

Paolo Virno
**Déjà Vu and the
End of History**

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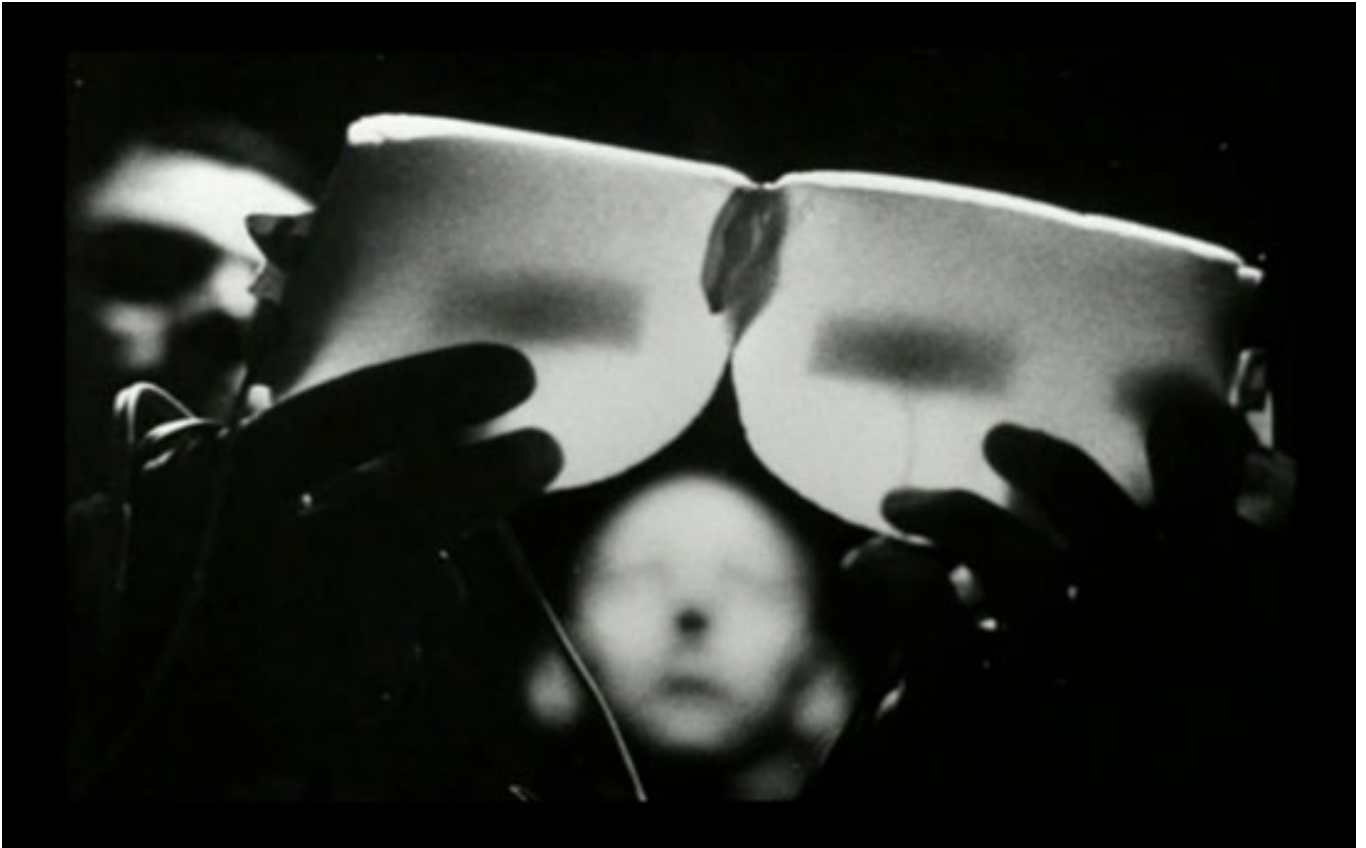
Watching Themselves Live¹

When psychiatrists refer to *déjà vu*, they do not mean a known event of the past playing out again, accompanied by either euphoric amazement or bored condescension. Rather, here we have an only apparent repetition, one that is entirely illusory. We believe that we have already experienced (or seen, heard, done, etc.) something that is, in fact, happening for the first time at this very moment. We mistake the current experience for the very faithful copy of an original that never really existed. We believe that we are recognizing something of which we are only now cognizant. As such, we could also describe *déjà vu* in terms of “false recognition.”

