

THE HISTORY OF MEMORY

TEN SHORT TEXTS TO ACCOMPANY THE MEMORY OF HISTORY

Lewis Bush

www.lewisbush.com

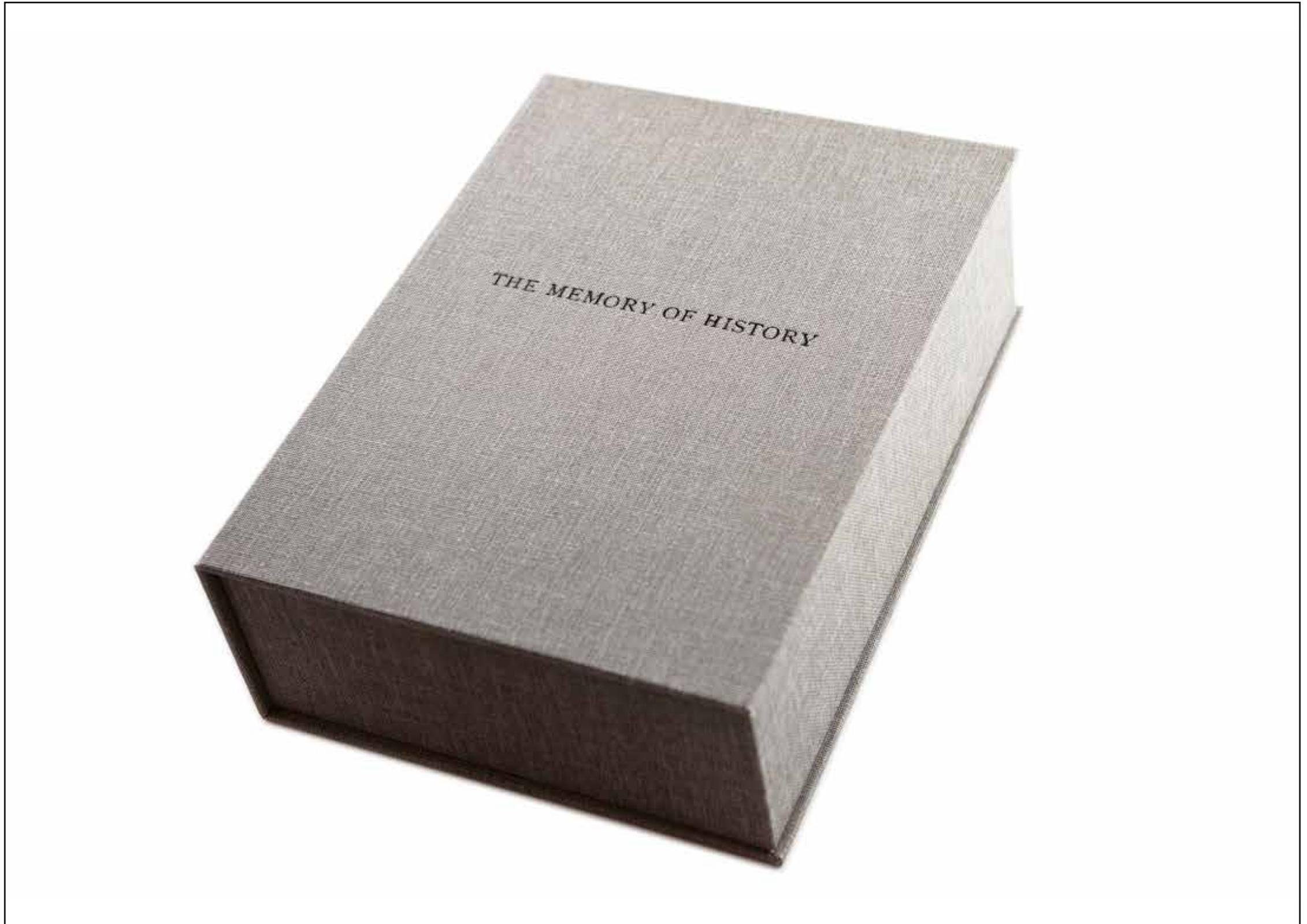
The Memory of History and The History of Memory

In the summer of 2012 at the height of Euro currency crisis, I travelled by bus, train, and boat through ten countries in the European Union. As I went photographed the way the continent's unresolved history was being disinterred, brought to light again by the disintegrating economic and political situation. The resulting series of photographs, titled *The Memory of History*, was my graduating project for my master's degree in documentary photography at London College of Communication.

As well as handing in my photographs for assessment I was also expected to submit a five thousand word essay which would critically evaluate the influences, ideas and processes which had led to my creating the submitted project. Feeling somewhat ambivalent about the idea of writing an essay which would need to be read in relationship to my photographs, and which would likely have little life span beyond

my studies, I decided to try and do something a little different to the traditional critical essay. Inspired by B.S Johnson's 1969 experimental novel *The Unfortunates*, I wrote an unconventional exploration of memory, history and trauma which made little direct reference to my photography.

The resulting text *The History of Memory*, is an essay without a fixed structure. Starting with an introduction and ending with a conclusion, the ten 'chapters' in between can be read in any order, on their own or in combination with the project's photographs, themselves also without a predefined narrative or structure. In relinquishing a fixed structure or narrative in both text and image, the project intended to highlight the fact that history is always a highly constructed enterprise, with the decision about where to locate particular historical facts bearing as much significance for the overall picture as the decision of what to include or omit.



ii. *The Memory of History* photographs and texts



ii. *The Memory of History* photographs and texts



ii. *The Memory of History* photographs and texts

The Invasion of Forgetting



A Royal Airforce bomber during a night raid
Hamburg, date unknown

'Every ten years a great man, Who paid the bill?'

Bertolt Brecht, Questions from a Worker who Reads

Knowledge of the past is like a great continent. As time passes, people die and direct contact with its events are lost, erosion takes place leaving increasingly isolated promontories of knowledge, bearing little relation to the original geography in which they sat. The channels and seas separating them are the unknowable past, apparently lost forever. The historian, professional or otherwise, attempts to bridge these isles with supposition. Besides death, the causes of the erosion vary, but neglect and catastrophe leading to the destruction of material evidence are the most usual.

Clearly it would be impossible to preserve all that constitutes the past, as much as it would be impossible to conserve total knowledge of even a single second of the present. How much and precisely what gets preserved has a profound effect on our later understanding. Indifference to the present because of the

apparent lack of need to protect or conserve it means the task is often left until after it is too late. Few people for example made efforts to record the customs and culture of Native Americans until their obliteration was almost total, the painter George Catlin and photographer Edward Curtis are notable exceptions, early examples of the 'salvage ethnographer'.

Forgetting the past can also be a defensive measure. W.G. Sebald mused that the devastation wrought on German cities in the closing years of the Second World War produced such a sense of trauma that the ability of Germans 'to remember was partly suspended'.²⁷ Consequently the event was scarcely dealt with for decades afterwards because in the face of such a trauma 'the need to know was at odds with a desire to close down the senses'.²⁸ As a result he felt that Germans still had not truly come to terms with the *Dombombenkrieg*.

