

Putting metaphor centre-stage: A case study of Alison Landsberg's 'Prosthetic Memory'

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Abstract

Alison Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memory' is one in a series of metaphors adopted by Memory Studies. In this article Landsberg's tropic concept serves not only as a case study in relation to Memory Studies, but also as a prompt to scholars to engage critically with the use of metaphor in cultural/literary studies. Metaphors matter. Poorly used figurative language can hamper communication and restrict how a given topic is both circumscribed and analysed. According to conceptual metaphor theorists, metaphors influence how we think as well as how we speak, and thus, potentially, how we live. To this end the term 'prosthetic memory' is analysed in the context of the relationship between the literal and the figurative as manifested at various levels in *Prosthetic Memory*, from Landsberg's use of a key film – *The Thieving Hand* – in her theory-building, to her stylistic tics and sleights of hand, to her probably unconscious use of verbal metaphors (considered by some as 'dead').

Keywords

cognitive metaphor theory, metaphor, prosthetic memory, *Thieving Hand*

Metaphors are all-pervasive in academic discourse. Consider research 'outputs', 'environments' and 'impact', or the figurative toolkits, boundary crossings and occasional fruit basket used to promote interdisciplinary courses.¹ Disciplines and fields regularly co-opt each other's terminologies, giving us media 'archaeologies' and 'ecologies', not to mention figurative translations, migrations, archives and curations, to name but a few examples. In what follows I focus on one particular type of academic discourse which is inextricably linked to metaphor – cultural/literary theory – drawing my case study from the field of Memory Studies. With her *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Landsberg (2004) introduced what she called 'a new form of public cultural memory'. Defining prosthetic memory is not a straightforward task, given the term's rather tricky tropic nature, but let us say it refers to what results from a spectator's affective and cognitive experience of a traumatic historical event

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(Landsberg's main examples are the Shoah and slavery) as represented by 'technologies of mass culture', typically films, television series and experiential museums (Landsberg, 2004: 2). Although the audience members have not lived through the traumatic events, Landsberg suggests that the spectator experience is such as to promote empathy for those who did, thereby potentially facilitating progressive alliances which transcend identity politics.

The apparently figurative nature of the term 'prosthetic memory' has already elicited some comment from Berger (2007) and to a lesser extent Munslow (2007) in *Re-Thinking History*, with a response in the same volume from Landsberg (2007). My approach here is different, with the emphasis falling squarely on the language and rhetoric Landsberg uses. To this end the term 'prosthetic memory' will be analysed in the context of the relationship between the literal and the figurative as manifested at various levels in *Prosthetic Memory*, from Landsberg's use of a key film – *The Thieving Hand* – in her theory-building, to her stylistic tics and sleights of hand, to her probably unconscious use of verbal metaphors (considered by some as 'dead').

As well as providing a new critical angle on Landsberg's already influential term, I hope that this case study might encourage further analyses of academic metaphors both within Memory Studies and beyond. Metaphors matter: as Semino (2008) states, they can be used to 'persuade, reason, evaluate, theorize', or indeed 'offer new conceptualizations of reality' (p. 31). Poorly used figurative language can hamper communication and restrict how a given topic is both circumscribed and analysed. According to conceptual metaphor theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors influence how we think as well as how we speak, and thus, potentially, how we live.

The Thieving Hand

I will return several times in what follows to one of the textual examples Landsberg draws on in the elaboration of her theory: *The Thieving Hand* (1908), a short film of approximately 5.5 minutes' running time which represents a literal prosthesis, and which for this reason can be identified as integral to her theory-formation. Anecdotally – yet significantly, given Landsberg's emphasis on audience response and affect – it was watching this film that first prompted me to look further into her work, for what I saw and what she focussed on were so very different. Her interpretation of the film seemed jarring in places, out of sync with other key ideas expressed in *Prosthetic Memory*. This spectator experience led to the realisation that a problematic relationship between the literal and the figurative in Landsberg's reading of *The Thieving Hand* is echoed at various levels of her work. There was, in brief, a serious issue with metaphor and coherence.

The short film is placed in a conspicuous position in both of Landsberg's principal expositions of her concept of prosthetic memory. An initial article on the subject from 1995 – 'Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*' – opens with the following sentence: 'In the 1908 Edison film *The Thieving Hand*, a wealthy passer-by takes pity on an armless beggar and buys him a prosthetic arm. As the beggar soon discovers, however, the arm has memories of its own' (Landsberg, 1995: 175). The chapter entitled 'Prosthetic Memory' in the monograph that followed begins with the near-identical two sentences (Landsberg, 2004: 25).² The film, Landsberg (1995) suggests, grounds her theory historically: 'I have begun with *The Thieving Hand* to demonstrate that, as with all mediated forms of knowledge, prosthetic memory has a history' (p. 176).³ Curiously, in spite of its prominent position both literally as the opening paragraph in Landsberg's theory-construction in both article and monograph, and figuratively as putative source and foundation of the concept of prosthetic memory, the film has not attracted the attention of many critics – neither Berger nor Munslow mention it, and nor does Abel (2006) in his detailed critical review.⁴ There is no bibliographic reference to this short film in either Landsberg's article or her monograph.