Déjà vu does not entail a defect of memory, nor its qualitative alteration. Rather, it means the untrammelled extension of memory’s jurisdiction, of its dominion. Rather than limit itself to preserving traces of times past, memory also applies itself to actuality, to the evanescent “now.” The instantaneous present takes the form of memory, and is re-evoked even as it is taking place. But what can “remembering the present” mean, except having the irresistible sensation of having already experienced it previously? Inasmuch as it is an object of memory, the “now” is camouflaged as the already-been, and is thus duplicated in an imaginary “back then,” in a fictitious “other-then.” It goes without saying that between the current event, considered a mere repeat, and the phantom original prototype, there is no mere analogy, but rather the most complete identity. The present and the pseudo-past, which have the same perceptual and emotional content, are indistinguishable. The consequence is a troubling one: every act and every word that I say and do *now* seems destined to repeat, step by step, the course that was fixed back then, without the possibility of omitting or changing anything. As Henri Bergson put it in “Le souvenir du Présent et la Fausse Reconnaissance”: “*We feel that we choose and will, but that we are choosing what is imposed on us and willing the inevitable.*”²

The state of mind correlated to *déjà vu* is that typical of those set on *watching themselves live*. This means apathy, fatalism, and indifference to a future that seems prescribed even down to the last detail. Since the present is dressed in the clothes of an irrevocable past, these people must renounce any influence on how the present plays out. It is impossible to change something that has taken on the appearances of memory. As such, they give up on action. Or, better, they become *spectators* of their own actions, almost as if these were part of an already-known and unalterable script. They are dumbfounded spectators, sometimes ironic and often inclined to cynicism. The individual at

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Chris Marker, *La Jetée* (1962), film still.

the mercy of the déjà vu is her own epigone. To her eyes, the historical scansion of events is suspended or paralyzed; the distinction between before and after, cause and effect, seems futile and even derisory.



Twin Eiffel Towers appear when seen from the Oculus Rift Google street viewer.

The phenomenon of “false recognition” allows us to decipher critically the fundamental idea of every philosophy of history: the end, the exhaustion, or the implosion of history itself. Above all, it allows us to settle accounts with the contemporary – that is, “postmodern” – version of this idea, which descends from a noble lineage and complicated family tree. According to Baudrillard and his miniature disciples, history thins out to the point of vanishing when the millenarian aspiration to wipe out the duration of time (and, with this, any irritating delays) appears to have been satisfied by the instantaneousness of information, real-time communications, and by the desire to lay “hold of things almost before they have taken place.”³ And yet the affirmation of an eternal present, a centripetal and despotic *actuality*, is provoked by déjà vu, namely by the form of experience in which there prevails – as Bergson put it – “the feeling that *the future is closed*, that the situation is detached from everything although I am attached to it.”⁴ In capricious, rampant years of history, Karl Mannheim prophesied:

It is possible ... that in the future, in a world in which there is never anything new, in which all is finished and each moment a repetition of the past, there can exist a condition in which thought is utterly devoid of all ideological and utopian elements.⁵

A posthistorical situation, then; but also, at the same time, a condition marked by the mnestic pathology of which we have already spoken: “there is never anything new ... each moment [is] a repetition of the past.”

Now, however, we need to interrupt this game of assonances and analogies. To understand the increasing fragility of historical experience and, at the same time, to refute the mediocre ideologies that set up camp on this terrain, it is necessary to observe more closely the actual texture of “false recognition.” What clay is a *memory of the present* made of? How is it formed? What does it reveal?

The Temporality of the Possible

It is in the past that we find the center of gravity of the temporality of potential. This is still something of an enigma, however. In order to illustrate its meaning and significance, it is worth asking ourselves, first of all, what past it concerns, and how the perennial “having been” of the virtual is articulated. This is nothing more than a morphological description, on the basis of which we can then address the important question: To what experience or way of being does such a “back then” correspond?

