed conversationally to an implied interlocutor (‘to be perfectly honest wi’ you’), conveyed through the subjectivity of the narrator (‘I wondered if they were lesbians’), and culminating in a vivid metaphor (‘I thought all my birthdays come at once’). Filmed in closeup, with no cutaway shots, the speaker retains a measure of authorial control.

Even in observational documentary, those who participate inevitably become ‘social actors’, performing their social roles on camera. In the process of memory evocation, corporeal responses are especially revelatory. Distinctions have been drawn, in relation to trauma memories, between memories that can be represented, and memories that remain as unspoken, sensory memories, felt and expressed through the body. Jill Bennett, adopting the terminology of Charlotte Delbo, a French poet and Holocaust survivor, refers to the latter as ‘sense memories’, involving ‘not so much speaking of but speaking out of a particular memory or experience – in other words, speaking from the body sustaining sensation’. In *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann deliberately sets up the conditions to prompt this response from his interviewees, using his own variegated forms of interviewing style (always audible to viewers) to tease confessions or memories out of those reluctant to take this journey in public. His reported aim was to produce not a documentary but a performance of memory. Television, with its routine conventions of filming interviewees in closeup, at an oblique angle to a

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relatively static camera, and with its often rehearsed process of interaction elided, offers fewer opportunities for speaking out of experience in the more general recovery of memory.

As with narrational style, it is difficult to disentangle spontaneity in memory work from its framing by televisual requirements. The play between the personality of the interviewee and the conditions of television’s production is rarely open to scrutiny, but traces at least are evident when the same witness reappears in different documentaries. Maureen Delenian features in both ‘The Pill: prescription for revolution’ (TimeWatch, BBC2, 10 March 1993) and ‘Virgins’ (first part of a C4 series, Sex Bomb, 14 October 1998). Both programmes review the ‘sexual revolution’ of the sixties, the first tracing the evolution of attitudes to the contraceptive pill, the second exploring, more broadly, the changing sexual mores of the decade. In each, Delenian testifies to the liberating and revolutionary quality of the pill, but in the first documentary she ‘speaks of’ her memories, whereas in the second she ‘speaks out of’ them. Even allowing for changes in her own life over a five-year period, this difference suggests a stronger rapport and sense of ease between herself and her interviewer in the later example that enables her to claim, however momentarily, a more forceful personal voice.

In ‘The Pill’, Maureen Delenian’s recollections move through Kuhn’s ‘autobiographical’, ‘repetitive’ and then ‘impersonal’ modes, as personal account slips into generic reflection. Filmed in medium closeup, her voice tone lacks modulation and her body remains static, although a knowing smile accompanies her last sentence. Brief cutaway shots of old colour photographs of her at the time, both on her own and with her partner, punctuate her short account:

I know that when my marriage was starting to break up I certainly had a lover, that being on the pill guaranteed me that I at least wasn’t going to get pregnant by that man. But I think the idea that you could control your fertility, you could go outside of a marital relationship, and you could start to develop in other ways, all came along at the same time. It was a revolution in a very real sense of the word for women that they felt that once they could control their fertility there may be other areas of their life that they could control with equal ease.

In ‘Virgins’, on the other hand, dispassionate narration gives way to embodied reliving of remembered experience. In relating her first orgasm (with her lover) after going on the pill, Delenian both verbalizes and performs her bodily delight (italics indicate emphasis in speech):

I wanted this man to make love to me. I wanted it. I wanted it so desperately I could feel my skin creeping over his, I mean, and it was there, I mean, that was what the first orgasm was for me, it was like, I don’t know, how can I, it’s like a shining from inside. It was it was just – uh – and this is what – whoah – thirty odd years ago and I still feel it – it’s wonderful.
The excitement of her delivery is orchestrated through bodily movement. When finally lighting on the ‘shining from inside’ analogy, after some fumbling for appropriate words, she raises her hands excitedly in the air, and leans forward out of frame. The ‘whoah’ is accompanied by a wink to the interviewer, as she relishes the recollection, and her ‘I still feel it’ produces a joyful screwing up of her eyes. Unlike her self-presentation in *TimeWatch*, when she situates her personal memory reflectively within a social frame, this narration manifests a recovery of desire, both verbally and visually. By embodying her memory, she endorses the intensity of transformation that the pill signified for many, and gives life to the ‘revolution’ that she asserts, in both documentaries, to have been its consequence.