The film, which is readily available online or as part of the DVD collection *Treasures from American Film Archives* (Simmons and Marks, 2000), was made by the Vitagraph company, founded in the late 1890s by J. Stuart Blackton, newspaper illustrator and 'lightning sketch' vaudeville cartoonist and magician Albert E. Smith.⁵ It is not certain who directed it, but most online sources (including IMDb and WorldCat) name Blackton as director and producer. The tale involves five principal characters; six if you count the prosthetic arm:⁶ a one-armed street pedlar selling pencils; a wealthy man who pays for a prosthesis when the pedlar returns to him a ring which he drops in the street; a salesman in the shop 'Limbs' where the prosthesis is purchased; a pawnbroker with whom the pedlar leaves the arm when it starts thieving, apparently of its own volition (the arms soon makes its own way back to the pedlar, having stolen rings from the pawnshop); a criminal in jail to whom the errant arm attaches itself when the pedlar is imprisoned for theft. What is striking is how Landsberg discusses, or rather does not discuss, the pawnbroker character. In *Prosthetic Memory* Landsberg (2004) simply makes a mistake when she refers to 'the pawnshop merchant who sells it [the prosthetic arm] to him' (p. 35). In fact, the prosthesis salesman is a different character in a different shop. This in itself is perplexing, but more troubling is the fact that nothing is said in either the article or the monograph, even in a footnote, about the Jewish stereotype of the pawnbroker. Ironically, this failure to comment on an anti-semitic representation extends to not seeing, or at least not mentioning, other literal prostheses in the film: the theatrical bald cap and prosthetic nose worn by the actor playing the pawnbroker. No mention is made, either, of the fact that the Jew is struck by a police officer when he indicates that the rings stolen from his shop should be returned to him.

And yet the stereotyping is obvious – there is also some (silent) wailing and hand wringing – and indeed the representation of the Jew, if not details of the anti-semitism, has certainly been deemed worthy of mention elsewhere. In the music notes to the *Treasures from American Film Archives* DVD Martin Marks states that he chose 'That Hand-Played Rag' as part of the soundtrack because its strong Yiddish inflection made it 'an apt choice for the pawnbroker's scenes'. Solomon (2009), writing in *American Cinema 1890–1909*, refers to 'the Jewish pawnbroker (represented here by an especially crude stereotype)' (p. 219). If *The Thieving Hand* was indeed directed by Blackton – and he would certainly have had oversight of the material – this anti-semitic stereotyping would be of a piece with other examples of his work. Just the year before, in 1907, he had directed another short film, *Lightning Sketches*, in which, as the titles suggests, he performs rapid sketches. One of these takes the form of his writing 'Cohen' on a large sheet of paper then transforming the name into the crude caricature of a Jew with a large hooked nose (there is a similarly objectionable transformation of the word 'coon').⁷ The 'clear anti-semitic overtones' of *Lightning Sketches* are mentioned in Erens's (1984) *The Jew in American Cinema*, with a footnote adding that 'Rumour has it that neither man [Blackton nor Smith] had any special love for the Jewish' (pp. 31, 396, note 11). Slide's (1994) *Early American Cinema* offers further anecdotal reflection: 'J. Stuart Blackton's daughter, Marion, states categorically: "My father was anti-Semitic, a weakness in him I could never understand"' (p. 49).

The gap between Landsberg's reading and that of other audience members – those who do comment on the Jewish stereotyping – highlights two conceptual weaknesses in *Prosthetic Memory*. Firstly, not all audiences 'see' as she suggests they do, nor are they 'forced' into certain positions, as she not infrequently suggests. Both 'see' and 'forced' are themselves figurative terms which as used by Landsberg elide the work of interpretation. Secondly, her failure to comment on the Jewish stereotyping undermines the coherence of a work that not only focusses on the Shoah and ethical engagement, but centres on a metaphorical instrumentalisation of the prosthesis. To put it bluntly, if you are going to build your case around metaphorical prostheses, you can legitimately be expected to be attentive to their literal counterparts.

Literally and figuratively

By choosing a theoretical term that comprises a qualifier added to the noun 'memory', Landsberg effectively inserts herself intertextually into a series of similar terms – 'cultural', 'collective' and 'multidirectional' memory, to name just three – and thus into the academic field of Memory Studies. At least some, if not all such uses of the term 'memory' are figurative: literal memory is an individual cognitive process. As Erl (2010) puts it: 'It is important to realize that the notions of "cultural" or "collective" memory proceed from an operative metaphor' (p. 4).⁸ Given the tendency for the metaphorical status of these terms to be reified, and bearing in mind also that Landsberg emphasises affect and ethics, it is worth stating from the outset that for some people, collapsing the difference between literal and figurative memory may be deemed inappropriate, even offensive: there is an epistemological, ethical and ontological gap between remembering – and all the more so remembering trauma – and being moved by learning of the experiences of others.

