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History Time and “Uchronic” Time

Another Perspective on Memory and Oblivion

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History Time and “Uchronic” Time

Another Perspective on Memory and Oblivion

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- 1 The preservation of the digital arts, and more generally of the digital culture, raises one of the most complex issues that human societies have had to solve in their relation with history. The problem is not only to keep artifacts in good condition, make them available to the widest possible base, introduce them in the art market or define new selection criteria, it is also a matter of contributing to the establishment of a new culture, of which the field of arts is but a facet. Among the various factors influencing the emergence of this culture, I have considered our relation to time, which plays a decisive role in the organization of memory and oblivion that every society must manage.

History time

- 2 Up until recently, we have maintained a relation to time based on the assumption that history began with writing. In this sense, history aimed at keeping track of the events that society deemed worthy of being remembered. However, let us note that in its early stage —over five thousand years ago— writing was not used to record the memorable events lived by the city, but to improve the management practices of great sanctuaries and administer their landholdings. At that time, writing served business management and religious purposes rather than history. It gradually became a means to set certain events through graphic processes. Through the everlasting nature of writing, history would ascribe the past with relative stability while ensuring temporal continuity between what was, what is and what will be. In this sense, history did not only manage the riches of the cities, but the very meaning of these events, the direction and course of the unifying thread between the past and future.
- 3 History constitutes a determining social component of this time Émile Benveniste refers to as “chronic time,”¹ a time deeply anchored in the physical time of the world, stars, seasons and days, and marked by various points of reference such as calendars,

rituals, major events, setting the *tempo* societies' lives and structuring them. In the case of history, these points of reference are no longer orally passed on, but durably set down in writing. Here, writing sorts out what should be forgotten and what must be remembered. Mastering chronic time is as important as mastering space, which is why it has been a constant challenge for the political and religious authorities. It was not until quite recently that the people writing history strived to cut loose from every form of authority to make it a scientific discipline. However, history is not limited to the science of history.

- 4 Although they have resulted in a considerable increase in the number of events induced by society and made the selective management of history even more difficult, the impact of sound and image recording and transmission techniques on our relation to time is limited. On the other hand, digital technologies are about to upset this relation.

"Uchronic" time

- 5 In order to understand how digital technologies modify our relation to time, we have to consider their differences with the so-called "traditional" techniques. The major difference between them lies in the fact that digital technologies enable users to experience virtual events, which are endlessly repeatable and potentially produce different results every time the apparatus is reset. In this way, users —or more precisely interactors— may act on the scenario (a series of still or moving images that may be accompanied with text, sound or music), reset it as they please within the limits of the program, or replay it as many times as they want. One of the distinctive features of these events is that they do not fall within the chronic passing of time. They partake in a sort of alternative time, a time outside of time, as virtual as the space they are intertwined with: a time that I refer to as *uchronic*. We are no longer talking about *events*, about irreversible *facts* that occurred in the past, but about some *potentialities* among other —sometimes even improbable— potentialities. They are *eventualities*: simulations of events that may occur or not.
- 6 It is in this context that one develops the habit of *resetting*², or in other words the resetting of the potential events and data that may be experienced in the uchronic time bubble. These temporal differences have different, even opposite, effects on the way time is perceived. They induce a sense of power, of time mastery. It is as if we were now provided with a cornucopia of time.
- 7 However, these same experiences may induce a kind of euphoria, due to the ability to launch the virtual scenario over and over again without ever facing any risk, or in other words, without the inevitable consequences of reality, away from the physical time and the unstoppable ticking of the clock. This rapture of the depths of time, source of a new pleasure that is inherent to the digital era, goes hand in hand with a hardly controllable vertigo. Moreover, the abundance of potentialities induced by the scenario, far from facilitating any decision, tends on the contrary to make it *undecidable*, for any wrong decision can be cancelled —*reset*— and there is no obligation for the interactor in the virtual world.
- 8 One of the characteristics of uchronic time is that it disrupts the continuity between the past, present and future. A *habitus* of time perception is consequently developed that favors the present time over the past and future. The internet greatly contributes

to the development and spreading of this habitus. Studies on the web³ have shown that internet users would find themselves locked in a temporality that is itself trapped in the present time. A simple "click" results in an immediate action, which in the real world would have required various operations and taken much longer. In many cases, the internet user's temporality almost obsessively pulls him/her back into the "present moment," the "now" and *here* —or in other words the screen.

