

PRESENT PASTS

Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory

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Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia

I

One of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key cultural and political concern in Western societies, a turning toward the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity. From the early twentieth century's apocalyptic myths of radical breakthrough and the emergence of the "new man" in Europe via the murderous phantasms of racial or class purification in National Socialism and Stalinism to the post-World War II American paradigm of modernization, modernist culture was energized by what one might call "present futures."¹ Since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically.²

But the contemporary focus on memory and temporality is mostly absent from much recent innovative work on categories of space, maps, geographies, borders, trade routes, migrations, displacements, and diasporas in the context of postcolonial and cultural studies. Not so long ago in the United States, there was a widespread consensus that in order to understand postmodern culture, the focus had to be shifted from the problematics of time and memory ascribed to an earlier form of high modernism

to that of space as key to the postmodern moment.³ But as the work of geographers such as David Harvey has shown,⁴ we would separate time and space at great peril to a full understanding of either modern or postmodern culture. As fundamentally contingent categories of historically rooted perception, time and space are always bound up with each other in complex ways, and the intensity of border-crossing memory discourses that characterize so much of contemporary culture in so many different parts of the world today proves the point. Indeed, issues of differing temporalities and alternatively paced modernities have emerged as key to a new rigorous understanding of the long-term processes of globalization that tries to be more than just an update of Western modernization paradigms.⁵

Memory discourses of a new kind first emerged in the West after the 1960s in the wake of decolonization and the new social movements and their search for alternative and revisionist histories. The search for other traditions and the tradition of "others" was accompanied by multiple statements about endings: the end of history, the death of the subject, the end of the work of art, the end of metanarratives.⁶ Such claims were frequently understood all too literally, but in their polemical thrust and replication of the ethos of avant-gardism, they pointed directly to the ongoing recodification of the past after modernism.

Memory discourses accelerated in Europe and the United States by the early 1980s, energized then primarily by the ever-broadening debate about the Holocaust (triggered by the TV series *Holocaust* and, somewhat later, by the testimony movement), as well as by a whole series of politically loaded and widely covered fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries relating to the history of the Third Reich: Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the Nazis' infamous book burnings, remembered in 1983; Kristallnacht, the organized pogrom of 1938 against Germany's Jews, publicly commemorated in 1988; the Wannsee Conference of 1942, which had initiated the Final Solution, remembered in 1992 with the opening of a museum in the Wannsee villa where the conference had taken place; the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944, remembered with grand spectacle by the Allies, but without any Russian presence, in 1994; the end of World War II in 1945, remembered in 1985 with a stirring speech by the German president and again in 1995 with a whole series of international events in Europe and Japan. Such mostly "German anniversaries," the historians' debate of 1986, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and German national reunification in

1990,⁷ received intense coverage in the international media, stirring up post-World War II codifications of national history in France, Austria, Italy, Japan, even the United States, and most recently Switzerland. The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., planned during the 1980s and inaugurated in 1993, gave rise to the debate about the Americanization of the Holocaust.⁸ But the resonances of Holocaust memory did not stop there. At this point one must indeed raise the question to what extent one can now speak of a globalization of Holocaust discourse.

The recurrence of genocidal politics in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo in the allegedly posthistorical 1990s has kept the Holocaust memory discourse alive, contaminating it and extending it past its original reference point. It is interesting to note how in the case of the organized massacres in Rwanda and Bosnia in the early 1990s, comparisons with the Holocaust were at first fiercely resisted by politicians, the media, and much of the public, not because of the undeniable historical differences, but rather because of a desire to resist intervention.⁹ NATO's "humanitarian" intervention in Kosovo and its legitimation, on the other hand, have been largely dependent on Holocaust memory. Streams of refugees across borders, women and children packed into trains for deportation, stories of atrocities, systematic rape, and wanton destruction all mobilized a politics of guilt in Europe and the United States associated with nonintervention in the 1930s and 1940s and the failure to intervene in the Bosnian war of 1992. The Kosovo war thus confirms the increasing power of memory culture in the late 1990s, but it also raises thorny issues about using the Holocaust as a universal trope for historical trauma.