The past can also be willfully forgotten, through intentional neglect, and more actively through the destruction of things that bear witness to it. Burning

Instructions

The Memory of History is about the past, and the way its understanding in the present is affected by chance and causality, subjectivity and memory. This project is designed to be viewed in a way that exploits these phenomena to make each viewing unique.

This box contains fifty-six digital inkjet prints, captioned on the reverse, and twelve text booklets with an additional one containing sources. When reading the booklets it is suggested that you start with the one labelled 'start' and end with the one labelled 'end'.

The photographs can be viewed and arranged in any order. You may choose to shuffle them and lay them randomly on a flat surface or you might prefer to arrange them into pairs or sets. You may wish to group them by country, context, colours or any number of other criteria.

START

The History of Memory

The past is something that prefigures understanding in almost every culture.

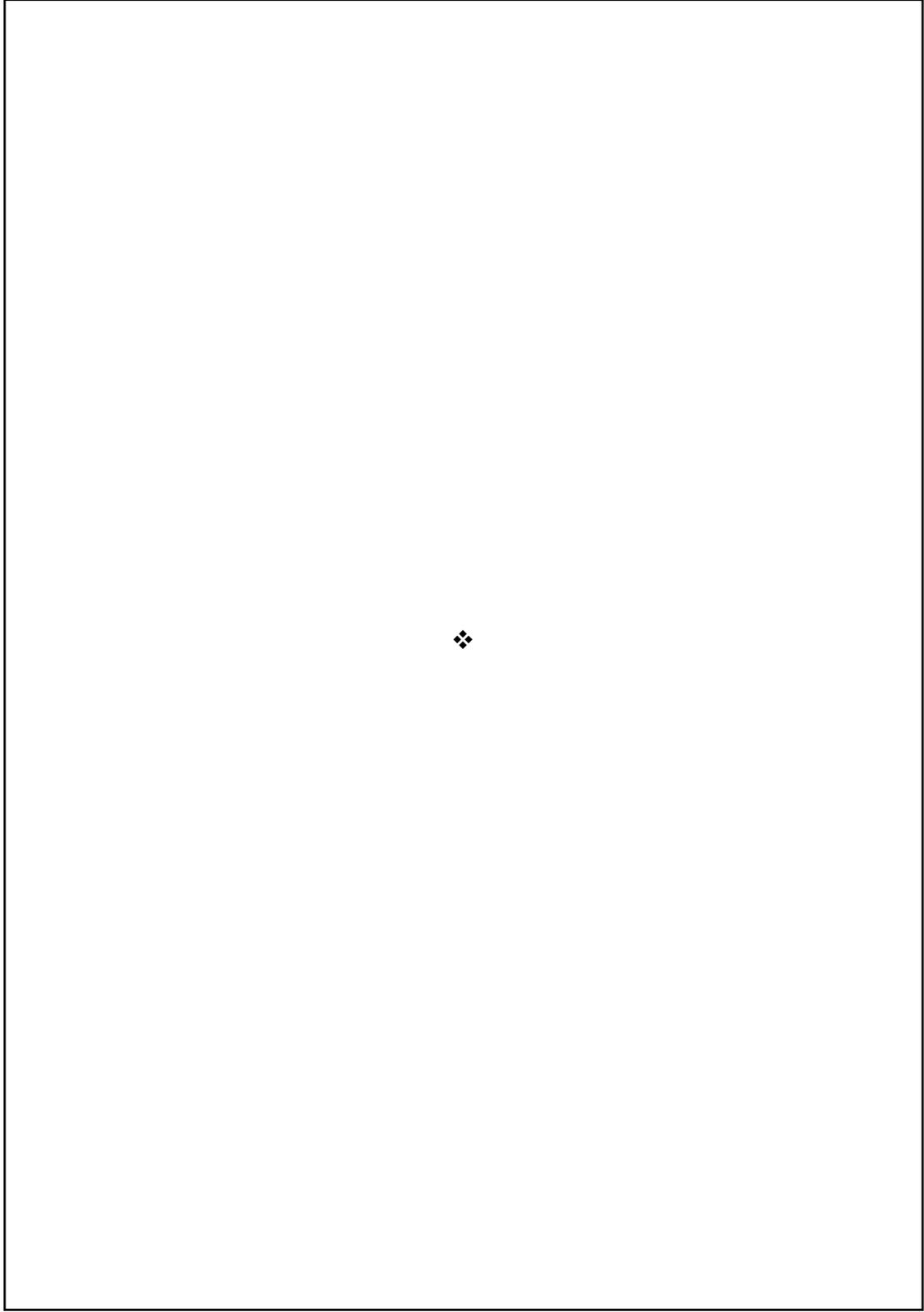
All people are dominated by the question of their origins, whether that is the micro-history of their family or the macro-history of the universe. I was once in training to join that caste of scholars that pursue the divination of the past, a practice part art and part science. However, I became increasingly estranged from my subject as I began to feel that academic history was just too fixated on something that was ultimately unknowable, and, finally, I abandoned it.

I gravitated towards photography because it seemed in many ways to be the opposite; it was direct, apparently self-explanatory and mechanically anchored to the now. Several years later during the height of the European Union's sovereign debt crisis I decided to travel through eleven cities photographing as I went. I wanted to document the consequences of the crisis from a fairly conventional approach of politics and protest, doing what other photographers had already done but on a greater scale, and attempting

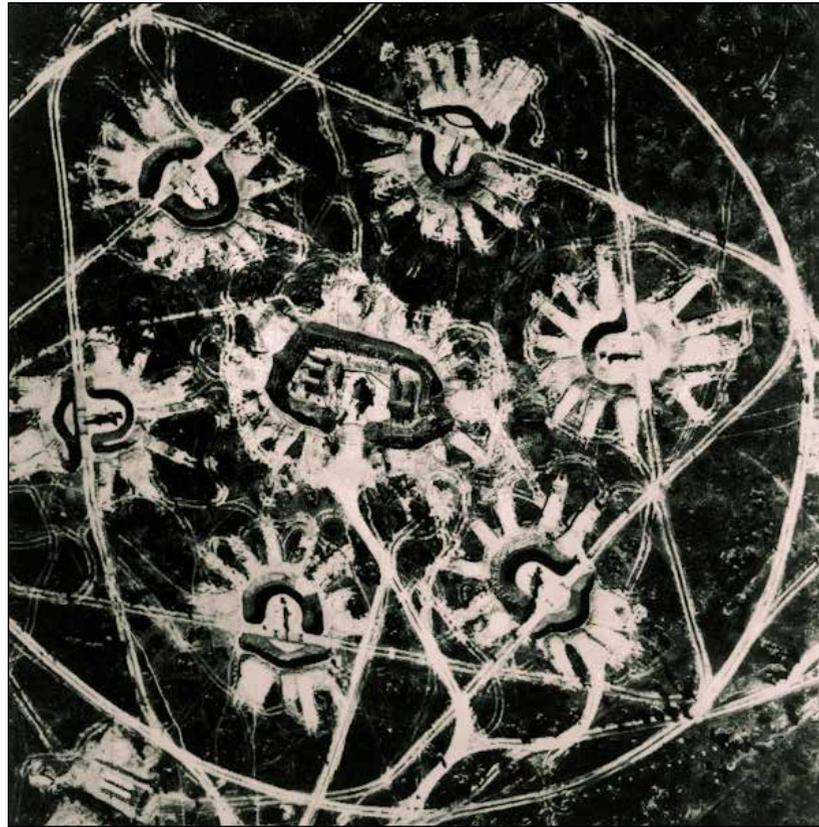
in doing so to transmute geography and show what was happening almost simultaneously in Athens and Berlin, Lisbon and Budapest.