Memory and metaphors do, however, go together. As Draisma (2000) reminds us in *Metaphors of Memory*, remembering involves a mortal body; memories 'do not survive the death of the person and cannot be passed on' (p. 2). But something less tangible is also in play. The involvement of both body (brain) and mind (consciousness) makes definitions and explanations of memory notoriously difficult. Arguably, any workable conceptualisation of memory would also need to encompass a range of types (episodic, semantic, procedural, etc.) and processes, including those relating to the formation, preservation and retrieval of memories, not to mention the ability to differentiate between what is recollected and what is imagined. It is precisely this complexity and the involvement of the intangible and apparently immaterial that make memory particularly suited to metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) note our tendency to 'conceptualize the nonphysical *in terms of* the physical'; what is less clearly delineated in terms of what is more clearly delineated (pp. 59, 109). Attempts to describe and account for memory using material metaphors can be traced back to Plato's wax tablets and aviary in the *Theaetetus* through to Locke's storehouse or repository of ideas, to more recent computer software imagery.⁹ The prosthesis can thus be regarded as a further example in this series, with a material object being used to help conceptualise the complexities of memory. But does it work as a metaphor?

Although theories of metaphor vary, and although I will draw again in what follows on one of these – conceptual metaphor theory – some common denominators amongst theories can be identified, starting with Ritchie's (2012) very open definition of metaphor as 'seeing, experiencing, or talking about something in terms of something else' (p. 8). To this one can add that there are usually at least two terms involved, traditionally known as the vehicle and tenor, now more usually the source and target domain, and that some sort of relationship is forged between these terms (based for instance on similarity, analogy, a perspectival seeing x in terms of y, an experiencing of x in terms of y, a conceptual blending of x and y). Finally, understanding metaphors typically involves a process of exclusion and inclusion. Taking a simple example, if we read 'Achilles is a lion' in a commentary on Greek epic poetry we may foreground in our understanding 'brave', 'noble' and maybe 'predator' from the source domain, but are less likely to keep 'sleeps for much of the day and lets the females do most of the hunting' (though Achilles does famously withdraw from battle and remain in his tent for 18 books of the *Iliad*). If we initially consider 'prosthetic memory' out of its context and decide that the term is not to be taken literally,¹⁰ the source domain potentially offers various options. First, there are, as we have seen, both theatrical and medical prostheses.

The former are temporary and serve to transform, disguise or even disfigure in the name of entertainment. The latter may bring to mind specific limbs (arm, hand, or leg; but what of, say, ocular prostheses?) and, depending on our individual knowledge base, different materials and types of interface with body. Source domains are not fixed in time: thinking just of

hands, prostheses range from strapped-on iron and wood contraptions to highly complex composite materials interfacing via osseointegration, targeted motor reinnervation or vascularised composite allotransplantation (see Zuo and Olson, 2014).

Whatever we draw from the source domain, the word ‘prosthesis’ is inevitably more loaded than other qualifiers of memory such as ‘collective’ or ‘multidirectional’, so it is unsurprising that the use of ‘prosthesis’ in metaphors has its critics. Holt and Murray (2020), for instance, in the context of a call for greater interdisciplinarity between engineering and cultural studies, mention Landsberg’s use as just one example of “‘prosthetic” as a critical theoretical term’, and stress that metaphorical uses ‘function, whether knowingly or not, through strategic conceptions of disability’ (p. 2). Sobchack (2005) in *The Prosthetic Impulse* notes that as someone with an actual prosthetic leg, she is ‘both startled and amused’ by metaphorical uses of prosthesis, referring to it as ‘a sexy, new metaphor’ and noting that it often excludes ‘prosthetic realities’; that there is a marked tension between use of the metaphor and the lived phenomenological reality of those with prostheses (pp. 18–19, 21). Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis* takes things in another direction, demonstrating that disabled characters are instrumentalised in many narratives, and thus identifying disability as ‘an opportunistic metaphorical device’ used by authors. The representation of disability itself is knowingly described by the authors as ‘a prosthetic contrivance’ on which narratives rely (Mitchell and Snyder, 2014: 48, 51). Thinking carefully about the literal and the figurative with such critiques in mind means considering what Landsberg makes of the literal prosthesis of the pedlar and his disability as well as that of the one-armed prisoner who features at the close of the film. This is both an ideological issue – as will become clear, Landsberg employs ableist language rooted in a medical model of disability – and a question of coherence at the level of the interplay between the literal and figurative in the act of theory-construction.

