

**the 'truth' that has always a  
small 't' for me...**

"Artist Position Statement"

Mani Mehrvarz

©2016

manimehr@buffalo.edu

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDY

University at Buffalo (The State University of New York)

The interweaving of past and present, and the ways in which individuals and societies constitute themselves through reference to the past, all would suffice to make the study of the past important. Examples might be reconsideration of the Holocaust, Rwandan or Armenian genocides, or other such atrocities. One method of looking at these could be via using a huge visual and audio archive as a physical connection to the past. Re-viewing the past can help to shape a new understanding of the future, and brings with it the embodiment of past times. In this way, the 'past' is no longer a passive collection of events, but a motivation of thinking about the 'thinking' behind those events. A better understanding of the past can introduce novelty in the world, where human action can be free of interpretation with its 'natality'.<sup>1</sup>

For me, the unique aspect of remembering is 'nostalgia' which depends on the act of memorizing, although its essence is different. Nostalgia signifies something more than mere memory of the past. It is a special state of mind in its contemporary meaning that exchanges real and fake memories, and often distorts even completely misrepresents - the past.

Just as we should reject the mindless equation of progress and hope, so we need to distinguish between nostalgia and the reassuring memory of happy times, which serves to link the present to the past and to provide a sense of continuity.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 178.

<sup>2</sup> "Memory and Nostalgia", *American Studies*, accessed May 5, 2016,

Nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealizes stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection. The clarification between nostalgia and remembering is blurred by language's semantic progression in the twenty-first century, but it is obvious, for instance, when someone tells us that she or he has nostalgic feelings, then we immediately know that they are dealing with a thoughtful mood, rather than active, accurate remembrance. My consideration of nostalgia emphasizes the state of mind that deals with the 'act of remembering'.

As Byom says: "the nostalgia that interests me is not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, 'a historical emotion'. It is beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped, as on an antique clock."<sup>3</sup>

### **Storytellers and History**

Human beings always like to relive past moments, and by doing so, we find we often tend to build a new story, that did not actually ever exist at all. Then the game begins, and we accept the new version as a form of history and continue destroying the original, in our own minds, overwriting it with the new 'improved' version of events.

It is impossible, in this context, to ignore the importance of the storyteller, and how they shape or illustrate the trace of the past. A storyteller is

one who composes the order of events, with the quality of distance to the past, or even to the future. The storyteller can create the illusion of unseen experiences. We cannot articulate any memory without being far from the events. "To present someone like Leskov as a storyteller, does not mean bringing him closer to us but, rather, increasing our distance from him"<sup>4</sup>. To understand this 'distance', helps us ignore the position of 'time' as a component of remembering. In this way, 'remembering' relies on 'distance', not 'duration', to say any story of the past or present can introduce new history, which I would like to call "post-history".

But what is the history that I am talking about? For Hegel, history refers both to the happening of actual events and narration of the event, and the subjective and objective sense that the union of the two meanings engenders, and this must be regarded as something of a higher order, rather than chance. In his view, history ends after modernity, as well as philosophy and art, with the birth of the aesthetic. His emphasis on the new notion of history, that exists just in philosophical thought, means "reason". Hegel believes that the consideration of history by thought is a function of the mind, of the faculty of thinking, and in that 'faculty of reason', is what Helgel termed 'philosophical history'. Thinking about philosophical history is based on one thought, namely reason. The only thought that philosophy brings with it, in regard to history, is simply the thought of reason

---

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/lisle/memory/close.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Svetlana. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1st ed. New York: Harcourt, 1968), 83-85.

that rules the world. A philosophical approach to history is thinkable only if history is thinkable, that is to say, to be rational. In this way, thinking about history can help us to understand 'reason'.<sup>5</sup>

It follows then that time and place just exist because of reason, which is the fundamental function of thinking. In this way, thinking of the past can form history in its philosophical meaning, by keeping the distance from its origin.

