Time and the Artwork

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Art criticism today is art history, though not necessarily the art history of the art historian.
– Harold Rosenberg
'Criticism and its Premises', 1965

This paper has two parts. A contextualising section on the relationship between history and memory is followed by some brief reflections upon the idea of artistic experience (the experience of the artwork) as a field of historical experience.

1. Context: Memory, History, De-historization[1]

There is a generally accepted account of the relationship of memory to historical consciousness which runs, broadly speaking, something like this. (1) History has its ontological basis and historical origin in the unity of individual and collective memory, as registered in the form of the epic (the unity of the one and the many narratives) and the structure of tradition, as the mechanism for securing continuity between the generations. However, (2) historiography proper, the history of the 'historians', history in its modern disciplinary, world-historical sense, begins only with the fracturing of this unity, the multiplication of reminiscences, and the consequent need for the artificial, methodological construction of collective memory through exterior, documentary sources. This is a process dependent upon writing (for both its objects and means) which, in the West, was revolutionised by the invention of printing at the end of the Middle Ages. Thus, in Europe, the period from the 14th to the 18th century may be seen as simultaneously 'the long death agony of the art of memory' in its core psychic sense (as charted, most famously, by Francis Yates) and the pre-history of historical scholarship, based on the establishment of centralized archival depositories and the foundation of state-sponsored libraries and museums, alongside the existing ecclesiastical institutions.[2]

In the 19th century, in Europe, the century of history par exellence, such scholarship was distinguished by three main features: (i) an aspiration to objectivism in its methodologies (Ranke's past 'the way it really was' or Michelet's 'integral resurrection of the past'); (ii) a primarily national and statist focus of interest; and (iii) a belief in the unitary character of its ultimate object: History with a capital 'H', the history of humanity, history as a whole – whether this belief be residually theological or newly materialist in kind. However, while the narratives which were built upon such scholarship could claim a new epistemological (though not necessarily political) objectivism, they were of necessity distanced from the 'living' memories at work in the everyday practices of different social groups. As a result, the ontology of collective memory was transformed. Cut loose from its moorings in psychic and generational continuities with the past, by becoming properly 'historical', collective memory migrated from social practice into independent representational forms (historical texts), from whence it was reimported into everyday life, in the service of a variety of political projects, in the distinctively modern form of what have become known as 'invented traditions'.[3] Historical consciousness, in the strict sense, is thus 'memory' in an analogical sense only. Its logic is that of construction, rather than recollection, in a Platonic or even a Hegelian sense.

More recently, (3) technical developments in the means of representation have led to further extensions in the metaphorical scope of the idea of memory. From photography and sound recording to the computer, with its still growing capacity for massive quantatitive expansions in data storage and retrieval, a variety of means of representation have come to 'embody' the past sufficiently indexically to be considered to 'be' (or in the specific case of computers, to 'have') 'memories'. In the last fifty years, the documentary basis of historical research has been

tranformed, both quantatively and qualitatively, creating new problems for historiography. Meanwhile, the analogical objectivization of 'memory' has gone a stage further, passing over into the biological sciences, where genetic codes are now routinely conceived as 'memories for heredity'. As a result, objects of memory are increasingly understood in cybernetic terms as embodiments of ontologically discrete forms of 'information', existing independently of the uses to which they might be put in either the present or future. 'Memory' has ben alienated from its communicative function in the constitution of social identities, becoming autonomous and disembodied.

We live in a culture characterised simultaneously by an abundance of historical representations and a scarcity of historical consciousness, in the traditional sense of a form of experience linking the three phenomenological dimensions of temporal experience (past, present, and future) in a coherent, though not necessarily seamless, collective and transgenerational manner. This de-temporalizing precedence of a binary and merely combinatory conception of information over narrative meaning (from the standpoint of which all narrative increasingly appears not only 'unscientific' but mythic) may be considered a further, electronically-driven, stage of what, in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin understood as the 'crisis of experience' precipitated by the interruptive time-consciousness of modernity in its myriad social forms: in particular, for Benjamin, the 'exact repetition' of machino-facture, the 'eternalization' of novelty in the temporal logic of fashion, the daily novelties of the newspaper, the instantaneous 'shock' effects of the crowd and of warfare in an age of technology, the accelerated and unpredictable temporality of run-away inflation, the disjunctive structure of montage in film, and above all, the abstraction from lived relations of usefulness dictated by the logic of exchange-value and the commodity-form.[4] This is a list to which can now be added the familiar effects of subsequent electronic audio and visual media and transport and communications technologies: the remote control 'zapping' of video and TV channels, the continuous automatic imaging of surveillance monitors, the compositional logic of word-processing, the cacophany of muzaks in public spaces, jet-lag, bombardment by e-mail, and the rest. In sum, a temporal culture of instantaneity and speed.