But everywhere I went I saw the past re-emerging as a result of the economic and political tensions on the continent, I saw the use and abuse of history and memory, invoked to support mainstream political parties or to justify extreme opposition to them. I saw the way history permeates everything around us, the way it often refuses to behave and obey the intentions of the people trying to use it. I saw all of this and I finally began to see connections emerging, connections between history and the present, and between photography and the past.

What follows are ten chapters on divergent subjects, tasters, as it were, of far larger subjects. Although the topics chosen might seem esoteric, they all relate in one way or another to the conception of history, the functioning of photography, and the pursuit of order in a disordered world.



The Harmony of Chaos



An aerial reconnaissance photograph of a missile launch site
Cuba, 1962

'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards'¹

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Synchronicity is the effect of experiencing two events with apparently unrelated causes but which together have significance to the observer. Carl Jung, who first described the phenomenon in the 1920s, argued that because such events occur infrequently they are outside the possibility of prediction and it is impossible to determine their causal relationship to each other but that 'their existence – or the possibility of their existence – follows logically from the premise of statistical truth.'² For Jung the concept of synchronicity or the 'acausal connecting principle' seemed to indicate that underlying the random chaos of the universe was a scheme or pattern that gave it order.

Jung originally conceived of the idea in relation to the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, a four thousand year old text Chinese used for divination. Where the Greek-influenced west focused on detail and explanation of cause, Jung

argued that the *I Ching* stemmed from a conception of the world which unlike the western one in which 'causality is considered to be an axiomatic truth'³ rather 'seems to be exclusively preoccupied with the chance aspect of events.'⁴

Synchronicity reflects the inherent human tendency to search for patterns in apparently random information, which, it has been suggested, is an evolutionary throwback. A false positive, for example mistakenly identifying a shadow as a predator hidden amongst the visual noise of undergrowth, is safer from an evolutionary perspective than a false negative.⁵ An extreme form of this is Apophenia,⁶ a condition which has been linked to a predisposition for compulsive gambling, an interest in conspiracy theories and religious belief.

Jung's original idea has been criticised and to some extent superseded. The theory of confirmation bias for example states that people tend to select and interpret information that supports their existing views, particularly regarding important or emotional topics. Apparently synchronous events that relate to

a pre-existing opinions or ideas are more likely to be noted and interpreted as meaningful. Convincing study of the synchronicity phenomenon has proved difficult, however, because of the unpredictability of such events and because, as Jung admits, 'we are dealing with ephemeral events which leave no demonstrable traces behind them except fragmentary memories in people's minds.'⁷

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) chapter 5, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12/12-h/12-h.htm#2HCH0005>

² Carl Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (New York, 1960) p. 5

³ Carl Jung, Foreword to *The I Ching* translated by Richard Wilhelm, viewable at <http://www.iging.com/intro/foreword.htm>

⁴ Carl Jung, Foreword to *The I Ching* translated by Richard Wilhelm, viewable at <http://www.iging.com/intro/foreword.htm>

⁵ Michael Shermer, *Finding Meaningful Patterns on The Scientific American*, published 25th November 2008, accessed 11th October 2012, available at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns>

⁶ Michael Shermer, *Finding Meaningful Patterns on The Scientific American*, published 25th November 2008, accessed 11th October 2012, available at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns>

⁷ Carl Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (New York, 1960) p. 6

The Nature of Chance



Crowds in Wenceslas Square during the Velvet Revolution
Prague, November 1989

‘Good luck lies in odd numbers’¹

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Chance can refer to the mathematical concept of probability, or to the superstitious notion of luck. Probability is a means of measuring the likelihood that something will occur, for example the probability of any given number ending topmost when a dice is rolled. Probability is not cumulative, for example rolling every number on a dice but the number one does not imply a greater likelihood that the next roll will be a one: if all variables involved stay the same, the probability will also remain the same.²

A causal Newtonian model of the world implies that a notion of probability should be unnecessary because if all physical processes and variables were measurable then the outcome of any given situation would be predictable; but in most situations the level of complexity involved makes most such predictions impossible. For example a dice throw would require information

about the precise surface the dice landed on, the force the dice was rolled with, the angle and so on. The postulation of quantum mechanics and associated theories has added a further degree of complexity, by expanding the physical interactions that function at the level of an event like a dice throw to a sub-atomic level.

Luck is a principle that is simultaneously related to and in conflict with the idea of probability. Luck is an occurrence for good or bad outside of the control and logical explanation of the person subjected to it. It tends to be conceived of in superstitious or supernatural terms, and is often linked to concepts of fate.³ In the past, games like dice throwing were seen as a way to reveal the will of the gods because they ‘eliminated the possibility of human manipulation and thereby gave the gods a clear channel through which to express their divine will’⁴ hence the phrase ‘*Alea iacta est*’ (the die is cast). It has been suggested that methods of divination like tarot cards evolved to perform similar functions more precisely. At some stage gamblers developed

ways of loading dice, altering the probability that a given number would land topmost when the dice was thrown, and thereby manufacturing the illusion of luck.

In Abrahamic religions particularly the concept of luck is often supplanted by the idea of a divine will or plan, where every event is preordained and occurs for a specific, if unknowable reason.⁵ For others, luck is a more deterministic concept, and with time the apparently unexplainable forces behind a lucky event can materialize and offer a logical and earthly explanation for something that appeared to occur randomly or supernaturally. This in turn can lead to what is termed creeping determinism or hindsight bias whereby the causal explanation for something appears far simpler once it is known, an illusion that often afflicts fans of crime thrillers.

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602) Act V, scene 1, line 2.

² Deborah J. Bennet, *Randomness* (Harvard, 1998) p. 93

³ Deborah J. Bennet, *Randomness* (Harvard, 1998) p. 29

⁴ Deborah J. Bennet, *Randomness* (Harvard, 1998) p. 28

⁵ Julius Caesar quoted by Suetonius in *Divus Iulius*, available at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/suetonius/suet.caesar.html#33>

⁶ Deborah J. Bennet, *Randomness* (Harvard, 1998) p. 35

The Invasion of Forgetting



A Royal Airforce bomber during a night raid
Hamburg, date unknown

'Every ten years a great man, Who paid the bill?''²

Bertolt Brecht, *Questions from a Worker who Reads*

Knowledge of the past is like a great continent. As time passes, people die and direct contact with its events are lost, erosion takes place leaving increasingly isolated promontories of knowledge, bearing little relation to the original geography in which they sat. The channels and seas separating them are the unknowable past, apparently lost forever. The historian, professional or otherwise, attempts to bridge these isles with supposition. Besides death, the causes of the erosion vary, but neglect and catastrophe leading to the destruction of material evidence are the most usual.