The globalization of memory works as well in two other related senses that illustrate what I would call the globalization paradox. On the one hand, the Holocaust has become a cipher for the twentieth century as a whole and for the failure of the project of enlightenment. It serves as proof of Western civilization's failure to practice anamnesis, to reflect on its constitutive inability to live in peace with difference and otherness, and to draw the consequences from the insidious relationship among enlightened modernity, racial oppression, and organized violence.¹⁰ On the other hand, this totalizing dimension of Holocaust discourse so prevalent in much postmodern thought is accompanied by a dimension that particularizes and localizes. It is precisely the emergence of the Holocaust as a universal trope that allows Holocaust memory to latch on to specific local sit-

uations that are historically distant and politically distinct from the original event. In the transnational movement of memory discourses, the Holocaust loses its quality as index of the specific historical event and begins to function as metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories. The Holocaust as a universal trope is a prerequisite for its decentering and its use as a powerful prism through which we may look at other instances of genocide. The global and the local aspects of Holocaust memory have entered into new constellations that beg to be analyzed case by case. While the comparison with the Holocaust may rhetorically energize some discourses of traumatic memory, it may also serve as a screen memory or simply block insight into specific local histories.

When it comes to present pasts, memory of the Holocaust and its place in the reassessment of Western modernity, however, is not the whole story. Many subplots make up the current memory narrative in its broadest scope and distinguish our times quite clearly from earlier decades of this century. Let me just list a few of the salient phenomena. Since the 1970s in Europe and the United States we have the historicizing restoration of old urban centers, whole museum villages and landscapes, various national heritage and patrimony enterprises, the wave of new museum architecture that shows no signs of receding, the boom in retro fashions and repro furniture, the mass-marketing of nostalgia, the obsessive self-musealization per video recorder, memoir writing, and confessional literature, the rise of autobiography and of the postmodern historical novel with its uneasy negotiation between fact and fiction, the spread of memory practices in the visual arts often centered on the medium of photography, and the increase of historical documentaries on television, including (in the United States) a channel dedicated entirely to history, the History Channel. On the traumatic side of memory culture and beside the ever more ubiquitous Holocaust discourse we have the vast psychoanalytic literature on trauma; the controversy about recovered memory syndrome; the historical and current work related to genocide, AIDs, slavery, and sexual abuse; the ever more numerous public controversies about politically painful anniversaries, commemorations, and memorials; the latest plethora of apologies for the past by church leaders and politicians in France, Japan, and the United States. And, finally, bringing together memory entertainment and trauma, we have had the worldwide obsession with the sinking of a presumably unsinkable steamship that marked the end of another gilded age. One cannot be quite

sure whether the international success of the film *Titanic* is a metaphor for memories of modernity gone awry or whether it articulates the metropolis's own anxieties about the future displaced to the past. No doubt, the world is being musealized, and we all play our parts in it. Total recall seems to be the goal. So is this an archivist's fantasy gone mad? Or is there perhaps something else at stake in this desire to pull all these various pasts into the present? Something that is specific to the structuring of memory and temporality today and that has not been experienced in the same way in past ages?

Frequently such obsessions with memory and the past are explained as a function of the latest fin de siècle, but I think one has to probe deeper to come to terms with what I will call the "culture of memory" that has become so pervasive in North Atlantic societies since the late 1970s. What here appears largely as an increasingly successful marketing of memory by the Western culture industry in the context of what German cultural sociology has called our *Erlebnisgesellschaft* acquires a more explicitly political inflection in other parts of the world.¹¹ Especially since 1989, the issues of memory and forgetting have emerged as dominant concerns in postcommunist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; they remain key politically in the Middle East; they dominate public discourse in post-apartheid South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and they are all-present in Rwanda and Nigeria; they energize the race debate that has erupted in Australia around the issue of the "stolen generation"; they burden the relationship among Japan and China and Korea, and they determine, to varying degrees, the cultural and political debate about the "desaparecidos" and their children in "post-dictadura" societies in Latin America, raising fundamental questions about human rights violations, justice, and collective responsibility.

The geographic spread of the culture of memory is as wide as memory's political uses are varied, ranging from a mobilization of mythic pasts to support aggressively chauvinist or fundamentalist politics (e.g., postcommunist Serbia, Hindu populism in India) to fledgling attempts, in Argentina and Chile, to create public spheres of "real" memory that will counter the politics of forgetting, pursued by postdictatorship regimes either through "reconciliation" and official amnesties or through repressive silencing.¹² But the fault line between mythic past and real past is not always easy to draw—which is one of the conundrums of any politics of

memory anywhere. The real can be mythologized, just as the mythic may engender strong reality effects. In sum, memory has become a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe.