Specificity of place acts as a powerful stimulus of memory, and yet the process of remembering can paradoxically produce an acute sense of spatial and temporal displacement. The frequent intensity of disputes about detail of location confirms how graphically place is rewritten across time. Discussions about ‘setting’ in family photographs are not merely debates about accuracy of recollection, but contests over interpretations about human relationships and their evolving formation. The ‘uncanniness of being at once the same and different, at once time and space’ characterizes the dual vividness of evocations of physical place with their dreamlike refusal to be contained within a particular time. Television documentaries, by routinely filming interviewees against interior backdrops that lack precise indices of cultural or geographical context, miss opportunities to experiment with the interactions between place and memory. Interviewees are rarely transported back to the site of their memories, or a reconstituted equivalent, in the manner of Lanzmann’s famous sequence in *Shoah* (1985), when he places a Jewish barber, responsible for cutting the hair of those who were about to be gassed at Treblinka, in an ordinary barber’s shop in Israel to resurrect his memories. When this does, exceptionally, occur, it evokes a different form of remembering from that elicited in domestic or studio interview.

In ‘The Pill’, one of the participants, Kathleen Duffy, provides a buoyant ‘repetitive’ reflection when interviewed in an anonymous interior setting about the consonance between the pill and its era: ‘we had moon landings, we had mini-skirts, everything was an atmosphere of freedom, so the pill really did fit in absolutely marvellously with that’. This contrasts with her earlier appearance on a terraced street relating her experience of an illegal abortion in the mid 1960s. Commenting initially on the feelings of alienation prompted by her return – ‘it’s all changed, it’s different’ – she recounts the secrecy attending her earlier visit, and the fear she experienced. ‘I had my boyfriend with me and we were both quite nervous’ is accompanied by a clasp of her stomach as if in a somatic reprise of her emotions at that time, and eventually she breaks down saying ‘it’s very strange coming back. It’s, I didn’t expect it to affect me quite like it has’. Her response echoes Annette Kuhn’s

For a moving account of this, see Annette Kuhn’s memory work on her family photograph album in *Family Secrets*, especially pp. 11–15.

Hodgkin and Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts*, p. 11.
observation that ‘memory . . . is at once emplaced and embodied’. Even allowing for the possible artifice of this sequence, the location prompts the recovery of emotions that would more probably remain suppressed in an interview set in a domestic interior connoting comfort and familiarity rather than the continuing rawness of the past.

An acute memory of place (whether actual or processed through intervening emotions) often features strongly in trauma memories. In a *TimeWatch* programme on the Aberfan disaster in October 1966 (‘Remember Aberfan’, BBC2, 15 October 1996), archive footage from contemporary news and current affairs programmes records the visible aftermath of the collapse of an old coal tip onto the village of Aberfan, which submerged the primary school and several houses, killing 116 children and 28 adults, but these clearly located film extracts visualize the horror less graphically than this parent’s vivid eyewitness recollection:

I can see the farm now. I can see the chickens coming through the roof. That was in the yard of the school. The farm was carried down the mountain and it was in the school yard and the slurry was all around it and the chickens is coming out through the roof, flyin’, and the stuff was still moving.

A teacher, with equal expression of amazement, recalls the extraordinary sight of a boulder spinning towards the school on the edge of his frame of vision. The precision of detail may or may not be wholly ‘accurate’, but it vividly evokes the intensity of feeling of these particular moments in time.

The relations between past and present and the shuttling between then and now are especially vivid in memories of trauma. Memory typically refuses linearity, preferring ellipses, fades, flashbacks and jump cuts that bring it, as several commentators have pointed out, into synergy with the visual language of film. Yet, in its production for television, a sense of linearity is frequently manufactured by commentary and editing conventions. Witnesses, in their performance of memory, make their own contribution to a sense of the past as complete and remote, or as still to be negotiated in the present. The degree of impersonality in some recounting of the past traduces memory work by turning remembering into a form of explanation or justification. In the episode of the *People’s Century* series devoted to youthful protest in the late 1960s (‘New Release’ in UK version, BBC1, 19 January 1997; ‘Young Blood’ in the USA), David Triesman recalls an occupation at the University of Essex to protest against its invitation to a defence industry scientist despite the intensity of antiwar feeling at the time. As a former student activist (now Lord Triesman, but at the time of filming the general secretary of the AUT), he is featured in the preceding archive sequence playing a leading role in this dispute, yet his mode of recall is distant and impersonal:

The real anger and distress about the Vietnam war meant that (eh) if speakers came (eh) to a university like Essex who were deeply
involved in biological and chemical warfare, students were going to protest and that is indeed what the protest was about.