The role of the one-armed criminal in *The Thieving Hand*, to whom the arm attaches itself at the end of the film (or ‘reattaches itself’, as Landsberg puts it), is wholly figurative in Landsberg’s (2004) narrative: he is the metaphorical and metonymic ‘real or authentic thieving body’ (p. 27). It is worth stressing that this figurative status is the result of an interpretation: there is nothing in the film to suggest that the wandering limb must necessarily be regarded as the criminal’s; indeed given the fact that the prosthesis is purchased for the pedlar in the shop ‘Limbs’ presumably as new (as opposed to items in the pawnshop), it could just as readily be regarded as passing from one person to the next in an endless chain. By contrast, the one-armed pedlar is indeed briefly discussed in terms of his literal disability, Landsberg (2004) stating, somewhat obliquely, that *The Thieving Hand* ‘naturalizes class difference by representing it as a physical deformity’ (p. 46). A footnote speculates that the pedlar may well have lost his hand, ‘the symbol of his capacity for labor’, in an assembly line mishap, and that ‘The lost hand conjures up Taylorist and Fordist practices’ (Landsberg, 2004: 35, note 36).¹¹ The language Landsberg (2004) uses, however, especially when taken as a whole, is incongruous, from the choice of the word ‘deformity’, to the reference to the pedlar’s body as ‘not whole’, ‘nor [. . .] “normal”’ (p. 35). The pedlar is, in fact, referred to throughout as a ‘beggar’, and indeed we are even told at one point that ‘the beggar is also a cripple’ (Landsberg, 2004: 35).¹² As with the case of the Jewish pawnbroker, and given the central role in the monograph of ‘respecting and recognizing difference’ (Landsberg, 2004: 24), the manner in which the one-armed characters in *The Thieving Hand* are discussed undermines conceptual coherence. And this is not an isolated example. A close reading of four representative examples of references to figurative and literal bodies in the monograph shows that a similarly dissonant relationship is repeated in different guises.

The Introduction to *Prosthetic Memory* includes the statement: ‘Now, as Holocaust survivors are dying, the pressing question is how other *bodies* – *bodies* that did not live through the original trauma – might testify to what happened’ (p. 23, my italics). There are two issues here. First, the

shift from the literal plane – dying Holocaust survivors – to metonymic ‘bodies’ (bodies=people) is both clumsy and a sleight of hand: survivors, of course, are more than bodies, which is precisely why they have the potential to remember their trauma and testify whilst their metonymic equivalents cannot. Equally troubling is the reference to the ‘bodies’ that failed to live through the trauma, a metonym that all too readily blurs into a nightmarish vision of those literal Jewish bodies seen in so much historical footage, whether strewn around camps in dehumanised form or bulldozed into mass graves.

Chapter 2 of *Prosthetic Memory* opens with the following statement and another infelicitous figure: ‘In its simplest form, the American “melting pot” fantasy was that as immigrants entered the nation, the visible signs of their ethnic and racial difference would be *bleached out*’ (p. 49, my emphasis). Two different source domains are in play here. The reference to ‘visible signs of [. . .] difference’ evokes the body, such that the element foregrounded in the source domain of this metaphor is inevitably skin bleaching. The metaphor of the ‘melting pot’ (first applied in the American context by a Jew, Israel Zangwill, mistakenly referenced by Landsberg as ‘Zangwell’) is based on a blast furnace or crucible and the melting together of solids. As Semino points out, ‘potentially clashing metaphorical expressions are very frequently used in close proximity to one another, but their mutual incongruity often goes unnoticed’ (p. 27). This should not be true in the case of a monograph which repeatedly draws attention to metaphor, so it is important to ask whether this figurative combination works. After all, mixed metaphors need not signal conceptual weakness: source domains may complement each other. Landsberg’s ‘bleaching out’ of visible signs of difference evokes an internalised racialised aesthetic that valorises whiteness. On the face of it (no pun intended) this might seem apt in the context of the chapter, which focusses on ‘new immigrants’ to America actively seeking to assimilate, especially Jews and Italians, described by Landsberg (2004) as ‘darker-skinned’ and ‘more visibly ethnic’ (p. 52). The problem with the metaphor – beyond the fact that I am unconvinced that these groups are necessarily darker skinned – is that skin bleaching is specifically associated with black and Asian women (and to a lesser extent men). The metaphor thereby unhelpfully introduces a different identity group and historical context into the discussion. Attribution and source are also issues: the same phrase is used later in the chapter in connection not to the fantasised assimilationist desire of immigrants, but rather to those of Henry Ford, as Landsberg refers to ‘Ford’s fantasy of bleaching out difference’ (p. 50).