This so-called 'crisis of experience' is a crisis of historical experience, a crisis in the definition of 'experience' (Erfahrung) as being, of necessity, 'historical'. It takes the form of a de-historization of lived relations (their isolation from large-scale narrative meanings and, in particular, from a collective futurity) and, in place of historical temporality, what Benjamin saw as an aestheticization of cultural forms. Aestheticization and instantaneity are linked together here as elements of a re-naturalization of experience: the technological exploitation of a crudely corporeal functionality for merely reactive or compensatory form of psychic gratification. The famous fascist 'aestheticization of politics' in Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay is but one aspect of this more general commodity-led, de-historizing aestheticization of cultural form which is the central theme of Benjamin's phenomenology of modernity.[5] Aestheticization and de-historization are two sides of the same coin. More recent accounts of de-realization, hyper-reality and the speed-image add little to this picture, beyond a technical updating and a more extreme rhetorical gloss. The issue is not computerization as such, but a culture of instantaneity in all of its forms. They do, however, subtract something crucial from Benjamin's account: namely, the urgent possibility of an oppositional, re-historizing, refiguring of temporal forms. Since for Benjamin, the temporality of modernity promotes a forgetting of history which – itself historical – can and should be contested from within.

Now, there are good philosophical as well as sociological reasons for contesting the absolutism of Benjamin's opposition of modernity to tradition, montage to narrative, image to story; and hence for doubting the apocalyptical tone of his account of the 'crisis' – reasons to do with the existential structure of temporalization and the transcendental status of narrativity, as argued, for example, by Ricoeur in his monumental Time and Narrative. They constitute the philosophical presuppositions of this paper.[6] Even more, should we doubt the latest, more fully

ontologised, self-consciously excessive variants (Baudrillard and Virilio). Nonetheless, a variety of factors indicate that the 'crisis' in the historical dimension of experience which so preoccupied Benjamin – and which he also found at the heart of historical study, in the blank chronologism of the time-consciousness of historicism, as acutely as elsewhere – not only continues but has intensified; not merely despite, but, once again, precisely via the forms of historical representation which predominate in advanced capitalist societies today: both at the level of 'lived experience' and within historiography. In the first case, these forms are still predominantly those of commodity consumption (commercially exploiting historical representation in the service of 'leisure' – what in Britain is called the 'heritage industry') and a reductively instrumental politics which feeds the perceived need for substantial social identities with ever more simplified images of the past, in a reactive restoration of the temporal structure of myth - indifferent to the complexities of actual social histories, utilising the mechanisms of abstraction of commodity culutre itself. The dimension of historical experience most profoundly effected (and effaced) by these forms is that of our relation to the future.

Ironically, this problem has been deepened, rather than challenged, by the democratization of historical discourses which underlay the decline in the reputation of unitary, teleological models of history among professional historians since the 1960s and opened up a vast array of new historiographic sources.[7] For the intellectual and political tide that turned against the (state-inflected) paradigm of a totalising or unified history, in favour of a democratic multiplicity of collective memories - returning history to its existential origins in memory - bases itself firmly in the presently defined realities of specific, differentially constituted social groups, as its point of orientation towards the past. Thus, the so-called 'new' (post-Foucauldian) history, with its discursive revolution in the concept of the archive and its rejection of the three main features of the 19th century model (above), turns on what Le Goff identifies as the twin epistemological axes of 'contemporary problematics ... retrospective procedures'.[8] It is as if Michlet's famous assertion that 'History is first of all geography' had back come back to haunt him. The newly differential social geography destroys the aspiration to an integral past. The practical basis of historical consciousness in the present realities of specific social subjects (and with it, to a certain extent, the idea of history as memory) is restored, but only at the cost of a relativization of its epistemic claims and social function which problematizes the concept of democracy itself.

One does not have to agree with declarations of a 'perpetual present' or 'post-historical' age to recognise within the new history itself the signs of another de-historization, resistant to the spatial generalisation of the totalising structure of temporalization into an overall historical view, however, fallible, heuristic and projective its claims on a common humanity might be. So where, or how, do contemporary art and art criticism fit into this picture of de-historization, de-temporalization and reactive mythologization?

2. Artistic Experience: Modernism, Criticism, De-historization

The link is aestheticization; the issue, the relationship between the historical and the aesthetic in what, following Adorno, I shall call 'artistic experience' (künstlerischen Erfahrung) - the experience of the artwork – something which is more often than not reductively misdescribed as 'aesthetic experience'. I shall restrict my remarks to two areas: the contradictory relationship to historical time established by the role of the aesthetic in Greenberg's modernist criticism; and the possibilities of an alternative account of the time of artworks as fields for the temporalization of history, which emphasizes their differential historical temporality.