His personal involvement is abnegated in his use of abstract nouns (‘anger’, ‘distress’, ‘the protest’), impersonal nouns (‘students’) and distancing labels (‘a university like Essex’), in place of any recollections of his feelings or aspirations at the time.

By contrast, the memory work of one of the bereaved parents, Chris Sullivan, in ‘Remember Aberfan’, demonstrates the lived continuities between past and present. He recalls the impact on this small and remote community of the sudden attention of the world’s media (square brackets indicate archive footage of reporters on the street, interviewing passers-by, including, possibly, this parent):

They are all over the place [and when I say that they – from all over the world, literally true. They were round with their notebooks and their pads and asking all these questions – ‘how are you getting over it’? and this kind of thing]. Well, I mean, you can’t, you cannot, I mean you cannot ask me that question now – never mind 30 years ago. I mean that question you couldn’t ask me – or, rather, let me put it this way, then, that I wouldn’t ask any of the bereaved that I know now that question today.

The shuttling between historic present, past and present tenses here is a potent confirmation of the continuity of this father’s grief, and the projection into a conditional future (‘you couldn’t ask me’) connotes the indefinite extension of the feelings being resurrected. As Alison Landsberg observes, ‘Memory . . . is not a means for closure – is not a strategy for closing or finishing the past – but on the contrary, memory emerges as a generative force, a force which propels us not backward but forwards.’

The discussion so far has mapped out some of the conventions through which witnesses’ memories are articulated within documentary, but these testimonies struggle for authority against voiceover commentary and compete for attention with archive footage. They also reverberate against each other, amplifying, modifying or dissenting from each documentary’s emerging dominant discourse. Commentary in some documentaries plays a discreet and mainly connective and explanatory role, but in many it is more prominently discursive, setting the script within which memories are assigned the role of supporting evidence. The claim of the People’s Century series that it is committed ‘to documenting the extraordinary events of the century through the revealing personal testimony of the people who experienced them firsthand – “no pundits, no academics appear on camera”’ is both literally accurate but also misleading. Considerable direction from the narrator remains, especially in establishing a hierarchy of significance between forms of protest (‘New Release’), or the primary agents in women’s liberation (‘Half the People’).

Demarcations between forms of rebellion that were frequently interrelated in practice are indexed by visual and soundtrack distinctions.
and accentuated by commentary. Political protest and the search for individual freedom through sex, music or drugs are, in several documentaries, constructed as opposing poles of attraction for sixties’ youth. In ‘New Release’, hippie culture appears as a spectacular interlude within an extensive review of antiwar and civil rights movements in different parts of the world. Voiceover commentary introduces the hippie era as a reaction against political involvement (‘But with the war escalating others felt so alienated and disconnected that they simply dropped out’.) This antithesis is sustained in a closing segue into the dominant political protest theme: ‘Though many of their concerns were to re-emerge in other forms later, the hippies were a minority. Most young people still wanted to be involved in what was going on around them.’ Appearing in archive footage from the sixties, one witness defends hippie culture by underlining the link between differing forms of protest: ‘What is happening here in San Francisco is really one of the only meaningful responses to the war and to the whole shock of the system.’ Yet his assertion is eclipsed by the framing of the commentary and by his own recollection almost thirty years on: ‘It was a dreamy thing, an idealistic thing’, even although this testimony also stresses the collective aspirations for social change underlying the hippie movement.

In ‘Half the People’ Joyce Wheedon’s recollections of her role in the Ford machinists’ dispute prompts the commentary, ‘as a result of the women’s action, equal pay became a national issue’. Yet, in its function of enabling smooth transition between topics, the male voiceover proceeds to undermine the achievements of female collective action by claiming the contraceptive pill’s superior contribution to women’s liberation: ‘But it was a scientific breakthrough, not a change in the law, that made the most difference to women’s lives’. This discursive capacity of commentary to frame memories within an agenda not of their own making is only occasionally disrupted or reversed. In ‘Virgins’, the commentary is more responsive to the evidence being presented through the recollection of its participants. Its initial declaration that the sexual revolution ‘transformed the intimate life of everyone in Britain today and defeated all those who tried to stand in its way’ takes a more qualified form as a witness recollects her traumatic experience in a mother-and-baby home and her enforced giving up of her baby for adoption: ‘beyond the metropolis the swinging sixties were a very long time coming’. In ‘Double Lives’, voiceover narration performs a dual role: contextualizing individual memories but also cueing these in rather than directing them. The commentator’s ‘most women still found out where lesbians met through chance conversations’ acts as prompt for Luchia Fitzgerald’s wry and entertaining account of her discovery of a lesbian club in Manchester. A balanced account of the limited shifts in public attitudes to homosexuality in the early sixties similarly segues into two male witnesses’ recollections of the perils of ‘cottaging’. In this documentary, commentary appears, exceptionally, to be modulated in tune with the primary contributions of the speakers, respecting and validating their
memories. The lengthier than average takes, enabling individuals to develop their own narrational rhythm in recollecting their experiences, confirm the sense that memory takes unusual primacy of place in this documentary.