At the same time it is important to recognize that although memory discourses appear to be global in one register, at their core they remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states. As particular nations struggle to create democratic polities in the wake of histories of mass extermination, apartheid, military dictatorship, or totalitarianism, they are faced, as Germany has been and still is since World War II, with the unprecedented task of securing the legitimacy and future of their emergent polity by finding ways to commemorate and adjudicate past wrongs. Whatever the differences may be between postwar Germany and South Africa, Argentina or Chile, the *political* site of memory practices is still national, not post-national or global. This does have implications for interpretive work. Although the Holocaust as a universal trope of traumatic history has migrated into other, nonrelated contexts, one must always ask whether and how the trope enhances or hinders local memory practices and struggles, or whether and how it may help and hinder at the same time. National memory debates are always shot through with the effects of the global media and their focus on themes such as genocide and ethnic cleansing, migration and minority rights, victimization and accountability. However different and site-specific the causes may be, this does suggest that globalization and the strong reassessment of the respective national, regional, or local past will have to be thought together. This in turn raises the question whether contemporary memory cultures in general can be read as reaction formations to economic globalization. Such is the terrain on which new comparative work on the mechanisms and tropes of historical trauma and national memory practices could be pursued.

II

If the time-consciousness of high modernity in the West tried to secure the future, then one could argue that the time-consciousness of the late twentieth century involves the no less perilous task of taking responsibility for the past. Both attempts inevitably are haunted by failure. Thus a second point must be made immediately. The turn toward memory and the past comes with a great paradox. Ever more frequently, critics accuse

this very contemporary memory culture of amnesia, anesthesia, or numbing. They chide its inability and unwillingness to remember, and they lament the loss of historical consciousness. The amnesia reproach is invariably couched in a critique of the media, while it is precisely these media—from print and television to CD-ROMs and the Internet—that make ever more memory available to us day by day. But what if both observations were true, if the boom in memory were inevitably accompanied by a boom in forgetting? What if the relationship between memory and forgetting were actually being transformed under cultural pressures in which new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption are beginning to take their toll? After all, many of the mass-marketed memories we consume are “imagined memories” to begin with, and thus more easily forgettable than lived memories.¹³ But then Freud already taught us that memory and forgetting are indissolubly linked to each other, that memory is but another form of forgetting, and forgetting a form of hidden memory. Yet what Freud described universally as the psychic processes of remembering, repression, and forgetting in individuals is writ large in contemporary consumer societies as a public phenomenon of unprecedented proportions that begs to be read historically.

Wherever one looks, the contemporary public obsession with memory clashes with an intense public panic of oblivion, and one may well wonder which came first. Is it the fear of forgetting that triggers the desire to remember, or is it perhaps the other way around? Could it be that the surfeit of memory in this media-saturated culture creates such overload that the memory system itself is in constant danger of imploding, thus triggering fear of forgetting? Whatever the answer to such questions, it seems clear that older sociological approaches to collective memory—approaches (such as Maurice Halbwachs's) that posit relatively stable formations of social and group memories—are not adequate to grasp the current dynamic of media and temporality, memory, lived time, and forgetting. The clashing and ever more fragmented memory politics of specific social and ethnic groups raises the question whether forms of collective consensual memory are even still possible today, and, if not, whether and in what form social and cultural cohesion can be guaranteed without them. Media memory alone clearly will not suffice, even though the media occupy ever larger chunks of the social and political perception of the world.

The very structures of public media memory make it quite under-

standable that our secular culture today, obsessed with memory as it is, is also somehow in the grips of a fear, even a terror, of forgetting. This fear of forgetting articulates itself paradigmatically around issues of the Holocaust in Europe and the United States or the *desaparecidos* in Latin America. Both share the absence of a proper burial site, so key to the nurturing of human memory, a fact that may help explain the strong presence of the Holocaust in Argentinean debates. But the fear of oblivion and disappearance operates in a different register as well. For the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of memory, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. At issue is the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data. My hypothesis here is that we are trying to counteract this fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of public and private memorialization. The turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space. At the same time, we know that such strategies of memorialization may in the end themselves be transitory and incomplete. So I must come back to the question: why? And especially: why now? Why this obsession with memory and the past and why this fear of forgetting? Why are we building museums as if there were no tomorrow? And why is it that the Holocaust has only now become something like a ubiquitous cipher for our memories of the twentieth century, in ways unimaginable even twenty years ago?

