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Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia

Andreas Huyssen

One of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key 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 also stands in stark contrast to so much other recent innovative work on categories of space, maps, geographies, borders, trade routes, migrations, displacements, and diasporas in the context of postcolonial and cultural studies. Indeed, not so long ago there was a widespread consensus in the United States that in order to understand post-modern culture, the focus had to be shifted from the problematics of time and

1. Both the title of this essay and the notion of present futures are indebted to the seminal work of Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

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

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, we would separate time and space at great peril to a full understanding of either modern or postmodern culture.⁴ Time and space as fundamentally contingent categories of historically rooted perception are always bound up with each other in complex ways, and the intensity of border-crossing memory discourses that characterizes so much of contemporary culture in so many different parts of the world today proves the point. Indeed, questions of discrepant temporalities and differently paced modernities have emerged as key to new and rigorous understandings of the long-term processes of globalization, which supplant rather than merely adjust 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 meta-narratives.⁶ Such claims were frequently understood all too literally, but in their polemical thrust and replication of the ethos of avantgardism, they pointed directly to the ongoing recodification of the past after modernism.

Memory discourses accelerated in Europe and the United States in the early 1980s, energized by the broadening debate about the Holocaust (triggered by the network television series *Holocaust* and, somewhat later, the testimony movement) and by media attention paid to the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries of events in the history of the Third Reich: Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 and the 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 initiating the “Final Solution” remembered in 1992 with the opening of a museum in the Wannsee villa where the conference had taken place; the Normandy invasion of 1944 remembered with grand spectacle

3. The case received its paradigmatic statement in Fredric Jameson’s classic essay “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53–92.

4. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

5. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), esp. chap. 4, and most recently *Public Culture* 11(1) (1999), a special issue on “alter/native modernities,” edited by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar.

6. On the complex mix of present futures and present pasts see 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.

by the allies but without 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,” along with the historians’ debate of 1986, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and German national unification in 1990, 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.⁷ The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, planned during the 1980s and inaugurated in 1993, gave rise to debate about the Americanization of the Holocaust.⁸ But the resonance of Holocaust memory did not stop there. By the end of the 1990s, one must indeed raise the question of to what extent we can now speak of a globalization of Holocaust discourse.

Of course, 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 actually 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 has, on the other hand, largely depended on Holocaust memory. Streams of refugees across borders, women and children packed into trains for deportation, and 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.

7. See Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) and special issues of *New German Critique* on *Historikerstreit* (44 [1988]) and German unification (52 [1991]).

8. See Anson Rabinbach, “From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America since Bitburg,” *History and Memory* 9 (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, see *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. Richard Werbner (London: Zed Books, 1998).

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 between enlightened modernity, racial oppression, and organized violence.¹⁰ On the other hand, this rather 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 universal trope that allows Holocaust memory to latch on to specific local situations 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 global circulation of the Holocaust as trope at once decenters the event of the Holocaust and certifies its use as a prism through which we may look at other instances of genocide. The global and the local of Holocaust memory have entered into new constellations that beg to be analyzed case by case; while Holocaust comparisons may rhetorically energize some discourses of traumatic memory, they may also work as screen memories or simply block insight into specific local histories.

When it comes to present pasts, however, memory of the Holocaust and its place in the reassessment of Western modernity is not the whole story. There are many subplots that make up the current memory narrative in its broadest scope and that distinguish our times quite clearly from earlier decades of this century. Consider a few of the salient phenomena. Europe and the United States have, since the 1970s, witnessed the historicizing restoration of old urban centers; the development of whole museum villages and landscapes; various national heritage and patrimony enterprises; a new wave of museum architecture that shows no signs of receding; a boom in retro fashions and repro furniture; mass marketing of nostalgia; a popular obsession with "self-musealization" by video recorder, memoir writing, and confessional literature; the rise of autobiography and of the postmod-

10. This view was first articulated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1972); it was taken up again and reformulated by Jean François 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).

ern historical novel with its uneasy negotiation between fact and fiction; the spread of memory practices in the visual arts, often centered on photography; and the increase of historical documentaries on television, including (in the United States) a whole channel dedicated entirely to history, the History Channel. On the traumatic side of memory culture, and beside the ever more ubiquitous Holocaust discourse, there is a vast psychoanalytic literature on trauma; the controversy of 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; a 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 witnessed a worldwide obsession with the sinking of a presumably unsinkable steamship that marked the end of another gilded age. Indeed, one cannot be quite sure whether the international success of *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. 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 indeed 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 *fin de siècle*, but I think one has to probe deeper to come to terms with what one now could call a culture of memory as it has become pervasive in North Atlantic societies since the late 1970s. What here appears by now largely as an increasingly successful marketing of memory by the Western culture industry, in the context of what German cultural sociology has called the *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, takes 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 dis-

11. Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt: 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 both the restrictive parameters of Pierre Bourdieu's class paradigm and of Walter Benjamin's philosophically inflected opposition of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* as an opposition between fleeting surface and authentic depth experience.

course in postapartheid South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission; they are omnipresent in Rwanda and Nigeria; they energize the race debate that has erupted in Australia around the issue of the “stolen generation”; they burden relationships between 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 and 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 at the same time, of course, the fault line between mythic past and real past is not always that easy to draw — 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 while memory discourses appear to be global in one register, in 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 exterminations, apartheid, military dictatorships, and 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 postnational or global. This does have implications for interpretive work. While the Holocaust as universal trope of traumatic history has migrated into other, unrelated contexts, one must always ask whether and how the trope enhances or hinders local memory practices and struggles, or whether and how it may perform both functions simultaneously. It is clear that national memory

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: University of California Press, 1999).

debates are always shot through with the effects of 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 these 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 of whether contemporary memory cultures in general can be read as reaction formations to economic globalization. This is the terrain on which some new comparative work on the mechanisms and tropes of historical trauma and national memory practices could be pursued.

If the time consciousness of (high) modernity in the West sought to secure the future, one could argue that the time consciousness of the late twentieth century implies 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 forgotten 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. What Freud described universally as the psychic processes of remembering, repression, and forgetting in an individual are writ large in contemporary consumer societies as a public phenomenon of unprecedented proportions that begs to be read historically.

13. My use of the notion of “imagined memory” is indebted to Appadurai’s discussion of “imagined nostalgia” in his *Modernity at Large*, 77. 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.

Wherever one looks, the contemporary obsession with memory in public debates clashes with an intense public panic of oblivion, and one may well wonder which comes 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 the 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 dynamics of media and temporality, memory, lived time, and forgetting. The clashing and ever more fragmented memory politics of specific social and ethnic groups raise 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 understandable 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 of the *desaparecidos* in Latin America. Both, of course, 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 try 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 an ubiquitous cipher for our memories of the twentieth century, in ways quite unimaginable even twenty years ago?

Whatever the social and political causes of the memory boom may have been, one thing is certain: We cannot discuss personal, generational, or public memory separate 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, that does not mean that each and every commodification inevitably banalizes it as 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 and on the context in which they are staged. Similarly, the presumably trivial *Erlebnisgesellschaft* of mass-marketed life styles, 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 sometimes oppose history to memory *tout court*, memory as the subjective and trivial stuff out of which the historian makes the real thing. We cannot simply pit the serious Holocaust museum against some 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 (i.e., as nonrepresentation) of Holocaust memory against Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* as commercial trivialization. For 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 the one and only correct representation. To argue that 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 traumatic memory and entertainment memory together as occupying the same public space, rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive phenomena. Key questions

14. On these issues see Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 292–312. See also my forthcoming "Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno," *New German Critique*.

of contemporary culture are precisely located 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 only mounted to repress such memories. For trauma is marketed just as much as the fun is, and not even for different memory consumers. It is also too easy to suggest that the specters from the past 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 innocently. They shape it in their very structure and form. And here — in line with Marshall 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 embody just 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. Witness Gates's much advertised purchase of the largest collection of original photographs ever. In the move from the photograph to its digital recycling, Walter Benjamin's art of mechanical reproduction (photography) has regained the 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 of the story; the argument omitted that modernization itself created the auratic effect to begin with. Today, it is digitalization that makes the "original" photograph auratic.

So let me indulge here for a moment in the old culture industry argument, as Theodor Adorno mounted it against what he believed 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 50s 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 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 plausible 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 are told, will not know the difference between the year 2000 and the year 1900— but do we?

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. Ultimately, 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, something 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, centrally 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 memorializing drive has a more beneficial and generative dimension as well. However much there is a displacement of a fear of the future in our concerns with memory, 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 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

15. Dennis Cass, “Sacrebleu! The Jazz Era Is up for Sale: Gift Merchandisers Take License with History,” *Harper's Magazine*, December 1997, 70–1.

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 occludes issues of temporality and memory and remains oblivious to the specifics of media and their relation to structures of perception and everyday life in consumer societies. Benjamin, on the other hand, is right in attributing a cognitively enabling dimension to memory and what in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" he calls the tiger's leap into the past, but he wants to accomplish this leap through the very media of reproducibility that to him signal futurist promise and socialist political mobilization. Rather than siding with Benjamin against Adorno or vice versa, as so often happens, the stake is to make the tension between their arguments productive for an analysis of the present.