For me, history is not simply the lining up of successive events, which can create state and national history. To be more critical, referring to the documentation of real events is the pasturage of prejudice, controlled by authority. My concern is our 'sense' of history- something exists in the human mind when we think about the past.

The concept of "eternal recurrence" is a fundamental theory that Nietzsche outlined in his writings. For him, events will recur again repeatedly, infinitely. Time in this view has been recurring, and is viewed as a circular, not linear. In this way, knowing actual events in the past is not a fundamental function of history. Considering time and history as never moving forward in a linear way, but always returning to the same points, then there would be no chance to find the truth for actual events just around it.

History is important because it goes round, and as a result 'time', for history, has not been begun and ended. It is not theological history and it is not a series of events. I want to talk

---

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F Hegel, Introduction to the Philosophy of History (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 11-13.

about the logic of history, which I think does not follow our general understanding of logic. This logic is not hidden behind text and narrative. It is something independent from events.

### **Can we say that history is ended?**

For Francis Fukuyama, "after the end of the cold war, we are now witnessing not just post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and universalization of western liberal democracy as a final form of human government."<sup>6</sup> For Fukuyama, history should be viewed as an evolutionary process, one which has been ended by democratization. His somewhat Hegelian view considers the continuation of the occurrence of events as the end of history, while the conceptual evolution of history is ended.

"There can be no progression from liberal democracy to an alternative system."<sup>7</sup> Fukuyama's liberal democratic view is criticized by Derrida: He said,

"Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugat-

---

<sup>6</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", The National Interest (Summer 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Francis Fukuyama, The end of history and the last man (New York: Avon, 1992), 45.

ed, starved or exterminated on the earth.”<sup>8</sup>

My personal political view is not the Fukuyama’s “democratic peace theory, which is hesitant regarding any physical conflict with other democracies, and has a desire for a world without any armed conflict. Furthermore, to study societies and their developments from Marxist “historical materialism” is not alternative thinking about the end of history, for me, as we can see these days that radical Islam, racism and the “clash of civilizations” all continue. George Will wrote that history had “returned from vacation” after 9/11. All of these contradictions show that we still can debate what is “the end of history”.

But my position, as an artist, is somewhere far from concrete political views. In my opinion, the disaster is when we apply history in our life as an alternative to thinking about the world’s meaning, when humans try to grasp part of events as our own understanding of the whole event. Reality, in my view, is shaped by the illusion of the storyteller who is not any more constituting the story in the form of linguistic communication, but as an image. I believe that history is not ended or even begun. It is a mirage of past events, which has been born of our nostalgic feelings about the past. This state of mind has been affected by reproductions of images, after the revolution of the image and the moving image in modern society.

Flusser believes that new perceptions of history can be seen in form of an image, that even one image

can tell a story.<sup>9</sup> This view is a fundamental part of my understanding of the new perception of history, which is not the past event but our imagination of a past where there is no constitution of power. From a chemical trace on paper, to square pixels on our phone’s display, humans have tried to record the world, in order to try to understand it, visually.

There is frequent reference to the nostalgic texts, such as Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a German romantic poet who carried in his poem the feeling of longing and mirroring of nostalgia. There are also those artists who express or support ‘common pain’ and use words to show their feelings of sorrow. However, having such nostalgic feelings, recorded in text form, is not comparable in intensity with an image and cannot cover all aspects of nostalgia or remembering the past. [A picture paints a thousand words is a well-worn axiom for a reason – because it is true]. Mechanical or digital images are the most effective invention of humankind, as we these days can find new worlds by calculating the difference between pixels. We are enthusiastic to see more pictures and watch more videos, and even more eager to archive them. It is the part of the development of visual culture that did not deal with human perception at the beginning, but today nobody can ignore the importance of visual documentation for archiving the world. Because humans need a pre-knowledge of language to understand text, but com-

---

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Spectres of marx." *New Left Review* 205 (1994), 31.