The third example is taken from Chapter 4 of *Prosthetic Memory*: ‘America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: The “Object” of Remembering’. On this occasion Landsberg adopts a Nietzschean metaphor by asking, in the context of the Shoah: ‘how do particular mass cultural events, institutions, and practices participate in the process of “burning in” such memories?’ (p. 113). Although Landsberg cites a segment of the original image – “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in” – noting that like her, Nietzsche regarded memory as an embodied phenomenon, she does not mention that in its original context the metaphor is linked to extreme physical pain, the idea being that in a hypothetically archaic scenario especially strong motivation (torture, branding) was required to overcome a natural human tendency to forget. The quotation from *On the Genealogy of Morals* in fact continues: ‘If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in; only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory . . .’ (Kaufmann, 2000: 497, Nietzsche’s emphasis). As with the expression ‘bleaching out’, the metaphor ‘burning in’, used here in the context of the Shoah, threatens to conflate two different identity groups, bringing to mind as it does the branding of slaves. It could be suggested that this example and that of ‘bleaching out’ constitute variants on what Semino calls ‘topic-triggering’, whereby metaphor choice is influenced by the topic under discussion (different historical traumas, if we take ‘topic under discussion’ to mean the monograph as a whole in this case). Such metaphors, Semino states, can strengthen an argument by binding the literal and the metaphorical together or be ‘strategically

used to blur the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical' (pp. 104–106). I do not believe that this is what is happening here. Rather, 'bleaching out' and 'burning in' are examples of what might be called cross-topic contamination, whereby coherence is undermined rather than strengthened, in this case via the conflation of different identity groups and historical contexts. There is indeed a blurring of the literal/figurative boundary, as the 'burning in' metaphor all too easily evokes images of real material bodies burning in crematoria. The metaphor seems all the more inappropriate when it is picked up again in the context of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Landsberg, referring to the importance of 'making the Holocaust concrete and thinkable', continues: 'It is about ways to "burn in" memories so that they might become meaningful locally' (p. 139).

The final example is taken from Landsberg's interpretation of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, specifically, her reading of Holocaust survivor Vladek's picking up of an old piece of wire in the street as a metaphor for the recirculation of the Holocaust in another medium (in this case the graphic novel). This already somewhat unconvincing claim (see Abel, 2006: 386) is followed by:

More broadly, the recirculation of the wire allegorizes the potential usefulness of the Holocaust in America as a way of thinking about the recirculation of 'waste' for productive ends. In other words, that the Holocaust might be a grounds for politics—or even for the production of subjectivity—presumes the potential usefulness of even the darkest and seemingly most irredeemable memories from the past. (Landsberg, 2004: 116)

The first sentence, which represents the Shoah as metaphorical 'waste' (or "'waste'") is to say the very least likely to raise hackles and objections. Precisely which aspects of the source domain are in play here? It is hard to imagine how a blend of source and target domains might be achieved in this instance. It is important to recognise that Landsberg highlights her own use of figurative language via the phrase 'In other words', which heads up the second sentence. Semino notes that 'signals' or 'tuning devices' such as this 'draw attention to the presence of metaphoricality in the immediate co-text, and [that] potentially guide readers' or listeners' interpretations' (p. 27). In this instance, however, the second sentence switches the focus to memories of the Shoah rather than the event itself and does nothing to make the 'waste' metaphor function more effectively. Tuning devices of this sort, including the phrases 'in any strict sense', 'in the traditional sense' and 'literally and figuratively', are common in Landsberg's work.¹³ Often, as in this case, they obscure rather than elucidate. In the Introduction to *Prosthetic Memory*, for instance, reference is made to 'people who inhabit, literally and figuratively, different social spaces, practices and beliefs' (p. 8). How, one might ask, does one literally inhabit a belief or practice? The phrase 'quite literally' is also used erratically: Landsberg's (2004) reader is informed that children whose bodies were cast as figures in the exhibit of a slave ship 'have quite literally lent their bodies to memorialise an event through which they did not live' (p. 81), though a body is not something that can literally be lent, any more than a narrative can be 'quite literally constructed before the reader' (p. 83).

The Spiegelman example is also worthy of note for the presence of scare quotes ("waste"), which like the tuning devices draw the reader's attention to individual words and phrases, and which are ubiquitous in Landsberg's work. These can be differentiated from quotation marks used to acknowledge the words of a third party, as is the case with "melting pot" and "burning in". Most commonly they take the form in *Prosthetic Memory* of what Pinker (2014), in his discussion of the use of scare quotes, classifies as 'compulsive hedging' (p. 43). They are also deployed with a degree of inconsistency. Why, to return to my examples, put 'waste' in scare quotes and not 'bleaching out'? More significantly, Landsberg uses scare quotes when it comes to key terms in her theory-building, namely with lexical items relating to memory and to what is or is not natural or

