On Media of Memory and Remembering

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> "What served in place of the photograph, before the camera's invention? The expected answer
> is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory.
> What photographs do out there in space was previously done with reflection." (Berger 1980, p. 217)

The following examination of memory media, from chemical photographs to digital media and reenactments, deals with (human) memory and remembering concepts. These will be treated as metaphors and models, which serve to better understand the media of memory, as well as being a kind of blueprint for them. In other words, media will be metaphorically and literally regarded as representations, simulations, extensions, and prostheses of human memory structures and functions. The aim of this paper is to explore some parallel concepts of memory and remembering which animate our approaches to mediated experiences of the past, the absent, the virtual. The way media memories function will be illustrated by Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, which he defined in close connection with issues of mediated or technologically reproduced experience, especially within his investigation of the possibility or impossibility of technologically representing an absent (original) work of art. Benjamin's *The Work of Art* essay and especially his concept of the aura will be observed and scrutinized both within its historical context and the new digital media discourse.

Lost in translation: from analogue to digital memory

The essay *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) by Walter Benjamin has become one of the most quoted texts both in photography theory and in the discourse on new digital media. This is so despite the fact that Benjamin was writing about the older media of mechanical reproduction, such as film, photography, and print. His central argument is that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be [...] The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin [1936] 1999, p. 220).

Benjamin's terms are implemented in the new digital media discourse within the rhetoric of dichotomies: old vs. new, the mass serial production of alienated products vs. the digital networked media of collective participation and endless creativity. The starting point for these arguments is the premise that we are dealing with two paradigmatically different periods and need to revise Benjamin's terms to be able to talk about new digital media art.

Applying Benjamin's essay to the new media discourse leads us to what can be described metaphorically as a problem of translation. The translation, or replacement, of the original text for the purposes of the new context can be executed in two ways. Either by a process of assigning new language terms word-for-word for the original ones. This method can result in highlighting the differences between, and thus the immeasurability of the two texts. Or we can aim towards a formally autonomous translation that mediates the original text's meaning. In the course of this process, we often have to search for adequate expressions and even coin neologisms, which can enrich the language of the translation (compare with Benjamin [1923] 1973).

We can find a mixture of these two strategies in the transformation (translation / replacement) of Benjamin's terms for the new digital media discourse: authors point towards the inappropriateness of Benjamin's concepts for new digital media art practice but at the same time a broad fascination with Benjamin's text is evident in the frequent searching for remakes of Benjamin's terms to find equivalents to Benjamin's categories in the theory of new digital media.

The metaphor of translation was used by Esther Leslie in a speech she gave on October 26, 1996, in Camerawork Gallery in London at the launch of her internet curatorial project. It is a website dedicated to Benjamin's essay *Work of Art* and its literal as well as metaphorical "transformations" in digital media discourse. Referring to Benjamin's text, she addressed the concept of translation as a kind of reproduction in her opening speech (see Leslie 1996a). It can be said that by applying Benjamin's *Artwork essay* to the digital media context, the text is transformed not only in terms of its materiality but also in terms of its meaning. The meaning of the original text, whatever it is, is not re-produced but supplemented by links, references, quotations, linkages, keywords, commentaries and paraphrases connecting it within the new digital media network and discourse.

On media memories

Digital media have radically changed our (traditional) experience of time-space relations from one based on the notion of a linear historical timeline to one of simultaneity and the possibility – at least in the virtual realm – of cyclical time, producing parallelisms and simultaneities. Knowledge stored in digital networked media is a radically new phenomenon, resulting from the substitution of the diachronic timeline (the basis for historical awareness) by the synchronic dimension of digital media working in real-time. In other words, in the potentially (virtually) permanent present (actuality). The new media memory, on to which Benjamin's *Work of Art* has been transposed, functions in a regime of constant (at least virtually so) presence. Thus the text is separated from its historical context and roots. It is disconnected from the author's way of thinking and socio-cultural context. Moreover, the digitalization of Benjamin's text makes his argument granular, fragmented and inseparably fused with the new digital media discourse.

Information stored in digital media literally and metaphorically loses its historical dimensions but gains spatial relations and burgeoning cross-references. Thus, all of culture, and by extension, its products too, are losing their historical dimension in the age of digital, networked technologies in favor of a constant, real-time information flow, produced by exchange and morphing.
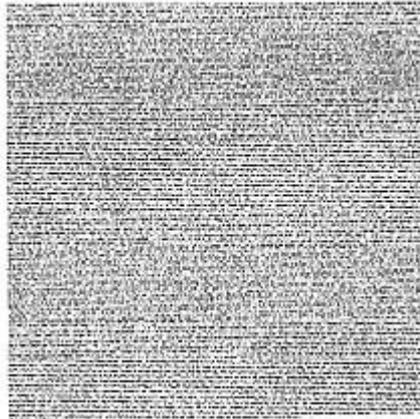
Benjamin's essay translated into the digital code (Leslie 1996b).