Clearly it would be impossible to preserve all that constitutes the past, as much as it would be impossible to conserve total knowledge of even a single second of the present. How much and precisely what gets preserved has a profound effect on our later understanding. Indifference to the present because of the

apparent lack of need to protect or conserve it means the task is often left until after it is too late. Few people for example made efforts to record the customs and culture of Native Americans until their obliteration was almost total, the painter George Catlin and photographer Edward Curtis are notable exceptions, early examples of the 'salvage ethnographer'.

Forgetting the past can also be a defensive measure. W.G. Sebald mused that the devastation wrought on German cities in the closing years of the Second World War produced such a sense of trauma that the ability of Germans 'to remember was partly suspended'.² Consequently the event was scarcely dealt with for decades afterwards because in the face of such a trauma 'the need to know was at odds with a desire to close down the senses'.³ As a result he felt that Germans still had not truly come to terms with the *bombenkrieg*.

The past can also be willfully forgotten, through intentional neglect, and more actively through the destruction of things that bear witness to it. Burning

books or photographs for example, demolishing statues and buildings leave gaping holes in the fabric of history that are sometimes more conspicuous than the thing removed. In Berlin the destruction of the socialist era parliament was advertised as an important stage in German reunification. Prominent East Germans however criticised it as part of a process of concealing positive aspects of East Germany and recasting it entirely as the defeated evil in counterpoint to the positive depiction of the 'victor' west.⁴

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Question from a Worker Who Reads* (1935) available at <http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/brecht/index.htm>

² W.G. Sebald, *On The Natural History of Destruction* (New York, 1999) p. 24

³ W.G. Sebald, *On The Natural History of Destruction* (New York, 1999) p. 23

⁴ Staff writer, *Berlin's Palace of the Republic Faces Wrecking Ball*, published 20th January 2006, accessed 16th October 2012, available at <http://www.dw.de/berlins-palace-of-the-republic-faces-wrecking-ball/a-1862424-1>

'I did not see and therefore cannot tell'¹

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

Forgetting is not always irreversible; and memory both in the physical and physiological, collective and individual senses is a resilient thing, the past may simply lie dormant rather than being lost forever, until changing events can trigger its return or rediscovery. When this occurs memories may not completely return because 'in every remembering something is always forgotten.'² Equally they may not reconstitute themselves predictably, but may return in strange stutters and starts. It is 'this randomness, this lack of structure in the way we remember things and receive impressions'³ that led B.S. Johnson to write a novel of loose chapters in a box, designed to be shuffled and arranged in any order by the reader. This enables the novel to flit randomly from the distant past to a moment ago, one memory sparking off another like a line of mnemonic fireworks burning out of control.

To remember something does not mean it happened the way it is remembered, or even happened at all. The cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus found that memories were prone to distortion by suggestion, particularly in the immediate aftermath of their formation. Using conflicting text and visual evidence she planted false or inaccurate memories in subjects. This has wider significance because it means that 'when witnesses to an event talk with one another, when they are interrogated with leading questions or suggestive techniques, when they see media coverage about an event, misinformation can enter consciousness and can cause contamination of memory.'⁴ Similar research has undermined the evidential value of 'reclaimed' memories of abuse or trauma, to the extent they are no longer accepted by criminal courts.⁵

National collective memory faces challenges both from the passage of time and from the fact that 'the putative unity of the modern nation is irrevocably split by the complexity of affiliations and identifications which function in its name.'⁶ A similarly wide array of cultural mechanisms functions against

this fragmentation to maintain a cohesive memory of national events. From monuments and symbols like The Cenotaph and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to cinematic epics like the American *The Birth of a Nation* and the Russian *9 Poma*⁷ culture reinforces the official memory of the past. Because of this, memories that contradict official narrative may be sidelined or silenced. Equally these national collective memories are prone to manipulation or misremembering. Japan for example has faced criticism for its systemic unwillingness to recognise the scale or nature of wartime atrocities committed by its soldiers in occupied countries.⁸

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Purg VIII 103-105, accessed 10th November 2012, available at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>

² Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity*, (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 164

³ Jonathan Coe, Introduction in B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London 1999) p.ix

⁴ Elizabeth Loftus, *Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30 Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory*, published 2005, accessed 21st October 2012, available from <http://learnmem.cshlp.org/content/12/4/361.full.pdf+html>

⁵ Elizabeth Loftus, *The Formation of False Memories*, published 1995, accessed 21st October 2012, available at <http://users.ecs.soton.ac.uk/harnad/Papers/Py104/loftus.mem.html>

⁶ Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 204

⁷ The 9th Company follows a group of recruits in training for the Soviet-Afghan war. Despite misgivings about the film's accuracy from veterans groups the film set records for domestic ticket sales in Russia and was praised by Russian president Vladimir Putin.

⁸ *Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Historical Issues Q&A, accessed 5th November 2012, available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/q_a/faq16.html#q8

The Scrapheap of Progress



Göring, Heß, von Ribbentrop, and Keitel on trial
Nuremberg, 1945-46

‘Woe to the vanquished’¹

Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*

History in the west has tended to be conceived of as a linear path of events progressing inexorably towards the future, an idea traceable at least as far back as ancient Greece.² This view of history was attacked by Walter Benjamin in his essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, written shortly before his death in 1940. In particular he criticised the tendency of historicists to use this view of time as progressively improving as a justification for death, destruction and suffering in the present as a necessary price to be paid for a future ‘paradise.’

Benjamin called for a return to a more metaphysical conception of history, using the Paul Klee etching *Angelus Novus* as a visual metaphor for the angel of history Benjamin wrote that, ‘Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet.’³ The Angel would like to reconstruct and make whole this

destruction but ‘a storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.’⁴

At the time this was read as a critique of the historical narratives deployed by totalitarian states, but the strength of Benjamin’s writing is that its crypticity allows it to be constantly reinterpreted and reinvented, for Benjamin’s ‘admonitions to come to life they must be critically rethought.’⁵ Baer for example reads the Theses as an ‘exhortation to rescue the dead from the clutches of the victorious.’⁶ A more literal reading of Benjamin’s metaphor might be that the scrapheap of history is just that, an almost meaningless pile of facts, their order and their very survival no evidence of their historical significance.

Historians, in turn, are like tinkers scavenging through the remains for anything that appeals to their individual fetishes. The scrapheap is still subject to the relentless storm of progress, which as well as continuing to pile on new

material, potentially burying earlier strata of time, is continuously altering the substance and meaning of what is already there. A historical fact or artifact unearthed today is almost always viewed in an entirely different context to that of its making, and while historians attempt to understand these objects in terms of their past, elements of that context will be irretrievably lost or distorted by the knowledge of the present.