- 9 This persistent present may have the distinctive feature of cutting loose from space, motion and the causal chain of mental states that unfolds during an action, even annihilating the "before" and "after" by compressing them to the extreme. This could harm the usual subjective construction of duration and result in the internet user's inability to apprehend change. As well, the user could be obsessed with saving time, in order to fuse the "before" and "after" into a condensed and unique "ever-present" time, which would make him/her ignore any kind of deadline, forecast, or projection into the future. In some individuals, this would result in a psychological conflict between time perception and time representation, induced by the internet and the objective, quantifiable, abstract time intertwined with space and motion that is inherent to modernity.
- 10 One shall argue that not everyone is "crazy" about the internet, and that the web provides us with new and extraordinary means of communication. However, the pathological behavior of some individuals reveals certain trends that are characteristic of the changes the internet induces in our relation to time. Another significant effect of uchronic time is that it modifies our pace of life by setting an increasingly sustained tempo. More and more, social activities —from political to economic, including the most mundane routine, work, information, pastimes, culture— tend to be carried out in a context of perpetual and feverish restlessness that will not allow any mediation or temporizing. Obviously, this has an effect on the way people apprehend works of art.

From factual to potential

- 11 The shift from factual to potential changes the relations the interactor has with the narrative forms encountered in the digital apparatus. The linear narration of events that occurred in the past and are transposed into the present time of writing is replaced by, or combined with, the arborescent narration of hypertexts and hypermedia which have the ability to create events and series of events as they are stated. Although there is some preexisting information stored in digital memories, hypertexts and hypermedia do not refer to the past. They do not *re-call*, *re-count* and more generally do not *re-present* anything. What they allow to read, see or hear, is *presented* for the first time out of numerous potentialities. They probably do so for the last time, for sometimes the reader is unable to read the same text, a viewer to find the same images, or a listener to hear the same sounds, as they browse the file for the second time. It all depends on the structure of the programs and the interactors' actions.
- 12 With this shift from factual to potential, the relation to history as the "account of memorable events" changes. Writing, which until then ensured the continuity of history, now complies with the hypertext model and spreads out into countless branches. The unifying thread between the past, present and future provided by history as a kind of handrail, is broken by uchronic time. The settling processes that

separate what will be remembered from what will be forgotten by society cease to function as usual. history no longer resorts to the past to ascribe events with meaning; instead the past becomes a network of potentialities whose meaning remains to be determined in an uncertain future. Everyone may rebuild history as they wish and propose their personal take on it: several websites already encourage internet users to redefine past and present events.

- 13 The overview that I have just given of the consequences of digital technologies on our relation to time only aims at pointing out certain trends, whose development is not inevitable. It is still worrying that as we connect to digital apparatus, we waver between two antagonistic temporalities, in which the present, past and future are no longer connected according to traditional rules. We find ourselves torn between history time and uchronic time: between the logic of the factual and that of the potential. The challenge consists in trying to master those coexisting yet contradictory temporalities, to arrange between them rather than oppose them, or to put it simply, to rethink our relation to time⁴.
- 14 What would be the concrete outcomes of such an achievement, considering that the preservation of digital works is at stake? Taking inspiration from the functioning of organic memory could represent a means to arrange between history time and uchronic time. The human brain memory processes do not consist in searching the event one wants to remember in a precise location (memory is not localized), but rather to re-create it through the activation of the neuronal areas triggered as one experienced this event. Organic memory is a live re-creation. In this sense, it is very different from the memory of a hard drive. This explains why a memory is always recalled differently.
- 15 The way works of art have been preserved until now is closer to the functioning of a hard drive than that of organic memory —a preservation means that would indeed correspond with the physical nature and fixed identity of works, which changes with the slightest alteration of their material. To put it in terms of digital technologies, it would be wise to switch from hard-drive memory or ROM, to RAM. This process is already implemented in other cultures and we could use it as a source of inspiration. In the West, architects rely on hard stones to ensure the durability of monuments. As certain parts age and wear out, they are replaced by new ones. With a few exceptions, the structure of the monuments is never rebuilt in its entirety. On the contrary, the Japanese always replace the whole structure bit by bit: memory does not lie within the materials (being wooden, they are inherently perishable), but in the plan. Thousand-year-old temples have retained their original shape, although they no longer contain any of the original materials.
- 16 This method could apply to a great number of interactive apparatus, artistic or not, as interactivity is one of the most characteristic and common features of digital technologies. However, let us remember that these apparatus have no real esthetic reality or meaning unless they are activated by their recipients. They must be "operated." In these conditions, we could not replace the creative experience of interactive dialog with a film that would make the work fall within the logic of the hard drive.
- 17 Admittedly, this process will not be easy to implement. One should first describe the apparatus in an adequate algorithmic language that would be independent from the obsolescent hardware —an essential issue raised by all software applications and which