III

Whatever the social and political causes of the memory boom in its various subplots, geographies, and sectorings may have been, one thing is certain: we cannot discuss personal, generational, or public memory separately from the enormous influence of the new media as carriers of all forms of memory. Thus it is no longer possible for instance to think of the Holocaust or of any other historical trauma as a serious ethical and political issue apart from the multiple ways it is now linked to commodification and spectacularization in films, museums, docudramas, Internet sites, photography books, comics, fiction, even fairy tales (Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*) and pop songs. But even if the Holocaust has been endlessly commodified, this does not mean that each and every commodification inevitably banal-

izes it as an historical event. There is no pure space outside of commodity culture, however much we may desire such a space. Much depends therefore on the specific strategies of representation and commodification pursued and on the context in which they are staged. Similarly, the presumably trivial *Erlebnisgesellschaft* of mass-marketed lifestyles, spectacles, and fleeting events is not devoid of a substantive lived reality that underlies its surface manifestations. My argument here is this: the problem is not solved by simply opposing serious memory to trivial memory, the way historians sometime oppose history to memory *tout court*, to memory understood as the subjective and trivial stuff out of which the historian makes the real thing. We cannot simply pit the serious Holocaust museum against Disneyfied theme parks. For this would only reproduce the old high/low dichotomy of modernist culture in a new guise, as it did in the heated debate that pitted Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* as a proper representation (because a nonrepresentation) of Holocaust memory against Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* as its commercial trivialization. Once we acknowledge the constitutive gap between reality and its representation in language or image, we must in principle be open to many different possibilities of representing the real and its memories. This is not to say that anything goes. The question of quality remains one to be decided case by case. But the semiotic gap cannot be closed by any orthodoxy of correct representation. To argue as much amounts to Holocaust modernism.¹⁴ Indeed, phenomena such as *Schindler's List* and Spielberg's visual archive of Holocaust survivor testimonies compel us to think of traumatic memory and entertainment memory together as occupying the same public space, rather than to see them as mutually exclusive phenomena. Key questions of contemporary culture are located precisely at the threshold between traumatic memory and the commercial media. It is too easy to argue that the fun events and spectacles of contemporary media societies exist only to provide relief to a social and political body haunted by deep memories of violence and genocide perpetrated in its name, or that they are mounted only to repress such memories. For trauma is marketed as much as the fun is, and not even for different memory consumers. It is also too easy to suggest that the specters of the past now haunting modern societies in heretofore unknown force actually articulate, by way of displacement, a growing fear of the future at a time when the belief in modernity's progress is deeply shaken.

We do know that the media do not transport public memory inno-

cently. They shape it in their very structure and form. And here—in line with McLuhan's well-worn point that the medium is the message—it becomes highly significant that the power of our most advanced electronics depends entirely on quantities of memory. Bill Gates may just be the latest incarnation of the old American ideal—more is better. But “more” is now measured in memory bytes and in the power to recycle the past. Gates's much-advertised purchase of the largest collection of original photographs ever is a case in point: in the move from the photograph to its digital recycling, Walter Benjamin's art of mechanical reproduction (photography) has regained an aura of originality. Which goes to show that Benjamin's famous argument about the loss or decay of the aura in modernity was always only half the story; it forgot that modernization itself created the auratic effect to begin with. Today, digitalization makes the “original” photograph auratic. After all, as Benjamin also knew, the culture industry of Weimar Germany already then needed the auratic as a marketing strategy.

So let me indulge here for a moment in the old culture industry argument that Adorno mounted against what he thought to be Benjamin's unwarranted optimism about technological media. If today the idea of the total archive makes the triumphalists of cyberspace embrace global fantasies à la McLuhan, the profit interests of memory's mass marketers seem to be more pertinent in explaining the success of the memory syndrome. Simply put, the past is selling better than the future. But for how long, one wonders.

Take the headline of a spoof posted on the Internet: “U.S. Department of Retro Warns: We May Be Running Out of a Past.” The first paragraph reads: “At a press conference Monday, U.S. Retro Secretary Anson Williams issued a strongly worded warning of an imminent ‘National retro crisis,’ cautioning that ‘if current levels of U.S. retro consumption are allowed to continue unchecked, we may run entirely out of past by as soon as 2005.’” Not to worry. We already have the marketing of pasts that never existed: Witness the recent introduction of the Aerobleu product line, 1940s and 1950s nostalgia cleverly organized around a fictional Paris jazz club that never existed, but where all the jazz greats of the bebop age are said to have performed: a product line replete with original diaries, original cuts on CDs, and original memorabilia, all available in the United States at any local Barnes and Noble.¹⁵ “Original remakes” are in, and not only as merchandise: as cultural theorists and critics we are obsessed with

re-presentation, repetition, replication, and the culture of the copy, with or without original.