The past in which the possible is inscribed is neither recent nor remote: in “Le possible et le réel,” Bergson speaks of a “*passé indéfini*,” of an incalculable “*de tout temps*,” a formless other-then.⁶ And in “Le souvenir du présent,” we read that in false recognition, the memory is never located at a specific point in the past, but rather in “the *past in general*.” What is at issue here is not this or that former present, with its own unique countenance, but rather a simple “before” that cannot be circumscribed within any chronological order: “a past that has no date and can have none.”⁷ The past-in-general accompanies every actuality like an aura – without, though, itself having ever been actual. It is, therefore, the pure *form* of anteriority that is here at work. It is an *a priori* form, with the capacity to subordinate any experience whatsoever to itself: not just that which has already been, but also current experience and what is now to come. We ought to recognize that “a representation can bear the mark of the past independently of what it represents.”⁸

If representation concerns a particular (dateable, defined) past, the past-form so closely adheres to its object that it goes almost unperceived. Conversely, where the “now” is depicted as the “back then” (namely, where we have a memory of the present) the past-in-general sticks out in sharp relief. The déjà vu is its epiphany. Moreover, the past-form also corresponds to the representation of the future. How? Whenever we adopt the future perfect tense of a verb, the future seems to be emptied out, locked away: “I will have enjoyed,” “I will have had many opportunities,” and so on. In all such cases, what does not yet exist is put behind us, and we include it in the past-in-general,

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making it a matter of memory. The future perfect is the *memory of what is to come*.⁹

Whatever the temporal location of the experience to which we are referring, the past-form always implies that the actual must step back in favor of the potential. An event that took place many years ago is “past” in a double sense: something that was perceived and something that was remembered as it took place, a real “back then” and a virtual “back then,” the chronologically situated past and the past-in-general. An event in the present, as we know, demonstrates its own enduring potential as soon as its image is anachronistically projected back onto the “*passé indéfini*.” An event that takes place subsequently, *will have been possible*: contingency is inherent within future states of affairs (or rather, seems to be one of their salient traits) precisely and only because they also have a place in the past-in-general, have something of the *previous* about them, and are vested with memory.

In a well-known passage of his *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

But even now it is manifest and clear that there are neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there

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are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.¹⁰

And yet such a scansion, with its axis in the current present (the object of perception or “direct intuition”), speaks to the modality of the real, rather than to the modality of the possible. The past – or better, the indeterminate “*de tout temps*” – is preeminent with regard to the potentially existing. Paraphrasing Augustine, we ought speak of a *past of the past* (the old “memory of the present” now placed side-by-side with the perception of the present); of a *past of the present* (as arises in the *déjà vu* phenomenon); and a *past of the future* (the memory of what is to come, as established by what “will have been”).

Language as the Indefinite Past



Aby Warburg, *Atlas Mnemosyne* no. 39, 1926.

The past that was never actual, a “before” with no date, the pure form of the previous: such are the structural characteristics of the time pertaining to possibility. But such a morphological description is only one first step. The past-form is not, indeed, a mental abstraction (possible to grasp by identifying what the countless particular pasts have in common), nor a mere psychological device. Nothing is less “formalistic” than this form: it does not limit itself to making its mark on many and varied representations, but also exhibits its own particular *mode of existence*. The past-in-general, beyond being a “how?,” is also and above all a “what?”: it refers to an aspect of existence, and is incarnated in an unavoidable concrete process. Our next task, then, consists in understanding what the past-in-general is, or – the same thing – in naming the potential nestled within it.

The past-in-general is, in the first place, language. Meaning: the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical system, which exists in the sense of an inexhaustible potential, a potential that is perennial because it is never exhausted or attenuated by the ensemble of its realizations. But the term “language” here has a more extensive – or less rigorous – meaning than Saussure gives it: it also indicates the general disposition towards articulated discourse, the very fact that we can speak. Here we are referring to the language faculty as such, not only the system of signs (*langue* in the strict

sense, that is) that allows and mediates its exercise.

According to psychiatrists, people subject to *déjà vu* are, without exception, inclined to find familiar words strange. Their vocabulary is immobilized, stopping the phrase in its tracks: derailed from its habitual use, it comes into sharp relief, and produces a sort of echo. We are suddenly struck by certain among its material characteristics (the excess of vowels in “queue,” for example), or by the obviousness of its etymology, or by a previously unnoticed homonymy. The familiar word is split in two: we use it to say something, but, at the same time, we put it in inverted commas, as if it were a quotation. It is *used* but also *mentioned*; perceived in its actuality, and together with this remembered as something virtual. On the one hand, the mention of the term – simultaneous to its use – situates what is being said in the past. On the other hand, its mention re-evokes the fact that it belongs to the infinite potential of language, restoring the *dictum* to the terms of the speakable, and referring the act of speaking back to the faculty that made it possible. On the one hand and the other: But is it really the case that two distinct aspects are at play here? Or are we talking about one and the same thing? On closer inspection, the mention of the familiar word pushes it back into the *passé indéfini* precisely insofar as it re-assimilates it to language. And language is, in itself, the purely previous, an indeterminate other-then. The

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Jonathan Glazer, *Under the Skin* (2013), film still.

language faculty is the never-present “back then” to which what I now utter can always look back.