When Claude Lanzmann decided to exclude archive footage of the Holocaust from *Shoah*, he was asserting the need for memory work to be visible and audible without the distraction of imagery increasingly drained of its original power. Documentaries concerning the 1960s face a related dilemma of how to avoid submerging memories beneath the bank of still images, news and fiction film sequences that form prosthetic memories of the era. Three categories of archive material are routinely interwoven with witness recollections: footage of protest marches; film of popular music festivals; and extracts culled from current affairs, news and documentary programmes (and the occasional film) of the decade. Images of protest demonstrations, predominantly in monochrome, set ‘ordinary people’ against the forces of the state and include a customary mix of aerial images and action shots of confrontation on the ground. Collage sequences in ‘New Release’ blend civil rights and antiwar protests across continents in a manner that erodes specificity, but archive footage of identified demonstrations (such as the May demonstrations in Paris in 1968) links individual memory with collective protest, as those recalling the events feature as activists in the archive film. The contrast between youthful protester and current witness is marked by oppositions of action/stasis, open/closed framing, (usually) monochrome/colour and by marked differences of dress and hairstyle. While David Triesman’s commentary in ‘New Release’, documented above, marks an extreme instance of detached recall, remembering in this context tends to explicate or elaborate archive footage, leaving at best marginal space for experiential memory work.

None of those represented as involved in protest movements ‘takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory’.

The transformation of a youthful Weatherman, a 1968 Paris protester or a rebellious Vietnam veteran into apparently quiescent middle-aged individuals also remains enigmatic and unexplored. By supporting archive footage, activists’ memories endorse media representation of the protests in which they participated and bypass the opportunities such memories might offer to interrogate contemporary media constructions and their subsequent iconic status. The observational style of filming in protest footage conspires to maintain this illusory separation between participant and mediation, revealing only very occasional glimpses of protesters’ awareness of the presence of cameras. A rare reflection on the power of media representation is offered in ‘Half the People’ when a participant, filmed taking part in the 1968 Miss America pageant protest in Atlanta City, comments in voiceover:

We threw bras and girdles and stockings, high high-heeled shoes and cosmetics into the trash can. The press loved it and we learned very early
on that the press liked crazy things, so let’s use the press. We didn’t burn any bras. It would have happened if they’d allowed us to have fire.

This allusion to the protesters’ awareness of the value of media publicity, and to the mythologies that ensued, is one of the few insights into witnesses’ awareness of their interdependence on the very media representations that now accompany their recollections.

If protest footage is at least associated with specific witnesses’ memories, archive film of music festivals is almost entirely detached from any individual remembering and is used generically only, to signify the liberation of the decade. In contrast to the protest film, music festival imagery (whether from Monterey 1967 or British festivals of the late 1960s), is predominantly in colour and regularly reveals participants’ awareness of the camera as they gesture to it and perform to catch its attention. Festival footage conjures up a world of psychedelic abandonment through tilting camera-work, zip pans and rapid zooms, revealing images of gyrating bodies, drug-taking and sex, to the accompaniment of well-known lyrics from the sixties such as The Who’s I Can See for Miles and Miles (‘Virgins’), The Youngbloods’ Get Together and Jefferson Airplane’s Somebody to Love (People’s Century). Generally celebratory of the supposed sexual liberation of the period, identical extracts from film of a British music festival recur in ‘Double Lives’, ‘Virgins’ and ‘Love Child,’ but only in ‘Love Child’ is this footage related, exceptionally, to individual (but not participant) memory. This documentary features three women who became pregnant outside marriage, recalling (in synergy with the witness in ‘Virgins’ referred to above) how they were then sent by their families to mother-and-baby homes and forced to give up their babies for adoption. Against familiar extracts from music festival footage, one of the women sums up her thoughts on the era in the following voiceover reflection:

What do I think was going on? The last-ditch stand of the Victorian morality, I think, to suppress women’s sexuality. A feeling of the deserving and the undeserving, but the kind of people who are fit to be mothers and who are not fit to be mothers.