With all this going on, it seems fair to ask: once the memory boom is history, as no doubt it will be, will anyone have remembered anything at all? If all of the past can be made over, aren't we just creating our own illusions of the past while getting stuck in an ever-shrinking present—the present of short-term recycling for profit, the present of in-time production, instant entertainment, and placebos for our sense of dread and insecurity that lies barely underneath the surface of this new gilded age at another *fin de siècle*? Computers, we were told, would not know the difference between the year 2000 and the year 1900—but do we?

IV

The critics of late capitalist amnesia doubt that Western media culture has anything left resembling “real” memory or a strong sense of history. Drawing on the standard Adornean argument that commodification equals forgetting, they argue that the marketing of memory generates nothing but amnesia. I do not find this argument convincing. It leaves too much out. It is too easy to blame the dilemma we find ourselves in on the machinations of the culture industry and the proliferation of the new media. Something else must be at stake that produces the desire for the past in the first place and that makes us respond so favorably to the memory markets. That something, I would suggest, is a slow but palpable transformation of temporality in our lives, brought on by the complex intersections of technological change, mass media, and new patterns of consumption, work, and global mobility. There may indeed be good reasons to think that the drive to memorialize has a more beneficial and generative dimension as well. However much our current concerns with memory may involve a displaced fear of the future, and however dubious the proposition may now strike us that we can learn from history, memory culture fulfills an important function in the current transformation of temporal experience that has followed in the wake of the new media's impact on human perception and sensibility.

In the following, then, I would like to suggest some ways to think about the relationship between our privileging of memory and the past on the one hand and the potential impact of the new media on perception

and temporality on the other. It is a complex story. Applying the blistering Adornean critique of the culture industry to what one could now call the memory industry would be as one-sided and unsatisfactory as relying on Benjamin's trust in the emancipatory potential of the new media. Adorno's critique is right as far as the mass-marketing of cultural products is concerned, but it does not help explain the rise of the memory syndrome within the culture industry. His theoretical emphasis on Marxist categories of exchange value and reification actually blocks issues of temporality and memory, and he does not pay enough attention to the specifics of media and their relation to the structures of perception and everyday life in consumer societies. Benjamin, on the other hand, is right in attributing a cognitively enabling dimension to memory, retro, and what in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" he calls the tiger's leap into the past, but he wants to achieve it through the very media of reproducibility that, to him, represent the futurist promise and enable socialist political mobilization. Rather than siding with Benjamin against Adorno or vice versa, as so often happens, I would make the tension between their arguments productive for an analysis of the present.

Here I will turn to an argument first articulated by conservative German philosopher Hermann Lübbe in the early 1980s. Already then, as others were debating the future promises of postmodernism, Lübbe described what he called "musealization" as central to the shifting temporal sensibility of our time.¹⁶ He showed how musealization was no longer bound to the institution of the museum, understood in the narrow sense, but had come to infiltrate all areas of everyday life. Lübbe's diagnosis posited an expansive historicism of our contemporary culture, and he claimed that never before had a cultural present been obsessed with the past to a similar extent. Lübbe argued that modernization is inevitably accompanied by the atrophy of valid traditions, a loss of rationality, and the entropy of stable and lasting life experiences. The ever-increasing speed of technical, scientific, and cultural innovation produces ever larger quantities of the soon-to-be-obsolete, and it objectively shrinks the chronological expansion of what can be considered the (cutting-edge) present at any given time.

On the surface, this argument seems quite plausible. It reminds me of an incident a few years ago when I went to buy a computer in an electronics store in New York. The purchase proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Whatever was on display was relentlessly described by

the sales personnel as already obsolete, i.e., musical, by comparison with the imminently expected and so much more powerful next product line. This seemed to give new meaning to the old ethic of postponing gratification. I was not persuaded, and made my purchase, a two-year-old model that had everything I needed and more and whose price had recently been cut in half. I bought "obsolete," and thus I was not surprised recently to see my 1995 butterfly IBM Thinkpad exhibited in the design section of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The shelf life of consumer objects has been radically shortened, and with it the extension of the present, in Lübke's sense, has shrunk at the same time that computer memory and public memory discourses keep expanding.

What Lübke described as musealization can now be easily mapped onto the phenomenal rise of the memory discourse within the discipline of historiography itself. Historical memory research is international in scope. My hypothesis is that, in this prominence of academic mnemo-history as well, memory and musealization together are called upon to provide a bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance, to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space.