¹ Titus Livius Patavinus, *Ab Urbe Condita*, Book V, available at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liv.5.shtml#1>

² Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 3

³ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (London, 1999) p. 249

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (London, 1999) p. 249

⁵ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 128

⁶ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 128

The Possession of Trauma



A young German soldier during the Battle of the Somme
France, late 1916

‘to be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event’¹

Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

Trauma is a ‘disorder of memory and time’² a type of psychological damage which results from extremely distressing events experienced individually or collectively. Such events fundamentally violate a person’s understanding of the world, creating a sense of insecurity and making memories of these events difficult to integrate into a broader context. As a result of their inability to be contextualised as memories of the past, these episodes intrude into the present as ‘hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event’.³

The mnemonic anomaly of trauma offers interesting insights into the functioning of photography and time. Freud characterised memory in terms of a camera, suggesting the unconscious served to store memories until they ‘are developed, like prints from black-and-white negatives, into consciously

accessible recollections.’⁴ Similarly Scott McQuire has argued that ‘memory necessarily implies selection, ordering, narration, perspective’,⁵ much in the same way as a photograph or series of photographs. Expanding this further, Baer suggests that traumatic memories and actual photographs of traumatic events function in broadly similar ways, resisting the need of the viewer to place these images into familiar narratives. In most photographs and memories ‘the viewer is supposed to be safely grounded in the present over here while the photograph is assumed to refer to a prior moment that can be kept safely apart over there’.⁵

Some images and memories, however, refuse to exist in the past and instead deliver what is termed an ‘illusion of the real’ directly into the present, a mesmerising effect that transcends the viewer’s knowledge that what is shown is now past in the same way that a traumatic memory overcomes the normal defences of memory. This, Baer argues, exposes ‘as a construction the idea that history is ever flowing and preprogrammed to produce an ongoing

narrative.⁶ Photographs like Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies of people with disabilities walking on crutches or crawling on all fours, or those taken by Zdenek Tmej while he was performing forced labour in Nazi Germany. These are images which explode myths by refusing to remain in one place and which instead appear to stand apart from the time and context in which they were originally made.

¹ Cathy Caruth, Introduction in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995) p. 5

² Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 9

³ Cathy Caruth, Introduction in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995) p. 4

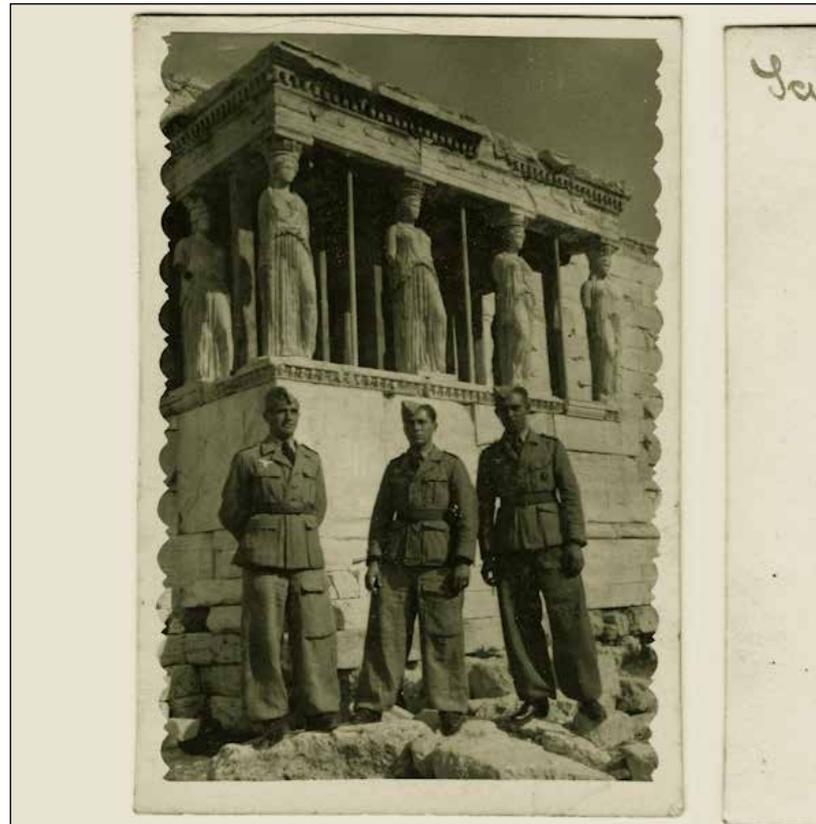
⁴ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 9

⁵ Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 164

⁶ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 2

⁷ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 1

The Nation of the Past



Three German Luftwaffe pilots at the Acropolis
Athens, September 1941

‘In individuals insanity is rare but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.’¹

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

The first seats in history at European universities began to be established at the start of the nineteenth century² at the same time that the idea of the nation state was beginning to emerge across the continent. The latter was in part a response to the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars but also reflected a trend amongst intellectual elites to investigate their native folk cultures which were disappearing under the pressure of modernity. Nationalists identified an ancient and primordial link between their nation, an ethno-cultural group, and the state, the geo-political entity they inhabited.³ Early academic historians played an important role in helping to establish and legitimise the narratives of nationhood, aiding nationalists in staking their claim to territory and autonomy, for example in the 1821 Greek war of independence against Turkey. Later Stalin went so far as to argue that ‘a nation is not racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people.’⁴

History and nationalism shared more than an approximate time of origin; they were also both borne of the enlightenment and its resultant revolutions in thinking. Nationalism was simply put, a logical extension of enlightenment concepts of the social contract and personal liberties, from individuals to entire ethnic groups.⁵ History, for its part, argues McQuire, could only have emerged from a major change in the concept of truth similar to that which occurred as a result of the work of thinkers such as Newton and Bacon. They instigated a change in thought which ‘came to center around the possibility of repeating experimental results under controlled conditions. This epistemological shift helped to create a new terrain for history and memory predicated on exact repetition.’⁶ This methodological revolution formalised processes of research and narration into what is now known as academic history, which combined with the teaching of history in emerging public school systems increasingly rendered traditional memory and folk history practices obsolete.