is now the subject of advanced researches. On the other hand, works —collaborative online works, among others— similar to performances could not be preserved. However, let us not forget that such was the case for all the performing arts before the invention of mechanical, optical and electronic recording techniques (all Mozart has left us with is written scores, all we know about Apelles's portraits is what Pliny and Quintilian have written about them). What changes indeed is the way this volatility is integrated. How to grasp what is volatile and transmit a living memory of it?

- 18 In this paper, I have tried to understand the deepest and most characteristic changes induced by digital technologies in our relation to time. I have mentioned a possible means to preserve some works. However, the cultural consequences of this change go way beyond the issue of preservation. They affect the whole field of arts. They have an impact on creation, on the circulation and reception of works, on art criticism, esthetics, history and philosophy, on museography, training, economy, on the role of political and administrative institutions —and as far as the man-machine relation is concerned, on culture as a whole. In this sense, the issue of preservation cannot be solved unless it is extended and adapted to these topics.

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NOTES

1. Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 72.

2. In computing: "to reboot a program", "return to the initial conditions."

3. See Luc Bonneville's online article "Temporalité et Internet: réflexion sur la psychologie du temps à la lumière des pratiques domiciliaires." Although the study focuses on the home use of the internet on a daily basis, its outcomes are still meaningful in terms of trends, of a wider use. [Online] <http://www.composite.org/index.php/revue/article/view/47> [accessed October 18th 2013].

4. On the issue of time, see Edmond Couchot, *Des images, du temps et des machines dans l'art et la communication*, Paris, Jacqueline Chambon/Actes Sud, 2007

ABSTRACTS

Digital technologies (computers, global communication networks, multimedia, electronic games or art installations) have not merely changed our relationship with the world and the other, they have disrupted our relation to time and rocked the very foundations of our culture. We find ourselves torn between two temporalities. The first temporality belongs to chronic time, the longitudinal time of history, of the events absorbed and retained by writing, writing being what organizes memory and oblivion. The second temporality belongs to machines and plunges us in a time outside of time, that virtual or “uchronic” time when events give way to eventualities. What happens to our world when writing, which has ensured the permanence of history until now, conforms to the model of hypertext and splits? When the thread which history spans from the past and present to the future threatens to break under the pressure of “uchronic” time? Are we to reinvent our relation to time? What are the consequences of this change in temporality on the preservation of digital art works and on the sphere of art as a whole? This text was first presented as an oral statement during the symposium *The Digital Oblivion* held by the ZKM.

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Keywords: digital, event, history, memory, representation, uchronic time

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Edmond Couchot is “Docteur d’État” and “Professeur émérite des universités.” He has directed the Department of Art and Technology of the Image at Paris 8 University for twenty years and continues to participate in research activities at the Images numériques et Réalité Virtuelle center (INREV, Center for Digital Imagery and Virtual Reality). His field of education and research is that of the interactions between art and science, namely between theories on art and esthetics and cognitives sciences/technologies. Since 1965, Edmond Couchot has taken part in the activities of the French Association for cybernetics and general systems and created interactive sound-sensitive electronic devices involving spectators. In the past few years, he has resumed his research and participated in numerous international exhibitions. He published over a hundred articles and five books. The latest, entitled *La Nature de l’Art. Ce que les sciences cognitives nous révèlent sur le plaisir esthétique*, was published by Hermann (Paris) in May 2012.