authentic. There are so many of these that it is impossible to do more than offer a small but representative sample. Mass culture, we are told, makes memories available to those ‘who have no “natural” claim to them’ (p. 9). ‘Natural’ – or rather ““natural”” – can often be found paired with other words, which are sometimes, but not always, also placed in scare quotes, thus: ““natural” or biological claims’ to memories (p. 18); ‘In both these films characters identify with memories that are not “naturally” or “properly” their own’ (p. 22); prosthetic memories which ‘are not “natural” or “authentic”’ (p. 26), with ““authentic”” explained at one point as ‘not an “actual” experience of a remembered event’ (p. 33). On the first pages of her monograph Landsberg refers to the film *The Road to Yesterday* and the character Bess gaining access to ‘memories of events through which she did not live but which she will take on as her own’ (p. 1), before on the very next page noting that Bess can ““remember”” a distant past, and referring to her ““memories”” of seventeenth-century England’ (p. 2). This hedging on occasion – though not always – extends to the key concept itself: ‘The American public seems increasingly drawn to experiential mass cultural forms, many of which turn history into personal memory and thus advance the production of “prosthetic memories”’ (p. 130). Not only is it ethically questionable to blur the difference between real individual memories and other, quite different constructs by hedging in this way: the status of memories is key to Landsberg’s theory. Fudging the issue between literal and metaphorical memories undermines the very argument she is seeking to make.

So far I have suggested that inconsistencies and a degree of incoherence can be identified in the relationship between the literal and the figurative at various levels of *Prosthetic Memory*: in what is said or not said about material prostheses (the theatrical prostheses used by the actor playing the pawnbroker and the language used to describe the one-armed characters in *The Thieving Hand*); the use of figurative expressions (metonymic ‘bodies’, ‘bleaching out’, ‘burning in’, ‘waste’) that are both potentially offensive and threaten to undermine conceptual coherence in their conflating of identity groups and historical periods; confusing use of tuning devices (such as the phrase ‘both literally and figuratively’); hedging using scare quotes, especially for key theory-building terms. Earlier, prosthetic as a metaphor was briefly discussed out of its immediate context. A final reading of the metaphor with these issues in mind can now be undertaken.

Prosthetic Memory: Authorly propositions and a readerly response

In many discursive contexts – literary works, the press, advertising – readers are largely left to fend for themselves when it comes to interpreting metaphors. As Semino notes, however, there are other possible dynamics:

Unlike literary writers [. . .] scientists tend to spell out in great detail how they intend their metaphors to be interpreted. This is especially the case with new creative metaphors, which do not yet have conventional interpretations within the scientific community’ (p. 222)

Such guidance for readers is also common in works of literary or cultural theory, and *Prosthetic Memory* is no exception. Landsberg glosses her figurative term in the Introduction to the monograph, stating from the outset: ‘I call these memories *prosthetic memories* for four reasons’ (p. 20). Her readers, of course, are not ‘forced’ to comply with this guidance. Indeed, if they have watched *The Thieving Hand*, and responded to the tuning devices and scare quotes inviting closer attention to language in the monograph, they may well read quite differently.

‘I call these memories *prosthetic* to underscore their usefulness’ (p. 21, my italics). Both Marco Abel and Nicki Hitchcott (2020) have questioned whether the memories described by Landsberg

are necessarily useful, whilst Tybjerg argues convincingly that the literal prosthetic memories in *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*, which Landsberg draws upon for her metaphor, should not be interpreted as having the potential to effect progressive change.¹⁴ My focus here remains on the use of figurative language and conceptual coherence. On the face of it, usefulness is an obvious characteristic one might take from the source domain of prosthetics. The problem arises when *The Thieving Hand*, which is repeatedly foregrounded by Landsberg, comes into play. Not only does the prosthetic arm in that filmic context prove to be disastrous for the pedlar; in the case of the pawnbroker theatrical prostheses are rather unhelpfully used to create an anti-semitic caricature. It is also important to note that in this and indeed all four directive propositions about her choice of metaphor, Landsberg uses the term ‘memories’, and not ‘memory’. Used in the singular as it is in the monograph title, and especially as part of an intertextual series (‘collective’, ‘multi-dimensional’ etc), ‘memory’ refers to the highly complex faculty of an individual. *Prosthetic Memory* is more of a book about ‘prosthetic memories’.

The memories are also called prosthetic because doing so ‘signals their interchangeability and exchangeability and underscores their commodified form’ (p. 20, my italics). Thinking again in terms of the source domain, although prostheses may be regarded as commodities (they are certainly bought and sold) this seems an unlikely trait to foreground, and even more so the qualities of interchangeability and exchangeability. In fact, it is the mass media products at the centre of Landsberg’s theory that have ‘commodified form’, not the memories: ‘prosthetic’ thus functions here as a transferred epithet. The influence of *The Thieving Hand* again makes itself felt, for that is the context in which a prosthesis is bought and sold as well as passed from one person to another.