It is a virtue of Greenberg's model of modernism that, in its origins at least, in the late 1930s and early forties, it attempted to base itself on a mode of historicality immanent to the productive logic of the art of the time. Thus, rather than following art history in its adoption of the time-consciousness of 19th century historicism, its notion of modernism as self-criticism operated with a genuinely 'tensed' conception of historical time centred on the historical

present of the enuciative act (in this case, the production of the artwork) and its relations of negation to past events (previous artworks).[9] In Benveniste's terms, it was first of all 'discourse' and only secondarily 'narrative'.[10] However, it was, necessarily, narrative as well, and it is from the increasing reification of this narrative element (a progressivist narrative of medium-specific aesetheticization or 'purification'), with a fixed point of origin, that its problems derive. For there is a paradoxical temporal doubling inherent in the conceptual structure of the 'modern' that Greenberg's criticism found increasingly hard to negotiate.

It derives from the fact that 'modernity' functions simultaneously as both a signifier of period, within the terms of an objective, typological, chronological historiography, and a self-referential, performative designation of the (changing) time of its utterance, the time of the analysis itself. As I have argued elsewhere, in this latter, productive respect, it is 'the product, in the instance of each utterance, of an act of historical self-definition through differentiation, identification and projection, which transcends the order of chronology in the construction of a meaningful present.'[11] As the name of the historical present, the present as history, all definitions of modernity (including artistic modernity) are at once iterative and inherently political. They construct specific positions of historical enunciation and address, provoking what Homi Bhabha has described as 'a continual questioning of the conditions of existence; making problematic ...[their] own discourse not simply "as ideas" but as the position and status of the locus of social utterance'.[12] Each repetition of the sign of modernity is different. Yet, by virtue of a common temporal structure, each repetition raises the question of its relations of other modernities; relations which are at once historical and projective, referential and constructed. However, such semantic fluidity (centred in the 'now' of each new production) runs counter to the narrative fixation of 'periods' for which empirical attributes must be abstracted from each specific present as a basis for typological generalization.

In Greenberg, as we know, the basis for such generalization was the reduction of artworks to the aesthetic dimensions of their traditionally (that is, retrospectively) defined media. For the visual arts, this meant the tendential elimination of the temporal dimension of aesthetic experience.[13] There are thus at least three different temporalities at play in Greenberg's account of the modernist work:

1) the productive, interruptive temporality of 'the new', through which each work defines its own historical present via its difference from the works of the past;

2) the idealized 'no-time' of aesthetic appreciation, through which the work presents itself as a purely spatial phenomenon inhabiting a kind of eternity (the classical);

3) holding the contradiction between 1) and 2) together, the narrative temporality of progressivism, with its regulation of interruption as series, on the basis of an underlying directional chronologism. Unfairly perhaps, we might call this the time of art history. This is the point at which Greenberg's art criticism approaches the art history of the art historian.

The first (avant-garde) form is radically temporalizing and historizing. Every work is a definition of the present in the name of the future. It is the function of a modernist criticism 'to speak the words of the future in the present'.[14] The second and third are both de-historizing, although in different ways. The second ('aesthetic') temporality is that of a paradoxical de-temporalization, an evacuation of temporality from the object. Modeled on a certain Kantian transcendentalism, it has affinities with – but should be rigorously distinguished from – the interruptive no-time of the instant. It is linked by Greenberg to 'autonomy', which he understands, narrowly, as self-referentiality. The third (narrative) temporality is de-historizing to the extent that it performs a historicist effacement of futurity. In each of the latter two cases, time appears as a mere external medium, external to the 'working' of the work.

The suppressed contradiction between the historical and the (idealized) 'aesthetic' aspects of this approach manifests itself as soon as artistic production strays beyond the parameters of the historical moment defining the aesthetic conception of the work. This was already happening to Greenberg in the mid 1950s in the USA (the time of his greatest critical purchase on

contemporary art), in the work of Rauschenberg and Johns, and it became increasingly (polemically) explicit in the context of the Pop, Minimalist and Conceptual work of the 1960s.[15]. That is to say, Greenberg's modernism is rendered anachronistic as soon as historical experiences impose themselves at the level of artistic form which, by virtue of their claim on the present, can no longer be ignored. How, though, can we construe the artwork in a fully historical manner without neglecting or annihilating the constitutive significance of its specifically aesthetic dimension?