Lübke's argument about the shrinking extension of the present points to a great paradox: the more the present of advanced consumer capitalism prevails over the past and the future, sucking both into an expanding synchronous space, the weaker its grip on itself, the less stability or identity it provides for contemporary subjects. The German filmmaker and writer Alexander Kluge has spoken of the attack of the present on the rest of time. There is both too much and too little present at the same time, a historically novel situation that creates unbearable tensions in our "structure of feeling," as Raymond Williams would call it. In Lübke's theory, the museum compensates for this loss of stability by offering traditional forms of cultural identity to a destabilized modern subject. Yet Lübke fails to acknowledge that these cultural traditions have themselves been affected by modernization through digital and commodified recycling. His idea of musealization and French historian Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* actually share the compensatory sensibility that acknowledges a loss of national or communal identity, but trusts in our ability to make up for it. Nora's *lieux de mémoire* compensate for the loss of

milieux de mémoire, just as Lübbe's musealization compensates for the loss of lived tradition.

This conservative argument about shifts in temporal sensibility needs to be taken out of its binary framing (*lieux* vs. *milieux* in Nora, entropy of the past vs. compensatory musealization in Lübbe) and pushed in a different direction, one that does not rely on a discourse of loss and that accepts the fundamental shift in structures of feeling, experience, and perception as they characterize our simultaneously expanding and shrinking present. The conservative belief that cultural musealization can provide compensation for the ravages of accelerating modernization in the social world is just too simple and too ideological. It fails to recognize that any secure sense of the past itself is being destabilized by our musealizing culture industry and by the media that function as leading players in the morality play of memory. Musealization itself is sucked into the vortex of an ever-accelerating circulation of images, spectacles, events, and is thus always in danger of losing its ability to guarantee cultural stability over time.

V

It bears repeating that at the end of the millennium, the coordinates of space and time structuring our lives are increasingly subjected to new kinds of pressures. Space and time are fundamental categories of human experience and perception, but far from being immutable, they are very much subject to historical change. One of modernity's permanent laments concerns the loss of a better past, the memory of living in a securely circumscribed place, with a sense of stable boundaries and a place-bound culture with its regular flow of time and a core of permanent relations. Perhaps such days have always been dream rather than reality, a phantasmagoria of loss generated by modernity itself rather than by its prehistory. But the dream does have staying power, and what I have called the culture of memory may well be, at least in part, its contemporary incarnation. The issue, however, is not the loss of some golden age of stability and permanence. The issue is rather the attempt, as we face the very real processes of time-space compression, to secure some continuity within time, to provide some extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move.

For surely enough, the end of the twentieth century does not give us

easy access to the trope of a golden age. Memories of the twentieth century confront us not with a better life, but with a unique history of genocide and mass destruction that mars a priori any attempt to glorify the past. After the experiences of World War I and the Great Depression, of Stalinism, Nazism, and genocide on an unprecedented scale, after the trials of decolonization and the histories of atrocities and repression they have brought to our consciousness, the view of Western modernity and its promises has darkened considerably within the West itself. Even the current gilded age in the United States cannot quite shake the memories of the tremors that have rattled the myth of permanent progress since the late 1960s and 1970s. Witnessing the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, the barely controlled meltdown of whole regional and national economies, and the return of war to the continent that spawned two world wars in the last century has surely brought with it a significant entropy of our sense of future possibilities.

In an era of ethnic cleansings and refugee crises, mass migrations and global mobility for ever more people, the experience of displacement and relocation, migration and diaspora seems no longer the exception but the rule. But such phenomena do not tell the whole story. As spatial barriers weaken and space itself is gobbled up by time ever more compressed, a new kind of malaise is taking root in the heart of the metropolis. The discontents of metropolitan civilization at the end of the century no longer seem to stem primarily from pervasive feelings of guilt and super-ego repression, as Freud had it in his analysis of classical Western modernity and its dominant mode of subject formation. Franz Kafka and Woody Allen belong to an earlier age. Our own discontents flow instead from informational and perceptual overload combined with a cultural acceleration that neither our psyche nor our senses are adequately equipped to handle. The faster we are pushed into a global future that does not inspire confidence, the stronger we feel the desire to slow down, the more we turn to memory for comfort. But what comfort is to be had from memories of the twentieth century?! And what are the alternatives? How are we to negotiate the rapid change and turnover in what Georg Simmel called objective culture while at the same time satisfying what I take to be the fundamental need of modern societies to live in extended forms of temporality and to secure a space, however permeable, from which to speak and to act? There is no

one simple answer to such a question, but memory—individual, generational, public, cultural, and, still inevitably, national memory—must surely be part of it. Perhaps one day there will even emerge something like a global memory as the different parts of the world are drawn ever tighter together. But any such global memory will always be prismatic and heterogeneous rather than holistic or universal.