---

<sup>9</sup>Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* [in Translated from the German.]. (London: Reaktion, 2000).

prehension happens for the image easily, as we all have an innate visual understanding of our world. And this visual perception can be shared easily, without the need for any semantic rules. The result is a shared feeling about the (moving) image, from the feeling, not the meaning. In addition, the essence of feeling is important here, rather than the subject of feeling. In this way, we can perceive even history in multiple channels of understanding, free from the bias of reality.

These days, we are facing to how store all this vast amount of visual data. For Manovich, the constitution of narrative is not important any more, while we have the ability to keep all this information in the form of a database.<sup>10</sup> The question is, can we introduce an unbiased form of storytelling by database where there is no hierarchy of events any more?

“To be sure, data also depend upon hierarchy. Part of what distinguishes data from the more general category, information, is their discreteness. Each datum is individual, separate and separable, while still alike in kind to others in its set. It follows that the imagination of data is in some measure always an act of classification, of lumping and splitting, nesting and ranking, though the underlying principles at work can be hard to recover.”<sup>11</sup>

The essence of a database is that it can value its items equally, while it can keep its ‘distance’ from each (event) or media object, in a way

which does not exist in text, video, film, or any other medium, independently. We should not forget that this accessibility is still under debate. “Along the way, we have conceived ourselves and the natural entities in terms of data and information. We have flattened both the social and the natural into a single world so that there are no human actors and natural entities but only agents (speaking computationally) or actants (speaking semiotically) that share precisely the same features.”<sup>12</sup>

A database is free of interpretation; it is no more than a container of objects. It can keep its distance equally from them and create a new subjectivity that can be shared among objects. This subjective association or notion can represent history at a deep level of understanding, unique, new and timeless. The desire to combine all of these notions will create a platform to share our historical experience and the story of our living as a distinct and unique being among equals.

In conclusion, for me the revision and reconsideration of our interpretation of history have an important role to play. Thousands years of history of war and brutality tell me that there should be another way to view that history.

I personally believe that yearning for the past and desire for the future are inseparable properties of the human mind. I try to provoke my viewer, in my artistic works, to rethink their oral history of their life, and urge them to have new vision about moments,

---

<sup>10</sup> Lev Manovich. *The language of new media* (MIT press, 2001), 219.

<sup>11</sup> L. Gitelman, *Raw data is an oxymoron*. (MIT Press, 2013), 20.

---

<sup>12</sup> Bowker, G. C. "Data flakes: An afterword to 'Raw Data' is an oxymoron", *Raw data is an oxymoron* (MIT Press, 2013), 258.

even in the future. The possibility that new media technology releases into the human experience makes me more confident that revising our view to find an alternative meaning for the world is crucial. Although huge political and technological developments are important, still the role of the artist, as a unique and small producer of thought, is considerable. In this way, thinking productively and conceptually for any new possibility to think about the world's meaning, can open a new chapter to the future. I am not worried about the result, because failing in this, still can produce thought, which is different with scientific logic, and philosophical thought. I am looking for the truth in my world; the 'truth' that has always a small 't' not a big one.

G. C Bowker, "Data flakes: An afterword to 'Raw Data' is an oxymoron", Raw data is an oxymoron, MIT Press, 2013

Hegel, G.W.F. Introduction to the Philosophy of History, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Lev Manovich. The language of new media, MIT press, 2001.

"Memory and Nostalgia", American Studies, accessed May 5, 2016, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/lisle/memory/close.html>.

## Reference:

Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. [1st ed] New York: Harcourt, 1968.

Boym, Svetlana. The Future of Nostalgia, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Derrida, Jacques. "Spectres of marx." New Left Review 205 (1994).

Flusser, Vilém. Towards a Philosophy of Photography, London: Reaktion, 2000.

Fukuyama, Francis . "The End of History?", The National Interest, Summer 1989.

Fukuyama, Francis. The end of history and the last man, New York: Avon, 1992.

Gitelman L. Raw data is an oxymoron, MIT Press, 2013.