The Snobbery of Memory

This reflection on the two different forms of anachronism now allows us to formulate a detailed and sharp-pointed thesis that will not be blunted by too many nuances. More than a thesis, it is a guide-to-thought with which we can mount an offensive against certain theories and emotional inclinations that postulate the completion or collapse of the process of history.

The feeling of *déjà vu*, awakened by “false recognition,” leads us to believe that even if we are faced with continuous change, everything is the same, everything is repeating itself. It goes without saying, however, that there would be no “false recognition” if it were not for “the memory of the present.” Only where the virtual is in full flower right next to the actual could we ever illusorily confuse it for something that we have experienced already. The real anachronism makes use of materials that the formal anachronism puts at its disposal: and nothing else beyond them. As such, it uses its opposite as its own lever. But since “false recognition” conceals the genesis of historical time, the genesis that the “memory of the present,” conversely, reveals and displays, to state that the former presupposes the latter has a consequence of some significance (here accorded the value of a “thesis”). Namely: *the “end of history” is an idea, or state of mind, that arises precisely when the very condition of possibility of history comes into view; when the root of all historical activity is cast out onto the surface of historical becoming, and is evident as a phenomenon; when the historicity of experience is itself also manifested historically.*

The best way to examine this guide-to-thought more closely is to put it to the test. That is, we ought to test the waters of its explanatory capacity and critical force in relation to an example text. In a long footnote to his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Alexandre Kojève maintains that the exhaustion of history diagnosed by Hegel is no longer, in our epoch, some future eventuality, but rather is a *fait accompli*.¹¹ The industrial societies of the post-Second World War period, in this view, had now left behind the struggle against nature and the struggle for mutual recognition. Labor – that is, the opposition between Subject and Object – was losing weight and significance as automated production processes captured and subjugated nature in such measure as to allow for a stable relation with it. Similarly, politics – the search for the recognition of others by way of wars and revolutions – was also declining. The bloody

conflicts of the last century represented only a “spatial extension” of the essential results achieved once and for all time by Robespierre and Napoleon. Also disappearing together with Labor and Politics is “Action in the strong sense of the term,” which, rejecting “the given,” was always seeking to establish a historically new world. But what forms of life prevail in post-historical societies? Kojève saw two of them, a pair that diverged and were even opposites.

On the one hand, the post-history in which we are supposedly immersed is explained as man “becoming an animal again.” Rather than inhabiting a world with struggle and labor, the living being of the *Homo sapiens* species is now encapsulated in an *environment*, to which it adapts without any kind of friction. Certainly, even after the conclusion of the business of History, we will build houses and create works of art, but following the same impulse that leads a bird to make its nest or a spider to spin its web. Nothing like happiness is any longer in question: rather, “men will surely be *content* as a result of their *artistic, erotic, and playful* behavior inasmuch as, by definition, they will be contented with it.” Also accounted for here is the “definitive disappearance of human discourse (*Logos*) in the strict sense.” In its place, “vocal signals or sign ‘language’” will proliferate, to which we would react by conditioned reflex: nothing much different from “what is supposed to be the ‘language’ of bees.” In Kojève’s view, the *American way of life*, in which the eternal present typical of an “environment” dominates, exemplifies well the condition of post-historical animals.

Another way of being also comes into view at the end of history, diametrically opposed to the one just sketched out. It is a matter of *snobbery*. That is to say, an affected attitude that shrinks from any utilitarian automatism and clashes with the “‘animal’ or ‘natural’ given.” Though having nothing to do with Labor or “warlike and revolutionary Fights,” the snob nonetheless maintains a separation between the *forms* and *contents* of his own activity, such as to guarantee the former a marked independence from (and supremacy over) the latter. The unequalled model of this way of being is Japanese culture: there, indeed, Noh theatre, the tea ceremony, and the art of flower arranging have built up a widespread propensity to “live according to totally formalized values.” No longer historical yet still human (the fracture between Subject and Object having been reinvented), Japanese snobbery, according to Kojève, alludes to a principle-hope of general applicability:

While henceforth speaking in an *adequate* fashion of everything that is given to him,

post-historical Man must continue to *detach* “form” from “content,” doing so no longer in order actively to transform the latter, but so that he may *oppose* himself as a pure “form” to himself and to others taken as “content” of any sort.