In the meantime we have to ask: how should even local, regional, or national memories be secured, structured, and represented? Of course, this is a fundamentally political question about the nature of the public sphere, about democracy and its future, about the changing shape of nationhood, citizenship, and identity. The answers will depend to a large degree on local constellations, but the global spread of memory discourses indicates that something more is at stake.

Some have turned to the idea of the archive as counterweight to the ever-increasing pace of change, as a site of temporal and spatial preservation. From the point of view of the archive, forgetting is the ultimate transgression. But how reliable or foolproof are our digitalized archives? Computers are barely fifty years old and already we need “data archaeologists” to unlock the mysteries of early programming: just think of the notorious Y2K problem that recently haunted our computerized bureaucracies. Billions of dollars were spent to prevent computer networks from going into retro mode, from mistaking the year 2000 for 1900. Or consider the almost insuperable difficulties German authorities now have decoding the vast body of electronic records from the former East German state, a world that disappeared together with its Soviet-built mainframe computers and its East German office systems. Reflecting on such phenomena, a senior manager charged with information technology at the Canadian archives was recently quoted as saying: “It’s one of the great ironies of the information age. If we don’t find methods for enduring preservation of electronic records, this may be the era without a memory.”¹⁷ The threat of oblivion thus emerges from the very technology to which we entrust the vast body of contemporary records and data, that most significant part of the cultural memory of our time.

The current transformations of the temporal imaginary brought on by virtual space and time may highlight the enabling dimension of memory culture. Whatever their specific occasion, cause, or context, the intense memory practices we witness in so many different parts of the world today

articulate a fundamental crisis of an earlier structure of temporality that marked the age of high modernity with its trust in progress and development, with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and irreducibly other, and with its unshaken belief in some telos of history. Politically, many memory practices today counteract the triumphalism of modernization theory in its latest guise of the discourse of "globalization." Culturally, they express the growing need for spatial and temporal anchoring in a world of increasing flux in ever denser networks of compressed time and space. As historiography has shed an earlier reliance on teleological master-narratives and has grown more skeptical of nationalist framings of its subject matter, today's critical memory cultures, with their emphases on human rights, on minority and gender issues, and on reassessing various national and international pasts go a long way to provide a welcome impetus for writing history in a new key and thus for guaranteeing a future of memory. In the best-case scenario, the cultures of memory are intimately linked, in many parts of the world, to processes of democratization and struggles for human rights, to expanding and strengthening the public spheres of civil society. Slowing down rather than speeding up, expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space rather than destroy it for the sake of some future promise, securing "quality time"—those seem to be unmet cultural needs in a globalizing world, and local memories are intimately linked to their articulation.

But the past cannot give us what the future has failed to deliver. There is no avoiding coming back to the downside of what some would call a memory epidemic, and this brings me back to Nietzsche, whose second untimely meditation on the use and abuse of history, often quoted in contemporary memory debates, may be as untimely as ever. Clearly, the memory fever of Western media societies is not a consuming historical fever in Nietzsche's sense, which could be cured by productive forgetting. It is rather a mnemonic fever caused by the cyber-virus of amnesia that at times threatens to consume memory itself. Therefore we now need productive remembering more than productive forgetting. In retrospect we can see how the historical fever of Nietzsche's times functioned to invent national traditions in Europe, to legitimize the imperial nation-states, and to give cultural coherence to conflictive societies in the throes of the Industrial Revolution and colonial expansion. By comparison, the mnemonic convulsions of North

Atlantic culture today seem mostly chaotic, fragmentary, and free-floating across our screens. Even in places where memory practices have a very clear political focus such as South Africa, Argentina, Chile, and most recently Guatemala, they are affected, and to a degree even created by, international media coverage and its memory obsessions. As I suggested earlier, securing the past is no less risky an enterprise than securing the future. Memory, after all, can be no substitute for justice, and justice itself will inevitably be entangled in the unreliability of memory. But even where cultural memory practices lack an explicit political focus, they do express a society's need for temporal anchoring when in the wake of the information revolution and an ever-increasing time-space compression, the relationship among past, present, and future is being transformed beyond recognition.

In that sense, local and national memory practices contest the myths of cyber-capitalism and globalization and their denial of time, space, and place. No doubt, some new configuration of time and space will eventually emerge from this negotiation. New technologies of transportation and communication have always transformed the human perception of time and space in modernity. This was as true for the railroad and the telephone, the radio and the airplane as it will be true for cyberspace and cyber-time. New technologies and new media are also always met by anxieties and fear that later prove to have been unwarranted or even ridiculous. Our age will be no exception.