We can see the new media structure as a metaphor for the loss of historical awareness in favor of a real-time regime of instant presence and simultaneity. However, the digital media can also be regarded as tools that enhance the older media of memory. Cyberspace would then be a super library, the central repository of cumulative knowledge, the ultimate extension of individual as well as social and cultural memories, much better both in remembering and forgetting than the original medium – the human brain. As Vilém Flusser puts it, "Electronic memories are simulations of the memory functions of the brain within inanimate objects. A simulation here means an imitation which exaggerates a few aspects of the original while disregarding all other aspects. […]." (Flusser 1990, p. 398)

In his rhetorical analysis of computer science and its associated disciplines, Warren Sacks describes how the metaphorical use of the word "memory" within the debate on the computer's potential for dealing with large sets of data was later used in a literal sense within discourses conducted by philosophers, scientists and engineers to describe functions and abilities of the new media and their ability to simulate or extend the capabilities of the human mind. He sums up the hypothesis by quipping: "Computer memory seems to be a good model for human memory because computer memory was modeled on human memory!" (Sacks 2008, p. 188). He also raised the question of what kind of human memory (or mind) the computer memory represents. He found the answer in Alan Turing's famous blueprint for the computer, On Computable Numbers with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem (1937). Turing wrote: "We may compare a man in the process of computing a real number to a machine which is only capable of a finite number of conditions […]," (Turing 1937, p. 231). Thus, Sacks concludes, the human memory that served Alan Turing as the model for computer memory is a book-keeper's, accountant's, or bureaucrat's memory (Sacks 2008, p. 188).

> "Equipped with a clear picture of whose memory the computer memory is designed to resemble, it becomes possible to parse the technical literature on computer memory. The technical literature is completely preoccupied with the management and allocation of memory. […] this technical literature is filled with the memories of bureaucrats: numbers, lists, tables, cells, and segments. […] Memory, of this bureaucratic, gridded kind, is a major area of work in hardware and software research and development. […]" (Sacks 2008, p. 189).

The omnipresence of Benjamin's terms, stemming from the context of industrial production and distribution, in the discourse on new digital media, then, can be understood not as a mere antithesis

used in arguments juxtaposing old vs. new media, but also as a symptom of 'unconscious' computer memory, which condemns its anchor in the logic of industrial production and the age of the typewriter and the bureaucrat / the human computer (see Kittler 1986).

Alternative models of memory

To recognize the kind of memory that computers replicate means to become aware of the alternative memory models that we can use to construct our intelligent machines. Sacks offers Marcel Proust's aristocratic kind of memory, which represents to him the opposite model of memory function to the dominant "bureaucratic memory" of today's computer.

> "And suddenly memory reveals itself. […] after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain posed a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest, and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection." (Proust [1908] 1922, p. 50).

We can recognize the shared metaphor of remembering in Proust's evocation of involuntary memories mediated by the smell of the madeleine cakes and Walter Benjamin's description of an aura. Both descriptions are associated with breath and thus with the medium of air. When Benjamin tries to explain what he means by the aura of a work of art, he describes an experience which goes beyond the senses, and especially beyond the visual, analytical experience which concerns the distance between the viewer and the object that is viewed. He describes the aura as emerging in the breakdown of spatial and temporal distance, when inner and outer worlds are interconnected in a regular rhythm of breath.

> Benjamin asks: "What is aura, actually? A strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand. On a summer noon, resting, to follow the line of a mountain range on the horizon or a twig which throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or hour begins to be a part of its appearance - that is to breath the aura of those mountains, that twig." (Benjamin [1931] 1972, pp. 5 – 26).

Benjamin's description of aura as "the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand" refers to the transcending of time-space relations in a cultic, ritual experience of personal participation in an event. The ritual can be any event or situation based on the representation or re-performance of something un-present, already past and/or un-presentable. Benjamin's search for the lost aura of things is at the same time a search for his own (lost) ability to experience aura. Benjamin's explanation of aura thus confirms its close link with nostalgia.