Becoming an animal again, or else snobbery. The alternative proposed by Kojève is in many aspects akin to that with which we dealt in earlier: real anachronism or formal anachronism, false recognition or memory of the present. However, in order to make clear this consonance, we must call into question the conceptual schema within which Kojève inscribes his pair of opposed choices. And it attracts two principal objections.

First off, far from it playing a protagonist’s role on the little stage of post-history, we could even say that snobbery constitutes the very quintessence of historical life. Its prerogative is to show the autonomy and exuberance of “forms” with respect to “contents”: But what are this autonomy and exuberance, other than the *prerequisite* of Labor and Politics: in other words, “Action in the strong sense of the term”? Snobbery unveils the foundation of historical conflicts, since it devotes itself to representing,

through a series of determinate acts, the contrast that generally exists between human action and “the given.” Detaching “forms” from “contents,” snobbery *factually* expresses the impossibility of any *fact* entirely realizing the corresponding capacity-to-do. To put it another way: snobbery is a peculiar praxis that reflects in itself – and relentlessly exhibits – the historicity of every type of praxis (including “snobbish” praxis as well, of course). To attribute a post-historical character to the snob is a classic case of being blinded by too much light.

Secondly, “becoming an animal again” is not a biological fate, corresponding to the disappearance of any friction with nature. On the contrary, it is an existential possibility that reveals itself insofar as the gap with “the given” is exaggeratedly accentuated, becomes most visible, and is experienced *as such*. But this accentuation, as well as the visibility and direct experience of the gap with “the given,” is the result of snobbery. As such, we must say that “becoming an animal again” is the existential possibility that reveals itself on the basis of the full affirmation of the snobbish lifestyle. For Kojève, the post-historical animal always adheres symbiotically to the “contents” of its action, while the snob distances himself from

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A hermit crab hides in plain sight in a transparent shell designed by Robert DuGrenier.

them, counterpoising to this the autonomy of “forms.” But he is mistaken here. Such a symbiotic adherence would only be conceivable, in truth, if we supposed that *Homo sapiens* somersaulted into the immutable condition of the wolf or the ape; but if we did suppose such a somersault, the self-distancing subsequently operated by the snob would itself be inconceivable. On closer inspection, the fracture between the “forms” and “contents” of activity is at the basis of *both* modes of being. The division that separates and renders them antithetical is, rather, the following: the snob tries to live at the level of this fracture, understanding that the source of history is to be found within it; the post-historical animal, conversely, makes the overpopulation of forms into an *environment* at one remove, viscous and all-embracing, and *adapts* to its prescriptions in virtue of some (pseudo-)instinctive behavior. To use Kojève’s example: the post-historical animal is he who reduces the most elaborate, affected aspects of the tea ceremony to an immediate “given.” Precisely because they are detached from their natural “contents,” and precisely because of their independence (and hypertrophy), “forms” are surreptitiously taken for a catalog of minute “contents” – and with this, their frictionless mutual penetration does indeed seem possible.

The post-historical animal and the snob do not limit themselves to coexisting spatially, each of them extraneous and refractory with regard to the other. Within the latter we can still make out the silhouette of the former, even if it has been disfigured and upended. The intimate relationship between these two contenders does not, however, blunt the contest itself. The antithesis between these two forms of life is all the more radical, indeed, the more they are based on identical premises and defined against the same background. This background is not, as Kojève supposes, the “end of history.” On the contrary, the opposition between “becoming an animal again” and snobbery is resolved on the stage of a *hyper-historical* epoch: the epoch in which, let us repeat, not only do we experience historical events, but we face up to the very thing that confers a historical tone on every event.

False recognition suits “becoming an animal again” very well. And the converse is also true: “becoming an animal again” announces itself first and foremost as false recognition. When today’s potential is confused for an already-experienced act, which we are now constrained to copy unvaryingly, human praxis degenerates into repetitive, predetermined behavior patterns. To identify the faculty (capacity-to-do) with a list of specific performances (*faits accomplis*) carves out an environment for us within which any freedom from “the given” is imperceptible. It is

clear, however, that this confusion and this identification would be impossible if the potential and the faculty had not acquired an autonomous significance thanks to the snobbish memory of the present. When we experience language through the prism of each concrete utterance, communication resembles a weft of “vocal signals or sign ‘language,’” but, in experiencing it, we take it for an immense reservoir of *already-spoken* words, to be repeated and repeated again in correspondence with environmental stimuli. The impulse for happiness declines, and people are simply content (inasmuch as they are *contented* with their own behavior), when the disposition to enjoy pleasure appears as such – as distinct from a single actual pleasure – but, at the same time, it is equated (through “false recognition,” indeed) with the sum of already-enjoyed pleasures.