Here I would like to turn to an argument first articulated by two conservative German philosophers, Hermann Lübbe and Odo Marquard, in the early 1980s. Already then, as others were in the midst of debating the future promises of post-modernism, Hermann Lübbe described what he called "musealization" as central to the shifting temporal sensibility of our time.¹⁶ Lübbe showed how musealization was no longer bound to the institution of the museum, narrowly understood, but had infiltrated all areas of everyday life. His diagnosis posited an expansive historicism of our contemporary culture, a cultural present gripped with an unprecedented obsession with the past. Modernization, he argued, is inevitably accompanied by the atrophy of valid traditions, the 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 obsolescence, while objectively shrinking the chronological expanse of what can be considered the (cutting-edge) present at any given time.

On the surface, Lübbe's argument seems quite plausible. It reminds me of an incident of a few years ago, when I went to buy a computer in a high-tech store in New York. The purchase proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Whatever

16. Hermann Lübbe, *Zeit-Verhältnisse: Zur Kulturphilosophie des Fortschritts* (Graz: 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: Routledge, 1995), 13–36.

was on display was relentlessly described by the sales personnel as already obsolete, that is, museal, 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 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 obviously been radically foreshortened, and with it the extension of the present, in Lübbe’s sense, has shrunk at the same time that computer memory and public memory discourses have swelled.

What Lübbe described as musealization can now be easily mapped onto the phenomenal rise of memory discourse within the discipline of historiography itself. Historical memory research is international in scope. My hypothesis is that, in this prominence of academic “mnemohistory,” memory and musealization together are enlisted as bulwarks against obsolescence and disappearance, to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever shrinking horizons of time and space.

Lübbe’s argument about the shrinking extension of the present signals a great paradox: The more the present of advanced consumer capitalism prevails over past and future, sucking both into an expanding synchronous space, the weaker is its grip on itself, the less stability or identity it provides for contemporary subjects. 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 agonizing tensions in our “structure of feeling,” as Raymond Williams would call it. In Lübbe’s theory, the museum compensates for this loss of stability. It offers traditional forms of cultural identity to a destabilized modern subject, but the theory fails to acknowledge that these cultural traditions have themselves been affected by modernization through digital and commodified recycling. Lübbe’s musealization and Pierre Nora’s *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. The *lieux de mémoire* in Nora compensate for the loss of the *milieux de mémoire*, as musealization compensates for the loss of lived tradition in Lübbe.

This conservative argument about shifts in temporal sensibility needs to be lifted from its binary framing (*lieux* versus *milieux* and entropy of the past versus compensatory musealization) 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 central players in the morality play of memory. Musealization itself is sucked into that vortex of an ever faster circulation of images, spectacles, events, and thus is always in danger of losing its ability to guarantee cultural stability over time.

The Changing Perception of Time

It bears repeating that, as we approach the end of the twentieth century and with it 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 a dream rather than a 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 which, a priori, mars 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 this 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 superego 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 discontents rather flow from informational and perceptual overload combined with a cultural acceleration neither our psyche nor our senses are that well 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 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? Surely, there is no one simple answer to such a question, but memory — individual, generational, public, cultural, and, still inevitably, national memory — surely is 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, of course, 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 archeologists” to unlock the mysteries of early programming: Just think of the notorious Y2K problem that haunts our computerized bureaucracies. Billions of dollars are being spent to prevent computer networks from going into retro-mode, 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 has 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 Indeed, the threat of oblivion 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 serve to 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 distinguished the age of high modernity — with its trust in progress and development, its celebration of the new as utopian (as radically and irreducibly other), and its unshaken belief in some telos of history. Politically, many memory practices today counteract the triumphalism of modernization theory in its latest guise 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 the writing of 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 the expansion and strengthening of the public spheres of civil society. Slowing down rather than speeding up, expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds

17. Gerd Meissner, “Unlocking the Secrets of the Digital Archive Left by East Germany,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1998, D5.

inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space rather than destroying it for the sake of some future promise, securing “quality time” — these seem to be unmet cultural needs in a globalizing world, and local memories are intimately linked to their articulation.

But, of course, the past cannot give us what the future has failed to deliver. Indeed, 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 mediation 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 cybervirus 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 between past, present, and future is being transformed beyond recognition.

In that sense, local and national memory practices contest the myths of cybercapitalism 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 cybertime. 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 to imagine 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 seems quixotic, if only because anything remembered — whether by lived or imagined memory — is itself virtual. Memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting — in short, 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 byproduct of cyberspace, we must not allow the fear of forgetting to overwhelm us. And then perhaps it is time to remember the future, rather than only worry about the future of memory.

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18. See Charles S. Maier, “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial,” *History and Memory* 5 (1992): 136–51.