History and nationalism have been problematically linked ever since, with history polluted in Geary's eyes with the 'toxic waste'¹ of nationalism. The Second World War discredited ethnic nationalism to some extent, and its remnants were subsumed under meta-national cold war ideologies. But the collapse of the Soviet Union disinterred these identities again, and they exploded violently in the Balkans. In other parts of Europe the economic promise of a continent united under capitalism was believed to have prevented this, an assumption Graham questioned in his book *New Europe*, in which he wondered what would happen to Europeans who didn't fit into 'all these promises of a new beginning facing the future hand in hand, free from the shackles of the past'.⁸

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) chapter 4 line 156, available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/cho4.htm>

² E.H. Carr, *What is History* (Basingstoke, 1961) p. 56

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York, 1983) p. 6

⁴ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/11913/03a.htm#s1>

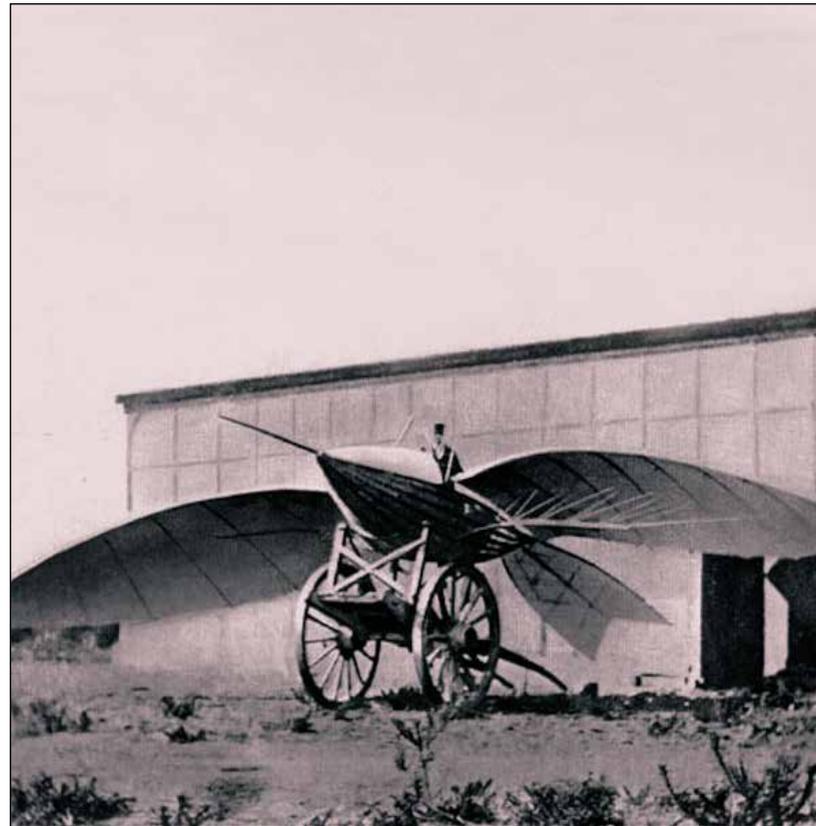
⁵ Athena S. Leoussi, *Encyclopedia of Nationalism* (London, New York 2001) p. 57

⁶ Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 166

⁷ Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations* (Princeton, 2002), p. 15

⁸ Paul Graham, *Paul Graham* (London, 1996) p. 25

The Tyranny of Time



Jean-Marie Le Bris's flying machine
1868

‘Here we are...trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why.’¹

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*

Time is an almost universal human concept and a central one for nearly every culture.² Competing models of time have co-existed for millennia sometimes within the same society, for example Baer references the ancient Greeks as viewing time both as a flowing river (from Heraclitus) and a vast rainfall (Democritus).³ More recently western models of linear time co-existed with eastern ideas about its cyclicity in countries like India and China. Gradually however one model has come to be almost absolute: the historicist view of time as linear. This is an idea which according to McQuire ‘saturates the modern concept of progress, conditioning belief in the endless growth of productive capacities and intellectual capabilities, the march of progress as cumulative, the order of time as successive and irreversible.’⁴

This model of time as progress creates the demand for a narrative into which memories, histories and artifacts can be neatly slotted to explain the world as it is and, even more problematically, where it is going. At the same time, it safely isolates the past and absolves us from responsibility for shaping the future. The linearisation of time and its connection to progress also have the effect of promoting the pursuit of speed which in turn has the result that ‘technological developments which regulate social velocity to an unprecedented degree have themselves become subject to shorter and shorter lifespans.’⁵ From the daguerreotype to the digital smartphone, photography is just one of many examples of the surging speed of human experience, one which gets closer to a physical and perceptual terminal velocity with each innovation.

However, progress and speed have also helped to undermine the narratives that made them possible. Baer suggests that photography was complicit in this, because as much as reinforcing the idea of time as ever passing, its unique way of seeing and showing things also ‘seems to reveal a world in which time is

fractured, splintered, blown apart'.⁶ Similarly McQuire compares the invention in 1765 of the first clock accurate to a second a day, to the latest atomic clock accurate to a second in three hundred thousand years, and suggests that the 'perceived failure of the "grand narratives" is not only a crisis of reference... but also of dimension: the continual hemorrhaging of orders of magnitude, the blurring of micro and macros, the telescoping of near and far'.⁷

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five, or The Children's Crusade*, (New York, 1991) p. 55

² But not all, the South American Piraha tribe for example are believed to be one of the very few with no conception of numbers, time, or creation myth: Elizabeth Davies, *Unlocking the Secret Sounds of Language: Life Without Time or Numbers*, published 6th May 2006, accessed 29th October 2012, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/unlocking-the-secret-sounds-of-language-life-without-time-or-numbers-477061.html>

³ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 3-4

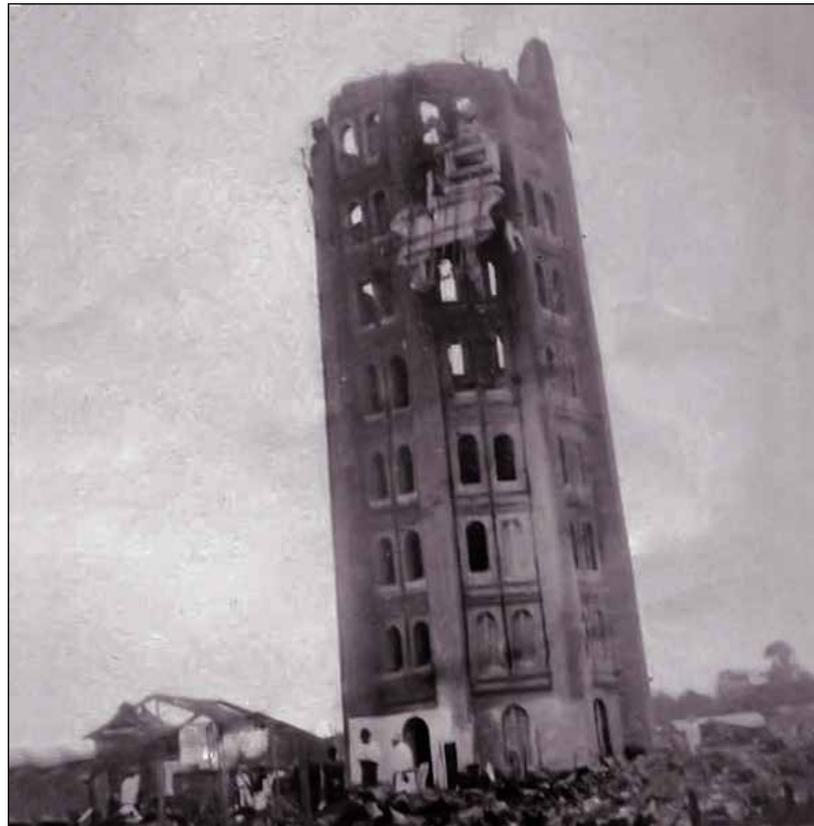
⁴ Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 114