The Modernariat

The excess of memory, which without doubt characterizes the contemporary situation, has a name: *the memory of the present*. This latter, rather than remaining a fundamental and yet hidden characteristic of the mnemonic faculty, breaks through to the surface and is explicitly manifest. What is excessive is not per se the split in every instant between a perceived “now” and a remembered “now,” but rather the fact that this split has become fully visible. To what do we owe such a radical disclosure? Perhaps to a pathological “lack of attention to life,” as Bergson claims? Nothing of the kind. The memory of the present, whose peculiar function is precisely to represent the possible, presents itself unreservedly when the experience of the possible assumes a crucial importance in the fulfillment of life’s tasks. It is the objective preeminence of the virtual in any given type of praxis that brings the mnemonic mechanism openly into relief – in determining the temporality of the virtual, this mechanism opens the way to the virtual itself. The excess of memory *does not* induce lethargy and resignation, but on the contrary guarantees the most intense alacrity.

The paralysis of action, often accompanied by an ironic disillusionment, derives above all from the inability to bear the experience of the possible. To put it another way, the effective cause of this paralysis is the overturning of the memory of the present in *false recognition*, which, as we know, reconfigures today’s possible as a previously-existing real that we must now inevitably reiterate. Since the memory of the present is an explicit, pervasive phenomenon, even its direct negation – that is, false recognition – is immediately in evidence. *Déjà vu* is, indeed, a pathology: but, we must add, it is a

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Rita Hayworth poses infinitely in Orson Welles's 1947 *Lady from Shanghai*.

public pathology.

In the contemporary situation, apparently in harmony with the plot of the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, the overabundance of memory entails an overabundance of history. This does not, however, mean the maniacal (and asphyxiating) predominance of historiographical studies. The problem is something rather more extreme: the unprecedented proximity of every particular instance of action and suffering to history's conditions of possibility, namely what *historicizes* action and suffering *per se*.

In our epoch, the root of acting historically (the coexistence of, as well as the discrepancy between, potential and act) has acquired empirical and even pragmatic significance as a phenomenon. There is no work task today that does not require – if it is to be discharged in full – the exhibition of the generic psycho-physical disposition to produce (namely, labor-power), which goes beyond the task itself. Nor is there any effective, pertinent discourse today that, beyond communicating something, does not also have to demonstrate the speaker's linguistic competence pure and simple, namely the capacity-to-speak (language), which always exceeds the content that the communication happens to have. The formal anachronism thus also itself becomes a *public* mechanism, an inevitable requisite of production and discourse. The overabundance of history (connected to the overabundance of memory) points us to where human praxis is directly grappling with the difference between faculty and performance, which constitutes history's condition of possibility.

Nietzsche held that “at the point of a certain excess of history, life crumbles and degenerates – as does, ultimately, as a result of this degeneration, history itself, as well.” We can here put our own name to this statement, on condition that the original meaning is altered. The idea of an “end of history” is *not* the consequence of excess, as Nietzsche hypothesizes, but rather the consequence of its obfuscation. It is also true, moreover, that this obfuscation presupposes a revelation: it concerns something (namely, the overabundance of history) on which our gaze is now fixed. Let us consider these two aspects more closely. The post-historical state of mind is awakened by the overturning of the (historicizing) formal anachronism in the *real anachronism*, which is symmetrically opposed to it. The *real anachronism* conceals the difference between potential and act (the foundation of historicity), thus reducing potential to a previous act, a faculty to past performances, and language to already-spoken words. Nonetheless, the radical

difference between capacity-to-do and *faits accomplis* is subject to a transfiguration – one that conceals this difference – precisely and only when it comes to the fore, when it is empirically most dazzling. The real anachronism is based on the formal anachronism, attesting to its opposite as it clashes with and deforms it. The impression that the historical process is stuck (“history itself ... crumbles and degenerates”) does indeed arise when human praxis stands closest to history's condition of possibility (“a certain excess of history”), but it arises as a reaction that detracts from it, or what Dante called a *contrappasso*.