The key, I think, lies in the unity of art criticism and art history; although not, as Rosenberg says, 'the art history of the art historian'. The key lies in the art history of the 'art critic': the iterative social constitution of the work through the field of historical judgment, as embodied in the totality of critical practices that make up the art institution. For the claim made by the work as 'art' is not itself 'aesthetic' as such. Rather, it is a claim made via the aesthetic which cannot be made any other way. Art is historical insofar as it signifies: re-presents experience sensuously as meaning. Art transcends aesthetics as soon as we make the move from sensibility to meaning – a move which is never completed, but constantly doubles back upon itself, renewing meaning through sensuousness, fracturing meaning against sensuousness. Art becomes historical to the extent to which this meaning is the object of autonomous judgments of artistic truth. However, it is the aesthetic itself which, through its figuring of autonomy, makes judgments about art's (historical) truth possible.

Thus while, on the one hand, registering the autonomy of artistic experience from immediate practical interest, the aesthetic dimension is idealising and de-temporalizing; on the other hand, it thereby projects the work into a domain of judgment, which is of necessity conceptual, comparative and historical in kind. The de-temporalizing function of the aesthetic may thus be read as the basis for a re-historization of experience, through artistic judgment. For art to function as the form of historical experience that it (potentially) is, however, requires a critical discourse capable of redeeming its immanent historicality. It is just such a discourse that the objectivizing narrative of Greenberg's hegemonic modernism fails to provide. Less still, however, is it provided by its self-declaredly 'postmodern', 'post-historical' successors, since they forego the potentiality of the crisis in the aesthetic definition of the artwork brought about by Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism, in favour of a dissolution of the concept of the artwork altogether.[16]

It is not possible here to examine the role played in this crisis by artistic reflection upon the de-temporalized form of memory as 'information', discussed above. Suffice to say that all three of the movements in question reflect upon different aspects of this paradoxical process of de-temporalization: the de-temporalizing abstraction of the distribution-image of the commodity-form (Pop); of a pure spatial objectivization (Minimalism); and of ideation (Conceptualism), respectively. Conceptual art, at least in its narrow, more dogmatic 'movement' sense, was less an art 'after philosophy' (whose 'philosophy'?) – for all its philosophical self-consciousness (it was hardly the first art-form to interrogate the concept of art) – than an art 'after information'.[17] (Two of the landmark exhibitions in New York in 1970 were entitled 'Information' and 'Software', at the Museum of Modern Art and the Jewish Museum, respectively). It used the ironic deployment of an alienated ontology of 'language' to highlight the lack of autonomy of visual form. Yet it remained naive about both its own dependence upon the aesthetic dimension and the de-temporalizing consequences of its purely ideational self-consciousness.

Nowhere is the historizing power of the 'aesthetic' (sensuous form) more apparent than here, in the largely unconscious role it plays within a supposedly purely 'conceptual' art. Similar points apply to the newer, technologically-driven performance art of Stellark and Orlan which, for all its radicalism, struggles to rise above the level of a mere cultural symptomology. For if contemporary art is to remain a form of historical experience, it must continue to pass through the de-temporalizing form of the aesthetic on its way to a re-historization of historical life.

[1] I use the word 'historize' (often used by English translators of Heidegger for the German geschehen) to mean the 'making historical' (i.e. collective and transgenerational) of temporal experience. Hence, 'de-historization': the process of evacuating the specifically historical dimension or meaning from temporal experience.
[2] See Jacques Le Goff, Memory and History, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 82-7.
[3] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
[4] Cf. Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds), Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 83-4.
[5] See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', October 62, Fall 1992, pp. 5-41.
[6] See Peter Osborne, The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde, Verso, London and New York, 1995, chs 2, 4 & 5.
[7] See Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory. Volume One: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture, Verso, London and New York, 1994.
[8] Le Goff, History and Memory, p.95.
[9] Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), in Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944, pp.5-22; and 'Modernist Painting' (1960), in Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, pp.85-93.
[10] Emile Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, 1971, pp. 195-215.

[11] Osborne, The Politics of Time, p.14.

[12] Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p.242. Cf. Osborne, The Politics of Time, pp.198ff.
[13] See Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', in The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1, pp.23-37.
[14] Ernest Hello, 1914, as quoted by Apollinaire, in Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902-1918, Da Capo, New York, nd, p.420.
[15] See, for example, Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties' (1969), in The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4, pp.292-302. Cf. Peter Osborne, 'Mere Ungovernable Tatste: Clement Greenberg Reviewed', Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts 3, Summer 1992.
[16] See, for example, Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art', in his The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, pp. 81-115.
[17] Cf. Joseph Kosuth, Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991. Such was the narrow-mindedness of Kosuth's supposed philosophical radicalism that he felt confident to declare that after Wittgenstein, '"Continental" philosophy need not seriously be considered' (1969). Ibid., p.14.