Benjamin also deals with the concept of the aura in his 1939 paper *On some motifs in Baudelaire*. In this paper, he analyzes the experience of the aura by comparing different approaches to memory in Bergson's, Proust's, and Baudelaire's writings. He opens his inquiry with a critical interpretation of Henri Bergson's notion of memory. Bergson defined memories as the experience of the flow of time passing. According to Benjamin, Bergson is not interested in memory related to historical changes or any specific feature of the age of "technical reproduction".

Rather, his theory is based on biological factors and the natural, physical properties of the individual. Benjamin confronts Bergson's notion of memory with Proust's novel *In search of Lost Time*, which represents to him an attempt to "produce experience, as Bergson imagines it, in a synthetic way under today's social conditions [...]" (Benjamin [1939] 1968, pp. 155 – 200).

Benjamin illustrated Proust's divergent interpretation of the concepts Bergson considered by his use of the contemplative experience, to which the memory is a key. He pointed to the fact that Bergson's pure memory ("mémoire pure") becomes not only an involuntary memory ("mémoire involontaire") in Proust's writing, but Proust distinguishes between two kinds of memories: involuntary memory, of which the madeleine episode is a famous example, and voluntary memory, which serves the intellect and is thus only ever partial.

> Benjamin sums up: "Proust says that the past is situated 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and its field of operations, in some material object …, though we have no idea which one it is. And whether we come upon this object before we die, or whether we never encounter it, depends entirely on chance.'" (Ibid.)

Charles Baudelaire encountered the true essence of remembering according to Benjamin. While Bergson's "durée" doesn't know death, it is isolated from historical order and tradition, and thus becomes mere experience, which only pretends to be knowledge. And while Proust suggests that "redemption is [his] private show" he loyally and ingeniously announces the end of experience. It is Baudelaire who deals with an experience which is not mere nostalgia, but the painful and hopeless awareness of a lost ability to "have experience".

Benjamin dealt with similar, "painful and hopeless experience" in his writings on the loss of the aura. His account of his distrust of images produced in the age of mechanical reproduction is mixed with evidence of his own weakening ability "to be hit by beauty". This becomes apparent in his description of aesthetic experience as a ritual experience of a cult, whose adherents are mesmerized by beauty. Benjamin understands the crises of the aura not only as a consequence of the widespread use of reproduction technologies, but also as an expression of modern society's diminishing ability to see. "To see" should be understood here as both experiencing a common view which is reflected, and as giving intentional attention. The aura of the thing observed is experienced at the moment when the image we are looking at opens itself to our gaze and responds to it.

Media of memories and traumas

Benjamin wrote that the aura is hidden in the ability of certain photographs to "deaden our awareness of time passing", to evoke our memories of time which has already passed, similarly to Proust's madeleines. However, the aura of photographs – their magic – is not in their ability to re-present the past. On the contrary, the aura emerges when personal images fade from our attention and are replaced by the memories they evoke. This kind of thinking about photographs and memory has nothing to do with categories of false or true, authentic or manipulated images etc., which are

significant for the debate about changes in the ontological status of the technical image in the age of post-photography and the digital technical image. The value of truth has nothing to do even with the ability to evoke memories.

We can add that our experience with digital media memory, which serves as a "perfect model of our minds" (Sacks 2008, p. 188), has called into question not only certain functions of the human brain but also all previous media of acquiring, storing and transmitting information. When retrospectively subjecting these pages, books, libraries, photographs or films to critical analysis, they are seen as memory media, or as tools of remembering. In this way, we are also reminded of pre-literate media of memory. Vilém Flusser mentioned two of them: Air waves (media of voice) and hard objects, such as stones and bones (media of our skills). He wrote: "[...] information stored within air waves (oral history), must be recovered quickly by a receiver and stored within his brain, in the hope that it can be transmitted from there to another receiver." (Flusser 1990, p. 25), "Information [...] stored within hard objects, constitutes our material culture." (Ibid, p.26)

We are witnessing the return of these pre-literate ways of remembering, based on the magic of objects and oral performance rituals, in the creative practices predominant today, the names of which feature the prepositions "re-" or "post-" (re-make, re-mix, re-enactments, re-production, post-production, etc...). The creative practice of the reenactment is probably the most symptomatic of this trend. These creative reenactments, typically of historical Live Arts events of the 1960s or '70s, are symptoms of artists' mistrust of big art history narratives and consequent need to find alternative, more performative, ways of accessing past events. Reenactments serve as attempts to overcome the limits of our memories, e.g. the partiality of eyewitness statements, at the same time as responding to critical analyses of the uncritical usage of documentary photographs and other media of re-presentation and remembering, such as texts, scores, instructions etc. Reenactments in contemporary art contribute to the debate on the use and misuse, understanding and misunderstanding of material objects as media of memories.