⁵ Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 114

⁶ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002) p. 4

⁷ Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998) p. 118

The Victory of Entropy



Ryounkaku tower, Japan's first western style skyscraper
Tokyo 1923

‘...knowledge comes only in lightning flashes,
the text is the long roll of thunder that follows’¹

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

A key principle of modern physics is that, as time passes, disorder in a closed system increases irreversibly, the level of this disorder is known as entropy. Entropy can be reduced in an open system, for example by the act of arranging historical facts into chronological order entropy is reduced compared to if those facts were left unordered. However the act of ordering an open system only increases entropy in a bigger closed system, for example the universe, because the ordering those facts uses energy, creates noise, heat, produces waste and so on. This concept strangely both seems to confirm the view of time as linear because it rests on the concept of ‘the arrow of time’ that is that time is irreversible² and at the same time seems to undermine the ideas of progress and order that are implicit in historicist views of linear time by refiguring time as a process of relentless decay.

Photography is an interesting example of some of these principles in action. Photography appears to offer a way to record and order the events of a seemingly chaotic world, but in doing so it increases that disorder. Photographic film is in a state of low entropy, but exposing it and developing it increases entropy through the expenditure of energy required to perform this act and because the relatively ordered physical structure of the film is replaced with the more disordered, silver halide crystals that appear as a result of the developing process.³ Similar issues effect a digital image, which although requiring less expenditure of energy produces vast quantities of information, perhaps thousands of pages of data per photograph. This effect becomes more profound over time, as image making proliferates and the volume of images increases. It has been estimated that as many photographs were taken in the whole of the nineteenth century as were taken last year.⁴

Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, a vast work on nineteenth-century Parisian shopping arcades, left incomplete at his death, offers similar insights into

entropy and history. In writing *The Arcades Project* Benjamin was seeking to bring together the 'refuse and detritus'⁵ of history and to explode 'the nineteenth century's conception of history [as] an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things.'⁶ In leaving the work incomplete he almost achieved this aim more effectively than if he had finished it, leaving behind him a work of a thousand pages of fragments, the remains of an unparalleled literary edifice, the very embodiment of the chaotic historical scrapheap he alluded to in his earlier works.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Boston, 1988) p. 456

² Huw Price, *The Thermodynamic Arrow: Puzzles and Pseudo-Puzzles*, accessed 3rd November 2012, available at <http://sydney.edu.au/time/price/preprints/Price2.pdf>

³ Robert Wright, *The Entropy Distinction: or the Heat of the Moment*, published 16th September 2006, accessed 6th November 2012, available at <http://www.robertwrightphoto.com/writing/photography/the-entropy-distinction-or-the-heat-of-the-moment/>

⁴ Jonathan Good, *How Many Photos Have Ever Been Taken?* Published 15th September 2011, accessed 10th November 2012, available at <http://blog.1000memories.com/94-number-of-photos-ever-taken-digital-and-analog-in-shoebox>

⁵ Foreword in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Boston, 1998) p. ix

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Boston, 1998) p. 14

The Treason of Images



Montage portrait of Georg Lindemann, with Knight's Cross added later
August, 1940

‘If the doors of perception were cleansed
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite’¹

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

After touch, sight is perhaps the pre-eminent sense. If something is seen ‘with one’s own eyes’ it is taken as a given that it happened. After entry into memory, however, what is seen is prone to distortion, as the experienced moment encounters the mind’s Escher-like structures of processing, storage and recall, and the distortive effect of the witness’s own biases and predilections. On top of this the translation of memory into words adds another layer of potential for distortion. As a result what re-emerges as spoken testimony has always been treated with skepticism by historians. Since their inception, photographs have been seen as bridging this gap by providing a direct connection between the event and the future need to view it, apparently without human manipulation. However, increasing photographic literacy has undermined this evidential value and it is ever more widely appreciated that photography is a manipulation of a reality, not a trace of it.

This is true both in the sense that the act of taking a photograph remains a decision made for specific reasons by a photographer, and in that the event documented encounters a similar distortion of reality on entering a camera as it does on becoming a memory. Photography is a transformative process in which an ongoing event occurring in three dimensions is remade as a two dimensional, still, fraction of it. As physical artifacts photographs are prone to yet more interference. True, the photograph does not undergo the problem of further translation into language, but an image is contingent on the context in which it is viewed, which frequently includes the addition of captioning. This is cleverly explored in René Magritte’s 1928 painting of a pipe over the text ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe.’ As Magritte implies, the relationship between text and image is not a neutral one.

Michel Foucault argues that ‘verbal signs and visual representation are never given at once. An order always hierarchies them running from the figure to the discourse or the discourse to the figure.’² Various artists have explored this inequality. Foucault proposes Klee as the most successful because he showed ‘the

juxtaposition of shapes and the syntax of lines in an uncertain, reversible, floating space.³ Similarly the image-poems of Filippo Marinetti violently collide text with graphic forms and the photomontages of Hannah Hoch mix image and text in apparently equal meaninglessness.⁴ Authors for their part have attempted similar combinations. W.G. Sebald scattered his texts with strange, ethereal photographs of people, buildings and landscapes 'more sacred than profane'.⁵ Uncaptioned and often not explicitly referred to, these juxtapositions demand that readers decide for themselves what relationship image and text bear to one another. Ultimately, any attempt to reconcile image and text must recognise the basic similarity between them: that both are signifiers and not the thing itself. A photograph of a pipe may resemble a pipe, but it is not one, and to someone from a culture without pipes the image is as meaningless as the words are to someone who does not understand the language.

¹ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, (1790) available at http://www.levity.com/alchemy/blake_ma.html

² Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (London, 1983) p. 33

³ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (London, 1983) p. 33

⁴ Judi Freeman, *The Dada and Surrealist Word-Image* (Cambridge, London, 1989)

⁵ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London, New York, 2002) p. 236

END

The Memory of History

Photography and history both owe their existence to fundamentally similar ideas about the past and future of the world. Both have been always been caught uncomfortably between functioning as an objective science or emoting as a subjective art. Both are dependent on the perception and understanding of the maker and the subsequent viewers, and the context in which those audiences stand. Both are entwined in so many ways in acts of chance, and are about scavenging temporal flotsam to try and create some sort of order in something which is for the most part disordered, chaotic and random. Both are about desperately clawing back small fragments of an indescribably vast collective experience from permanent loss in unfathomable oblivion.

In the epilogue of Paul Graham's *New Europe*, Uhrs Stahel wrote that 'In the dust of Friedrichstrasse station, in the reflection of the flames of German unity, the shadows of the past are watching as silent as the grave'.¹ What I have

sought to show is that the past does not just watch from the shadows, nor does it remain silent. The ordering, remembrance and forgetting of the past, the conception of what it is and how we are separated from it, and those strange anomalies that periodically burst all of these ideas apart all contribute to a present that is entirely fabricated from the past.