Thirdly, these are dubbed ‘prosthetic memories’ because ‘they are not natural, not the product of lived experience’ (p. 20, my italics). The association of a prosthesis with what is not natural is open to question: Sobchack, for instance, stresses that phenomenologically prostheses are often wholly integrated into the user’s body. As we have seen, scare quotes are usually employed with the adjective ‘natural’ in *Prosthetic Memory* (just a few pages later, in fact, we find ‘these memories are not “natural” or “authentic”’, p. 26), thereby calling into question one of the key aspects of the theory. The tuning device used when the same set of ideas is expressed in Landsberg’s (1995) earlier article also has the effect of hedging: ‘By prosthetic memories I mean memories which do not come from a person’s lived experience in any strict sense’ (p. 175, my emphasis). Rhetorical sleight of hand in the form of *petitio principii* is used to make the same point when it is asserted that the pedlar’s ‘subject position as thief [. . .] is predicated on memories of experiences through which he did not live, that is, prosthetic memories’ (Landsberg, 2004: 25, my emphasis). This notion of memories uncoupled from ‘lived experience’ is also expressed via personification: the prosthetic limb in *The Thieving Hand* ‘has its own memories’ (p. 25), we are told, and these memories make a thief of the pedlar.¹⁵ To the extent that the prosthesis in *The Thieving Hand* is animate, Landsberg’s personification is not inapt,¹⁶ but it is worth noting that the pedlar resists and rejects the identity which the arm apparently bestows on him, inviting questions about how prosthetic memories might be unwanted or enter into conflict with self-identification. Finally, although the clause ‘they are not natural, not the product of lived experience’ invites us syntactically to read the second proposition as a reinforcement of the first, the representation of ‘natural’ memories as ‘products’ of experience elides too many factors in the processing and recall of memories, harking back as it does to the early memory metaphor of an impression stamped onto wax.

Finally, memories are called prosthetic, Landsberg states, because ‘as I describe in chapter 1, these memories, like an artificial limb, are actually worn on the body’ (20, my italics). Landsberg’s aim here is to stress the bodily experience which results from the act of spectatorship, but once again the figurative language is problematic.¹⁷ As with the personification of the pedlar’s arm, one trope is added to another, this time in the form of a simile: memories are ‘actually worn on the body

like an artificial limb'. What can the 'actually' mean in this context? And what are we to make of the new metaphor, 'worn'? In Landsberg's (1995) earlier article it is linked to mass media products: 'the portability of cinematic images – the way we are invited to wear them prosthetically [. . .]' (p. 181). Both wearing and portability seem closer to the domain of clothing (*prêt-à-porter*) than to prostheses. In any event it is difficult not to see this metaphor as another example of hedging, even obfuscation.¹⁸

Stylistic traits and tics can all too easily become engrained, as Landsberg's 'Response' to Berger's and Munslow's critiques of *Prosthetic Memory* demonstrates. Initially agreeing that prosthetic memory does not involve 'literally experiencing someone else's memory', Landsberg (2007) then shifts the ground via another metaphor – it is, rather, 'learning to see differently, as if through someone else's eyes' – before swerving – and hedging – by referring to 'the formation of a memory of an event that wasn't lived *in the traditional sense*, and might not be acquired in any "natural" or voluntary way' (pp. 628–629, my italics).

Conclusion and undead metaphors

For conceptual metaphor theorists so-called 'dead' metaphors may express underlying conceptual metaphors. The conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, for instance, can be identified via verbal metaphors which might well pass unnoticed: 'Your claims are *indefensible*'; 'He *attacked* every weak point in my argument' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:4). Slowing the reading process down and looking for just some of the verbal metaphors relating to memory in the Introduction to *Prosthetic Memory* is revealing. Memory 'has a role' and comes in different 'forms'; it can 'be transmitted' and 'inform identity'. Memories are 'building blocks'; they can also be 'taken on', 'acquired', 'disseminated', 'produced' and 'forged'. They may (or may not) 'belong to a group', are 'central to a person's identity' and can, more actively, 'affect people', 'shape subjectivity', 'generate empathy' and 'organise and energise bodies and subjectivities'. Following Lakoff and Johnson's typology, these verbal metaphors reveal underlying ontological metaphors: MEMORY IS AN AGENT/ENTITY, and MEMORIES ARE AGENTS/ENTITIES. Adopting a critical stance when we encounter metaphor means asking 'how is this conceptualisation of memory and memories limiting our thinking?'; 'could a different conceptualisation lead not only to different theories, but a different praxis?'.

My focus on 'prosthetic memory' is intended to be taken as a case study of the influential but problematic workings of metaphor in Memory Studies, and beyond that, cultural/literary theory. Metaphors do more than adorn. Used well they achieve what literal propositions cannot; used badly or insensitively, they may offend, obfuscate, delimit and skew thinking, undermine the very arguments they are intended to support. Metaphors are open (or vulnerable: choose your metaphor) to interpretation, they may become dated, be co-opted or assume the faddish status of memes. Boyd (1993) states that:

There exists an important class of metaphors which play a role in the development and articulation of theories in relatively mature sciences. Their function is a sort of *catachresis*—that is, they are used to introduce theoretical terminology where none previously existed. (p. 482)¹⁹

The same may be true of cultural theory, and it is certainly always worth asking whether metaphors in this field function in a similar way, facilitating conceptualisations that would otherwise not be possible, perhaps acting as necessary placeholders. It is equally important to consider both metaphors' discursive limitations, and the potentially deleterious effects they may have. Interdisciplinary awareness and cooperation may help in cases where metaphors are co-opted from other fields.