Here, we get to something else that perhaps ought to be counted among the many ways in which we can formulate the salient problem of the contemporary situation. Namely, learning to experience the memory of the present (or better, its explicit, pervasive character) as such, thus liberating it from the nemesis that degrades it into false recognition. Learning to experience the memory of the present means to attain the possibility of a *fully historical existence*. Such a possibility, if it is not incarnated in a set of habits – that is, in an ethos – will not remain neglected, ever-flickering on the horizon, but rather penetrates into its opposite, taking on the semblance of the “end of history.” And that is what is happening today, in the main. Faced with the hyper-historicity of experience, postmodern ideology hurries to play the broken record of the *déjà vu*, simultaneously both sweet and gloomy. Everything has already been; history has fallen “into the order of the recyclable”; we are destined, for better or for worse, to “the massive recall, at every moment, of all the patterns of our life”¹²; every action has the status and the mannerisms of a quotation.

Making its mark on the contemporary public spirit, the *déjà vu* (or false recognition, or real anachronism) determines collective behaviors, lifestyles, and emotional propensities. To illustrate these behaviors, lifestyles, and propensities in a synthetic (yet not elusive) manner, it is opportune again to turn to the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*. We know already that the *déjà vu* subjects us to a *pseudo*-past, the fictitious “back then” that the present seems compelled zealously to reproduce. But every relationship with the past, even when it is utterly illusory, requires the development of a certain *historiographical talent*. Obviously what is in question here is not a scientific methodology, but an undertone of common sense, the nonpremeditated inclination to take care of what has been. The question that makes us again turn to Nietzsche's text is more or less the following: What kind of “historiography” appertains to the false past set

up by déjà vu? What type of historical narration establishes itself at the “end of history”?

Nietzsche discerned three possible approaches to the cadaster of *res gestae*. He termed monumental that history (read: historiography) which strives to present models worthy of emulation: “a collection of ‘effects in themselves’ of events that will have an effect in every age.”¹³ Critical history is that concerned with “passing judgment on and destroying the past”: it is cultivated by those of us who, unable to bear the miserable present, attempt “to give ourselves *a posteriori*, as it were, a new past from which we would prefer to be descended, as opposed to that past from which we actually descended.”¹⁴

Finally (though taking the middle place in Nietzsche’s ordering), there is *antiquarian* history, which “preserves and venerates” the past, as it really was, in its totality, without missing out the slightest detail.¹⁵ For the antiquarian historian, *everything* deserves to be kept alive in memory: the village fête, an incidental comment that just slipped out, the humble “almost vanishing traces” of history. Monumental historiography can degenerate into overblown rhetoric, and the critical approach into peevish rancor: however, since each of them maintains a certain link with activity and the unfolding of history, their overabundance is harmful to life to only a limited degree. Only the excess of antiquarian history causes irreparable damage. Its stunning suggestion that we ought to remember every particular raises the specter of hypermnesia, which Nietzsche discusses right at the beginning of this text: “Imagine the most extreme example, a human being who does not possess the power to forget.”¹⁶ This extreme case, at first brought up as a bogeyman, becomes a *routine* when antiquarian history has its way. It flourishes untroubled even “when history itself is lost” – even and *especially* then.

The pseudo-past, when we are being led on by the déjà vu, does not allow for filters or choices. Rather, it appears to be “preserving and venerating” everything, almost as if it were a vivid *hic et nunc*. Antiquarian historiography lovingly tends to the “once upon a time” evoked by false recognition. But, we should repeat, here “historiography” must not be taken to mean specialist knowledge, but rather a widespread and even banalized existential attitude. Correlating extremely closely to the post-historical mood, the antiquarian attitude is an indelible component of the forms of life characterized by the déjà vu as public pathology. But of what, exactly, does this attitude consist?

The “past” to be preserved and venerated (and this veneration’s only requisite is in mimesis) is nothing other than the present: or better, the

present smuggled in place of something that already happened, through a real anachronism. Antiquarian historiography applies its own typical methods to actuality: everything that happens is treated as suggestive *evidence*, while it is still happening; the current moment is consumed by *nostalgia*. But the antiquarian inclination ought to have a more specific name for when it is concentrated on the present: *modernariat*. In its common usage, this term designates the – sentimental, aesthetic, commercial – interest in objects and artifacts belonging to the recent past (so recent, it skirts on today): the music of the 1960s, the political posters of the following decade, and then, continuing onward, the washing machine that just gave up the ghost, or last summer’s fashionable hats. In the radical usage that we here propose, “modernariat” instead means the systematic development of an antiquarian sensibility with regard to the *hic et nunc* being lived at any given moment. In one sense, the modernariat is a symptom of the doubling of the present as an illusory “already-been”; but it also actively contributes to the ever-renewed realization of this double.