However, Peter Weibel is quite critical of this artistic practice. He sees reenactments as a product of the illusion that it is possible to have an experience of pure presence, of immediacy, in other words, that we can have an experience beyond all media. (Weibel 2009)

Weibel approaches the practice of reenactments from a media art history point of view. For him, the reenactment is a medium which carries information about the past event or performance. It is mere repetition, re-performance referring to creative acts of the past. We can say that he sees reenactments in terms of a logic of remediation. They are just another medium of "transparent immediacy" (Bolter / Grusin 2000), which hides its identity as a medium behind an illusion of presence. From this point of view, reenactments are mere redundant or belated activities which accompany the process of taming (or making conform) and institutionalizing historical Live Art events within the big narrative of 20th century art history.

Weibel's disdain for reenactments, which refers to the preference of modernistic aesthetics for shock and innovation, is countered by Hal Foster's argument. Foster introduced a new experience of temporality and new narrative models inspired by the model of the "traumatic real" and "aesthetics of trauma" (see Foster 1994, pp. 5 – 32) into the debate. He alternates between traditional historiography

based on biological metaphors of evolution or devolution and historiography which is derived from the psychic temporality of the subject. In this respect, Foster refers to Freud's notions of trauma and deferred action.

> He wrote: "For Freud, especially as read through Lacan, subjectivity is not set once and for all; it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events. [...] One event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (Nachträglichkeit)." (Ibid.)

Foster proposes that the significance of avant-garde events is likewise produced through the complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction. By considering this psychic, rather than biological, temporality, and the dissolving of the antagonism between the diachronic and the synchronic in our psyche, he creates new references between the historical avant-garde and contemporary "re-" and "post-"practices.

A reciprocal or even retroactive understanding of the relationship between past and present events challenges the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as a merely redundant version of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the modern. The aesthetics of trauma, based on the concept of "deferred action", can serve us well as the theoretical frame for better understanding the complicated and reciprocal relationship between the past, historical events, and contemporary practices.

Within the practice of repeated creative gestures serving as the media of past experiences, to which we can apply the criteria of the "aesthetics of trauma", the theme of memory and remembering is central. If the photograph was a referential point for all artistic creativity in the post-media age and if the camera was the prototype for all media, then we can see the memory as the central motif of media art discourse in general. Berger wrote: "What served in place of the photograph, before the camera's invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done with reflection." (Berger 1980, p. 217).

Accepting Berger's premise that photographs, understood as memory media, are a prototype for all kinds of media of remembering, the artistic strategy of reenactment can be treated not only as a medium (see Weibel 2009), but also as a low-tech manifestation of the human urge to step into the image (the photograph of the past), which has its high-tech equivalent in artistic projects based on the use of fully immersive virtual reality technology. Both provide quite similar experiences of immersion in an "elsewhere", just using different technological equipment.

Roland Barthes recognized, similarly to Benjamin, that the medium itself is not the agent of memories. Rather, it is the viewer's ability or inability to have "the aura-experience of the past" which is the fundamental condition for remembering, as Roland Barthes wrote in conclusion to his book Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (Barthes [1980] 1982).

> "Mad or tamed? Photography can be one or the other; tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to

the very letter of Time; a strictly repulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic ecstasy.
Such are the two ways of photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusion, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality." (Ibid. p. 117)

Crossings instead of Conclusion

I have considered memory media, for which the photograph serves as a metonymy (Berger 1980), in the context of Walter Benjamin's concept of the aura (auratic experience) and Hal Foster's aesthetics of trauma (1994). I have found that memories cannot be stored in any media, not even in our brains. Memories are not something we have but something we are searching for, hoping that the smell of a cake, a song on the radio, or a postcard hidden in a book will bring them back for a while.

To end, I would like to illustrate my theses by the example of the video *Crossings: The Last Passage of Walter Benjamin* by Czech-born media artist Michael Bielicky (Bielicky 2000). The video is a record of the artist's journey through the Pyrenées that form a natural border between France and Spain. Bielicky's journey was a reenactment of Walter Benjamin's escape from France in 1940, during which he ended his own life. Bielicky followed Benjamin's footsteps with the help of GPS navigation, to provide the viewer with a first-person experience of the journey. The video document represents the process of remembering the past event, which the author is not even in a position to remember.

This artistic video document is a fine example of media art that points to the significance of the aura-experience in reenactment, to the cult of remembering, where the aura is hidden. For me, the video evokes the ecstasy or madness of entrance into the image in search of past time.

Portbou period photograph. (Leslie 2007, p. 215)

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