In contrast to the political protest archive, which takes precedence over memory work, this woman’s reflective ‘past/present’ recall offers an acerbic and ironic comment that invites rethinking of the familiar connotations of ‘flower power’ footage, and also injects a fleeting but timely reminder of class differentials in the experiences of this decade.

While protest and music festival footage prompts prosthetic memories of the decade, extracts from contemporary documentary or current affairs programming provide sharp reminders of the dominant attitudes and ethos of the time. In a rare insight into racism in sixties Britain, an episode from the Century Road series (‘Tempus Fugit Damn Quick!’, BBC2, 30 January 1999), set in the multiracial area of Oldbury, near Birmingham, includes a Jamaican teacher recalling both his personal
experience of racism and the Smethwick by-election in 1964 that became notorious for the racist campaign of the winning Conservative candidate. As Alton Burnett watches himself on an archive television programme, relating a racist incident he experienced shortly after arriving in Britain in 1961, he silently mouths the exchange between himself and a woman who threw a bucket of water over him as he sheltered under her porch. His non-verbal replay, and the bridging of his laughter in the 1960s with his laughter now, counteract the distancing effect of the dated television image and the impersonal character of his comment: ‘That’s how it was in those days. That was 1961. Very interesting days.’ This anecdotal memory is contextualized and amplified by being juxtaposed with extracts from unidentified current affairs programmes of the period, in which a series of individuals, including a parish priest, express overtly racist views on camera or via voiceover, enabling Burnett’s subsequent sombre account of the events leading up to the Smethwick by-election to acquire a more intense social resonance.

Maureen Delenian’s memories of the liberating effects of the contraceptive pill in the *TimeWatch* programme referred to earlier, acquire a distinctive resonance, despite her bodily restraint, by being set against extracts from *Panorama* and *World in Action* from 1965. In each, voices of male authority reveal patronizing attitudes to women. A male doctor in *World in Action* argues that its association with sexual precociousness makes the pill unattractive to some women: in terms of sexual encounters, women prefer instead ‘to be approached by the man, to be persuaded, talked into it, cajoled and coaxed’. This interviewee’s received pronunciation tones, the awkwardness of the mise-en-scene (he is filmed facing the camera and fidgeting with an open book on his desk), and the graininess of the monochrome image, all intensify the gap between ‘then’ and ‘now’. When prefaced by this footage, Delenian’s narration, although less embodied and intense than her appearance in ‘Virgins’, accentuates the political challenge that the pill presented at this time to entrenched patriarchal and class constructions of appropriate feminine conduct.

Individual memories, despite their segmentation, interrelate in ways that are sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually supportive. In ‘Virgins’, male and female recollections clash in their perspectives on the openness of sexual relationships. A male witness reminisces euphorically:

> And the woman wouldn’t want it [possessiveness]. I mean, for all you know the woman was into having as many casual relationships as she could get so what right did you have to be possessive about her?

Yet his claim to speak for women is questioned by a direct cut to a woman’s testimony:

> Possessiveness was uncool because it didn’t fit into this liberation theory, and the ideal was that – hey – whoever you met, whoever you wanted, that was cool and whoever you were with would understand
because they were free and you were free. Of course this was absolute nonsense and there was a lot of unhappiness.

On the other hand, in ‘Love Child’, the editing together of the testimony of three women who shared very similar experiences gives strength and consonance to their reminiscences. Emerging as the dominant discourse, critical of the codes of respectability at the time, these women’s voices assert their authority against the counter-memories of the religious authorities who ran many of the mother-and-baby homes. The claim by a monsignor that he feels no regret about involuntary adoption, because ‘at the time it was right’, carries little oppositional weight when articulated in the wake of repeated instances of the women’s suffering, and their recollections of a church that forbade one of the women from taking communion and required another to arrive at church after – and leave before – the congregation, in order to protect religious sensibilities.