The modernariat is the historiographical genre that prevails when History always seems to be setting the pace; when, that is, it seems – as Bergson wrote of the déjà vu – “that the *future is closed*, that the situation is detached from everything although I am attached to it.”¹⁷

The antiquarian history of the present gives rise to what Nietzsche called “a blind mania to collect.”¹⁸ The modernariat develops a sort of cult of whatever happens to exist *now*: it surveys it with “insatiable curiosity” and attributes it the stunning fascination and prestige of destiny. Walter Benjamin tried to put some of the prerogatives of the “antiquarian” approach to the service of “critical” history, or to make the antiquariat supremely critical: as such, he sang the praises of the collector (think of his “Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian”¹⁹) and his vocation of redeeming the “oppressed past” sabotaged by the victors of history, with special concern for the lowly, the hidden and the silenced. Benjamin’s proposal is, today, being hideously caricatured by part of the modernariat, who favor a particular form of collecting: not to bring out in the present the plot of a thorny past which has been misunderstood (i.e., Benjamin’s intention), but rather to give the present the stigmata of a sacred and unmodifiable past. Not satisfied with contemplating the “now” as if it were a “back then,” the post-historical collector also nurtures a certain admiration for it, to the extent of concluding that “it’s too late to do anything better.”

The antiquarian history of the present, or

modernariat, is wholly at one with the *society of the spectacle*. In turn, we could say that the society of the spectacle is the modernariat raised to the *n*th degree. The “blind mania to collect” of our time understands the present day as a sort of world’s fair. An exhibition, that is, where the same individual attends both as an actor (“playing a role – for most people, many roles, thus playing them all superficially and badly”) and as a spectator “wandering in search of pleasure.” That is, they are their own spectators; or rather, though it is the same thing, they *collect their own life* while it is passing, rather than living it. Why is the present incessantly duplicated as the spectacle of the present? Why does it take on the aspect of a “world’s fair”?

Such questions have become rhetorical, by now. The present is duplicated because of the *déjà vu*. When we feel that we are simultaneously both acting in and spectating on our lives, this is a case of false recognition. It is then, according to Bergson, that a person “is looking on at his own movements, thoughts and actions,” such as to split him into two people, as if one were “an actor playing a part” for the other, spectating.²⁰ Far from only referring to the growing consumption of cultural commodities, the notion of the spectacle concerns, first and foremost, the post-historical inclination towards *watching oneself live*. To put it another way: the spectacle is the form that the *déjà vu* takes, as soon as this becomes an exterior, public form beyond one’s own person. The society of the spectacle offers people the “world’s fair” of their own capacity to do, to speak and to be – but reduced to already-performed actions, already-spoken phrases, and already-complete events.

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Déjà Vu and the End of History

- 1
[A reference to Luigi Pirandello.
–Trans.]
- 2
Henri Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” in *Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2002), 149.
- 3
Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 9.
- 4
Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” 155.
- 5
Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936), 235–36.
- 6
Bergson, “The Possible and the Real,” in *Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2002), 230.
- 7
Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” 148.
- 8
Ibid., 150.
- 9
The future perfect verb tense is of some significance in both Bergson’s essay on the *déjà vu* and that concerning the possible. In “Le Souvenir du present et la fausse reconnaissance” (*Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger* [Dec. 1908]: 561), he writes: “As we witness an event or participate in a conversation, there suddenly arises the conviction that we have already seen what we are seeing, already heard what we are hearing, and already said what is being said ... in sum, we are reliving down to the last detail an instant of our own past life. The illusion is sometimes so strong that in each moment, as long as this illusion lasts, we believe ourselves to be at the point of predicting what is about to happen: how could we not know already, if we feel that soon *we will know that we knew it?*” [Italics added. This passage does not appear in the existing English translation in *Key Writings*. –Trans.]
- 10
Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter 20.
- 11
Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). In the text I focus exclusively on the long note in which he develops the discussion from the twelfth of his 1938–39 lectures at the *École pratique des hautes études*.
- 12
Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, 27, 73.
- 13

- The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 133–34.
- 14
Ibid., 138.
- 15
Ibid., 135.
- 16
Ibid., 127.
- 17
Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” 155.
- 18
Nietzsche Reader, 137.
- 19
Translation in *New German Critique* 5 (1975): 27–58.
- 20
Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” 150.