Similarly photography, which for so long I felt was so anchored in the present, is nothing of the sort. As photographers, and we are almost all photographers now, we live in the present but the moment the button is pressed we make an image of something that is already receding at terrifying speed into the distant past, becoming ever more isolated and unknowable with each passing second. The exponential acceleration embodied in technologies like the smartphone camera, technologies that seem to act to restore photography's 'immediacy', are, as I have already suggested, themselves speeding towards a glass ceiling imposed by the limits of technology and, more insurmountably, the boundaries of our own perception.

When we reach that barrier, if we are not already at it, I think it will demand of us a rethinking of the way we use and understand photography, perhaps not as a technology of documenting the present but as one of recording that which has already passed us by.

SOURCES

Non-fiction

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York, 1983)

Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (Athens, 2002)

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London, 2000)

Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, London, 1999)

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Boston, 1998)

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History in Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (London, 1999)

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction in Illuminations* edited by Hannah Arendt (London, 1999)

Deborah J. Bennet, *Randomness* (Harvard, 1998)

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, New York, Victoria, Toronto, Auckland, 1972)

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) available at http://www.levity.com/alchemy/blake_ma.html

E.H. Carr, *What is History* (Basingstoke, 1961)

Cathy Caruth, Introduction in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995)

Julius Caesar quoted by Suetonius in *Divus Iulius*, available at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/suetonius/suet.caesar.html#33>

Judi Freeman, *The Dada and Surrealist Word-Image* (Cambridge, 1989)

Non-Fiction (cont'd)

Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley, 1968)

Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (London, 1997)

Walter Laqueur, *After the Fall: The End of the European Dream and the Decline of a Continent* (New York, 2011)

Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (London, 2005)

Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, Woodstock, 2009)

W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London, 2004)

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London, 2002)

Peter Wollen, *Fire and Ice in The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells (London, 2003)

Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1998)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/cho4.htm>

Various, *Dada, Surrealism and Scuola Metafisica*, in *Theories of Modern Art* edited by Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, 1968)

Fiction

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, (1555) available at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>

William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York, 2010)

William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (New York, 2010)

Bertolt Brecht, *Question from a Worker Who Reads* (1935)

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871)

Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (New York, 1991)

Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (New York, 2010)

B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, (London, 1999)

B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, (London, 1999)

Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (New York, 1997)

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (London, New York, Victoria, Toronto, Auckland, 1960)

W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London, New York, 2002)

W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London, New York, 2002)

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London, 2011)

William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602)

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five, or The Children's Crusade, A Duty-dance with Death* (New York, 1991)

Articles

Elizabeth Davies, *Unlocking the Secret Sounds of Language: Life Without Time or Numbers*, published 6th May 2006, accessed 29th October 2012, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/unlocking-the-secret-sounds-of-language-life-without-time-or-numbers-477061.html>

Jonathan Good, *How Many Photos Have Ever Been Taken?* Published 15th September 2011, accessed 10th November 2012, available at <http://blog.1000memories.com/94-number-of-photos-ever-taken-digital-and-analog-in-shoebox>

Elizabeth Loftus, *Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30 Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory*, published 2005, accessed 21st October 2012, available from <http://learnmem.cshlp.org/content/12/4/361.full.pdf+html>

Elizabeth Loftus, *The Formation of False Memories*, published 1995, accessed 21st October 2012, available at <http://users.ecs.soton.ac.uk/harnad/Papers/Py104/loftus.mem.html>

Michael Shermer, *Finding Meaningful Patterns*, published 25th November 2008, accessed 11th October 2012, available at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns>

Robert Wright, *The Entropy Distinction: or the Heat of the Moment*, published 16th September 2006, accessed 6th November 2012, available at <http://www.robertwrightphoto.com/writing/photography/the-entropy-distinction-or-the-heat-of-the-moment/>

Staff writer, *Berlin's Palace of the Republic Faces Wrecking Ball*, published 20th January 2006, accessed 16th October 2012, available at <http://www.dw.de/berlins-palace-of-the-republic-faces-wrecking-ball/a-1862424-1>

Books of Photography

- Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Industrial Facades* (Cambridge, 1995)
- Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Cooling Towers* (Cambridge, 2005)
- William Eggleston, *Los Alamos* (Zurich, Berlin, New York, 2003)
- Robert Frank, *The Americans* (New York, 1959)
- Peter Fraser, *Ice and Water* (1993)
- Peter Fraser, *Two Blue Buckets* (Manchester, 1988)
- Paul Graham, *Paul Graham* (London, 1996)
- Paul Graham, *Empty Heaven* (Zurich, Berlin, New York, 1995)
- Paul Graham, *New Europe* (Leeds, 1989)
- Paul Graham, *Troubled Land* (Leeds 1987)
- Ray Johnson, *Please Add to and Return to Ray Johnson* (London, 2010)
- Eadweard Muybridge, *The Human and Animal Locomotion Photographs* (Koln, 2010)
- Simon Norfolk, *For Most of It I Have No Words: Genocide, Landscape, Memory* (Stockport, 1998)
- Zdenek Tmej, *The Alphabet of Spiritual Emptiness* (New York, 2011)

Photographs

- The Possession of Trauma – *A young German soldier* – Attribution: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R05148 / CC-BY-SA, From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-R05148,_Westfront,_deutscher_Soldat_crop.jpg
- The Nation of the Past – *Luftwaffe airmen in front of the Acropolis* – Attribution: Public domain, from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luftwaffe_Griechenland_2.jpg
- The Victory of Entropy – *Ryounkaku Tower* – Attribution: Public domain, from <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ryounkaku.jpg>
- The Scrapheap of Progress – *Hermann Göring et al. on trial at Nuremberg* – Attribution: US Federal Government, now in Public domain, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nuremberg_Trials_retouched.jpg
- The Burden of Memory - *Toshiaki Mukai and Tsuyoshi Noda* - Attribution: Public domain, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Contest_To_Cut_Down_100_People.jpg
- The Invasion of Forgetting – *A Royal Air Force bomber during a raid on Hamburg* – Attribution: Public domain, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lancaster_over_Hamburg.jpg
- The Harmony of Chaos – *Crowds in Wenceslas Square, Prague during the Velvet Revolution* – Attribution: Public domain, from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Praha_1989,_V%C3%A1clavsk%C3%A9_n%C3%A1m%C4%99st%C3%AD,_dav.jpg
- The Tyranny of Time – *Jean-Marie Le Bris's flying machine* – Attribution: Public domain, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:LeBris1868.jpg>

Photographs (contd.)

The Nature of Chance – *Aerial reconnaissance photograph of a missile launch site in Cuba* – Attribution: Public domain, from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aerial_photo_of_an_SA-2_site_in_cuba_1.jpg

The Treason of Images – *Montage portrait of Georg Lindemann, with Knight's Cross added later* – Attribution: Public domain, Attribution: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-Lo8017 / CC-BY-SA - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-Lo8017,_Georg_Lindemann.jpg