In both ‘Virgins’ and ‘Love Child’, the inevitable contest over whose memories are granted primacy in defining particular periods in time is, however briefly, visible, but in most documentaries the process remains hidden. Hegemonic patterns nevertheless prevail. More women than men recall the impact on their lives of the so-called ‘sexual revolution’, with lesbian or gay perspectives remaining marginalized, or sequestered into programmes specifically about gay sexuality. Memories of public protest are, by contrast, offered mainly by men: the women who testify in ‘New Release’ comment principally on changing lifestyles or sexual mores. The preferred mode of memory narration also manifests gender distinctions: women are more inclined to offer autobiographical accounts, and to communicate memory through their bodily reactions, whereas men tend to deploy repetitive or impersonal forms of reminiscence, although the *TimeWatch* documentary on Aberfan provides a striking exception to this. Diversity of witnesses, in terms of ethnicity, social class, or even identifiable regional origin, is extremely limited across the documentaries, restricting opportunities for cultural negotiation over the complexity and unevenness of social change within the decade.

Some counter-hegemonic aspects of television’s presentation of witness memories are, however, evident. Despite the euphoric connotations of music festival footage, there is little sense of the nostalgia that popular music has inscribed indelibly on prosthetic memories of the decade. The fate of unmarried mothers in an era of alleged sexual liberation (especially outside the affluent areas of metropolitan life) is not the only source of pain to be documented. Even amongst those who participated enthusiastically in the hedonism of the times, occasional voices express reservations about its consequences. Peter Finn, who articulated such rejoicing over the extinction of possessive attitudes, reflects at the end of ‘Virgins’ that, although the sexual revolution brought him a few years of happiness, ‘it didn’t bring
me freedom’. The absence of nostalgia in the documentaries that focus on protest takes a different form. Here, the tendency to bracket the past from the present, revealing nothing of the processes that tamed youthful enthusiasm for structural change, precludes any yearning for a revolution that never materialized.

Documentary’s stress on pace, visual interest and narrative structure constrains the space for memory work that might throw up Benjamin’s ‘moments of danger’. Remembering has its own unfolding pace, but television, unlike film, still adheres to the staccato-style imperative of the viewer’s glance. In the rapid sequencing of segmented memory sound-bites and archive glimpses, accompanied by fragments of diegetic or non-diegetic sixties sounds, the kaleidoscope of images distracts us from the involvement in the process of remembering that typifies Lanzmann’s technique in film. Lanzmann’s slowly moving camera forces us to linger, often painfully, over landscapes haunted by associations with the Holocaust and to attend to elongated interviews that continue even against the evident resistance of the speaker. Television too often finds ways to integrate, and subdue, the performance of witnesses’ memories within its own narrative and visual requirements. Commentary and archive footage, with their directing or generalizing capacities, tend to smooth away the rough edges of potential moments of disruption or tension in memory evocation. Those forms of archive film consonant with the mythology of a decade of political rebellion and sexual revolution have a particularly hegemonic capacity. Witnesses’ memories punctuate rather than interrogate these, inflecting them as either firmly set in a past era or as requiring the modest qualification of recognising the undercurrent of pain, especially for women. Extracts from 1960s programming, on the other hand, by providing their own invocation of the predominant social mores and values of the time, can, with skilful editing, add resonance to the remembering process and accentuate its interrogation of sixties’ mythology.

The reminiscences of witnesses become most alive and persuasive when they are grounded in specific detail. By including snatches of reproduced conversation, struggling for appropriate metaphors or analogies to communicate their feelings, and producing their own graphic ‘epiphanies’ of the era, witnesses come closest to the conditions of performing memory work. Memories that exhibit poetic qualities potentially work against the televisual grain of linearity and flow. Memory does not necessarily take ‘pictorial’ form and the referencing of other forms of sensual experience (although, surprisingly, not sound, despite the prominence of popular lyrics in most people’s recollections of the sixties) surfaces in several accounts. However, in its love of ‘serial monoglossia’, its denying of opportunities for collective remembering and its pretense that visualization of the past resides primarily in archives, not in people’s memories, television documentary focuses too exclusively on the often truncated outcome of memory rather than memory as process. By reifying memory into a means of presenting

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40 Kuhn, ‘A journey through memory’, p. 190, comments that memory texts ‘have more in common with poetry than with classical narrative’.

41 The role of music and sound, for example, has been discussed by Philip Drake, “Mortgaged to music”: new retro movies in 1990s Hollywood cinema’, in Grainge (ed.), Memory and Popular Film, pp. 183–201. Recognized also by Annette Kuhn, ‘A journey through memory’, p. 186.
‘colour’ or ‘instantiation’, television misses opportunities for a performance of a diversity of memories that might unsettle comfortable views of the past and suggest a radical enquiry into how the present and future might be otherwise. Attending to witnesses’ own ideas about how they might wish to stage their testimonies would also offer fresh possibilities for creative and courageous television, capable of responding to the graphic and imaginative possibilities of memory work.