At the same time, cyberspace alone is not the appropriate model for imagining the global future. Its notion of memory is misleading, a false promise. Lived memory is active, alive, embodied in the social—that is, in individuals, families, groups, nations, and regions. These are the memories needed to construct differential local futures in a global world. There is no doubt that in the long run all such memories will be shaped to a significant degree by the new digital technologies and their effects, but they will not be reducible to them. To insist on a radical separation between “real” and virtual memory strikes me as quixotic, if only because anything remembered—whether by lived or by imagined memory—is itself virtual. Memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, in brief, human and social. As public memory it is subject to change—political, generational, individual. It cannot be stored forever, nor can it be secured by monuments. Nor, for that matter, can we rely on digital retrieval systems to guarantee coherence and continuity. If the sense of lived

time is being renegotiated in our contemporary cultures of memory, we should not forget that time is not only the past, its preservation and transmission. If we are indeed suffering from a surfeit of memory, we do need to make the effort to distinguish usable pasts from disposable pasts.¹⁸ Discrimination and productive remembering are called for, and mass culture and the virtual media are not inherently irreconcilable with that purpose. Even if amnesia were a by-product of cyberspace, we must not allow the fear of forgetting to overwhelm us. Perhaps it is time to remember the future, rather than simply to worry about the future of memory.

Notes

CHAPTER I. PRESENT PASTS

1. Both the title of this essay and the notion of "present futures" are indebted to the seminal work of Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (Boston: MIT Press, 1985).

2. Of course, an emphatic notion of "present futures" still operates in the neo-liberal imaginings of financial and electronic globalization, a version of the former, largely discredited modernization paradigm updated for the post-Cold War world.

3. Paradigmatically in Fred Jameson's classic essay "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53-92.

4. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

5. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), esp. chapter 4, and most recently the special issue *Alter/Native Modernities of Public Culture* 27 (1999).

6. On the complex mix of present futures and present pasts, cf. Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition" and "Mapping the Postmodern," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 160-78, 179-221.

7. See Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); *New German Critique* 44 (Spring/Summer 1988), special issue on the *Historikerstreit*; and *New German Critique* 52 (Winter 1991), special issue on German reunification.

8. Cf. Anson Rabinbach, "From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America since Bitburg," *History and Memory* 9:1/2 (Fall 1997): 226-55.

9. Of course, the use of Holocaust memory as a prism for the events in Rwanda is highly problematic since it cannot acknowledge the specific problems arising within a postcolonial memory politics. But that was never the issue in Western media accounts. On memory politics in various parts of Africa, cf.

Richard Werbner, ed., *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998).

10. This view was first articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and it was taken up again and reformulated by Lyotard and others in the 1980s. On the centrality of the Holocaust for Horkheimer and Adorno's work, see Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

11. Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1992). The term *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, literally "society of experience," is hard to translate. It refers to a society that privileges intense but superficial experiences oriented toward instant happiness in the present and quick consumption of goods, cultural events, and mass-marketed lifestyles. Schulze's is an empirical sociological study of contemporary German society that avoids the restrictive parameters both of Bourdieu's class paradigm and of Benjamin's philosophically inflected opposition of "Erlebnis" and "Erfahrung" as an opposition between fleeting surface and authentic depth experience.

12. On Chile see Nelly Richard, *Residuos y metáforas: Ensayos de crítica cultural sobre el Chile de la transición* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1998); on Argentina see Rita Arditti, *Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

13. My use of the notion of "imagined memory" is indebted to Arjun Appadurai's discussion of "imagined nostalgia" in his *Modernity at Large*, 77f. The notion is problematic to the extent that all memory is imagined, and yet it allows us to distinguish memories grounded in lived experience from memories pillaged from the archive and mass-marketed for fast consumption.

14. On these issues cf. Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 292–312. Also the essay "Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno," in this book.

15. Dennis Cass, "Sacrebleu! The Jazz Era Is Up for Sale: Gift Merchandisers Take License with History," *Harper's Magazine* (December 1997): 70–71.

16. Hermann Lübbe, *Zeit-Verhältnisse: Zur Kulturphilosophie des Fortschritts* (Graz and Vienna: Verlag Styria, 1983). For a more extended critique of Lübbe's model, see my "Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium," in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 13–36.

17. Quoted from the *New York Times* (February 12, 1998).

18. The term is Charles S. Maier's. See his essay "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial," *History and Memory* 5 (1992): 136–51.