With respect to prosthetic memory, for instance, a ‘disability media studies’ approach as envisaged by Mills and Sterne, or indeed a disability memory studies approach, might benefit both fields.²⁰ A critical approach to metaphor, finally, can and should be mobilised at all discursive levels, from coinages at the heart of theories (like ‘prosthetic memory’) to both existing and innovative figurative expressions (‘bleaching out’, ‘wearing’ a memory) which may, or may not, be flagged by the writer who is using them, to the undead metaphors which affect the very way we think.

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Notes

1. The terms ‘research impact’, ‘research environment’ and ‘research output’ are drawn from the Research Excellence Framework, a process familiar to all UK academics. See: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>
2. There are minor changes from the article to the monograph version: ‘passer-by’ becomes ‘passerby’; ‘memories of its own’ becomes ‘its own memories’; ‘Edison’ is changed to ‘Vitagraph’. The relationship between Vitagraph and Edison is documented by Musser (1983).
3. Note also that this claim illustrates a stylistic trait which we will encounter again: *petitio principii* or ‘begging the question’, that is assuming what you are claiming to be establishing.
4. Berger (2007) states that Landsberg presents prosthetic memory ‘through three distinct types of example’, which he labels ‘models’, ‘demonstrations’ and actual instances’, but he does not include *The Thieving Hand* in this list. *The Thieving Hand* is also absent from Tybjerg’s (2016) analysis.
5. See Musser (1983: 4–46) on Blackton. My thanks to Dr Malcolm Cook for the information he provided on Blackton.
6. Matthew Solomon states of the arm’s escape from the pawnshop: ‘the “thieving hand” becomes an independent – and uniquely cinematic – character. These trick shots contain no people and, moreover, are not seen by anyone in the film’, in André Gaudreault (Solomon, 2009: 219).
7. <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/sammondn/clips/blackton-lightning-a.mp4/view>. See Cook (2018) for references to the Cohen sketch (pp. 65, 140–142).
8. See Olick (1999) for a discussion of the relationship between individual, collective and collected memory, and how these relationships map onto issues of literal or metaphorical memory.
9. *Theaetetus* (191c-e) and (197d ff.); Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II. x1-2). Whitehead (2009) identifies three transhistorical ‘motifs’ relating to memory: inscription, spatial metaphors, and body memory’ (p. 9).
10. Foster (2009) notes that (literal) prostheses which might improve our memory do not yet exist, though this might be possible in the future ‘through the interfacing of carbon-based and silicon-based hardware’ (p. 115).
11. See Jain (1999) for a reading of Fordism and disability in the context of prostheses and consumerism. Jain cites Ford’s *My Life and Work* on what types of bodies could operate his plant’s machinery, including the statement that ‘670 [of lighter jobs] could be filled by legless men, 2, 637 by one-legged men, two by armless men, 715 by one-armed men and ten by blind men’.
12. Landsberg’s use of the word seems wholly unrelated to more recent developments in ‘Crip Theory’, which has deliberately reclaimed the word.
13. For examples in Landsberg’s later writing see, for instance: Landsberg (2018a: 630): ‘in both the literal and figural senses of the word’; ‘both literally and figuratively’; Landsberg (2009: 222): ‘The sensuous

- engagement that these technologies enable creates the formation of a memory of an event that wasn't lived in the traditional sense and might not be acquired in any "natural" hereditary or voluntary way'.
14. Tybjerg states in his conclusion that literal prosthetic memory in these SF films 'comes with such strong associations of fraudulence, mental manipulation, and brain-washing that it cannot serve the hopeful purposes it is supposed to serve'. See Sanyal for a different but related approach to the usefulness or otherwise of representations of trauma. Objecting to theories of memory which focus on victim and trauma identification, Sanyal (2015) calls for a focus on 'complicity', stating that 'The aesthetic encounter does not simply open up our identification with various forms of alterity, in a conversion of difference into familiarity' (p. 15).
 15. An earlier version gives: 'the arm has memories of its own'; 'the arm remembers' (Landsberg, 1995: 175).
 16. For an extreme version of the personification of a hand see Laurant (2006), whose novel is partly narrated by a hand severed in an accident.
 17. See Tybjerg for a critique of Landsberg's approach to theories of embodied spectatorship.
 18. A variant of this metaphor can be found in Landsberg's (2018b) later work, in which she states: 'This museum makes all visitors wear their race' (p. 213).
 19. See also Olick (1999: 333–334) who states of the term 'collective memory': 'we need to inquire into the value added by the term, to specify what phenomena the term sensitizes us to as well as what kind of sensitivity this is'.
 20. See especially Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne, 'Afterword II: Dismediation—Three Proposals, Six Tactics', which includes a discussion of the 'media-as-prosthesis' trope.

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