

Nostalgia & Melancholy



(nostalgia)



Many interesting creative concepts are centered around ideas of memory, such as those of Nostalgia and Melancholia – examples shown are works by Hollis Frampton & Lars Von Trier

Both the terms, Nostalgia & Melancholia originate from what were once considered an illness or disease.

The Sublime

Melancholy

Nostalgia

much like the Sublime, nostalgia and melancholy both share the dialectical quality of pain and pleasure, for nostalgia and melancholy this is rooted in their engagement with time, memory, and emotion

The Sublime

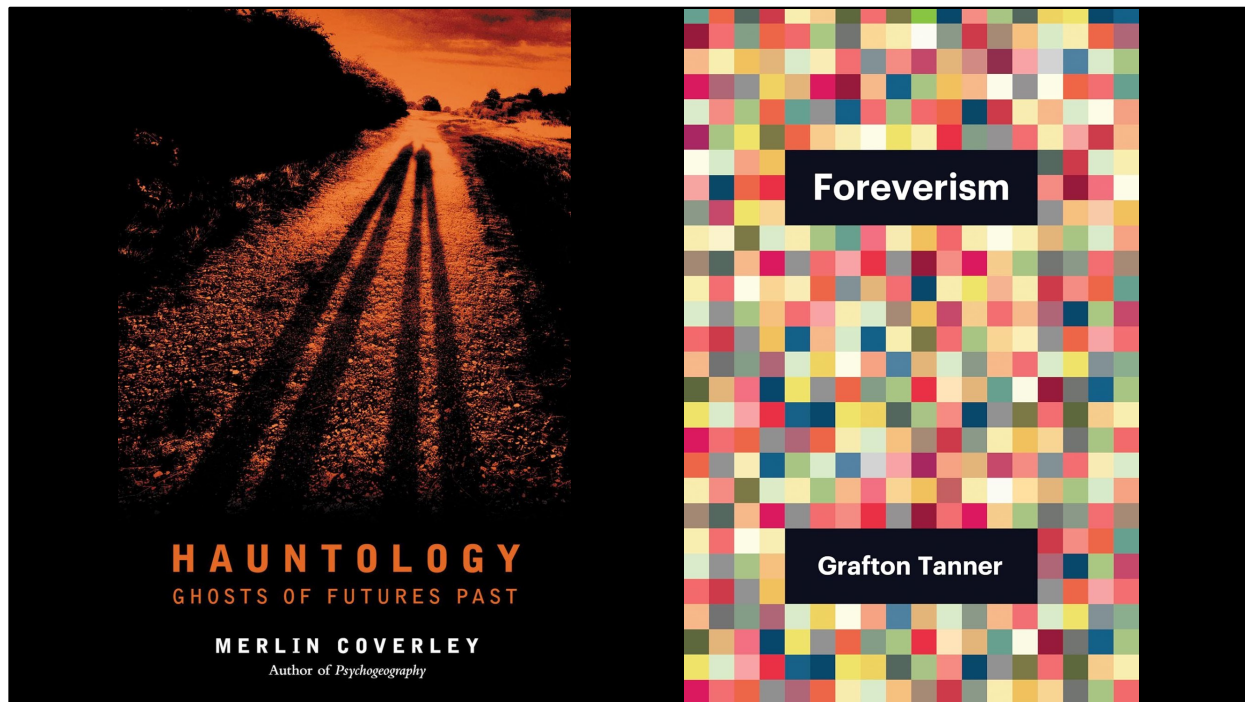
The sublime thrills and unsettles simultaneously—its beauty is inseparable from its threat

Melancholy

Melancholy is generative—it transforms sorrow into creativity and contemplation

Nostalgia

Nostalgia soothes and wounds—it idealises what is lost while reminding us it cannot return



And both are linked to so many other concepts such as Hauntology, here explored by Merlin Coverley (after Mark Fisher, after Derrida) or Foreverism, very recently written about by Grafton Tanner in relation to technology, social media and our desire for anti-nostalgic permanent remembrance.

mnemonic concepts

So initially it is worth exploring some of the mnemonic (memory orientated) qualities that are shared by and trigger such feelings and concepts. All are linked by their association to ideas of memory.



...a deepening sense of crisis often articulated in the reproach that our culture is terminally ill with amnesia.

...a crisis, born of the dangers to memory, perceived in the growth of technology, the image-laden spread of mass communication and the rapid acceleration of modern living.

THEORIST Andreas Huyssen locates the contemporary critical and artistic obsession with memory in "a deepening sense of crisis often articulated in the reproach that our culture is terminally ill with amnesia."

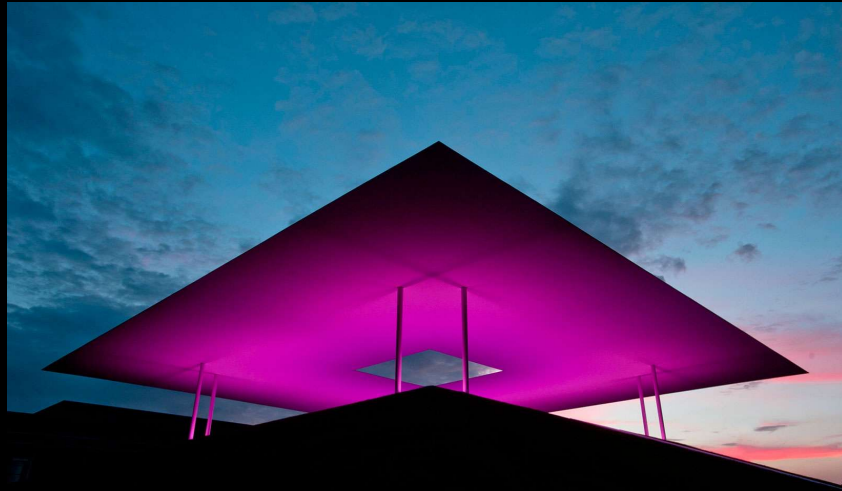
This is a crisis, born of the dangers to memory, perceived in the growth of technology, the image-laden spread of mass communication and the rapid acceleration of modern living.

Memories are **potential**:

simultaneously irretrievable, instable,
fluid, transient, poignant, melancholic
and goldenly nostalgic.

He goes on to say - memories are potential, simultaneously irretrievable, instable, fluid, transient, poignant, melancholic and goldenly nostalgic.

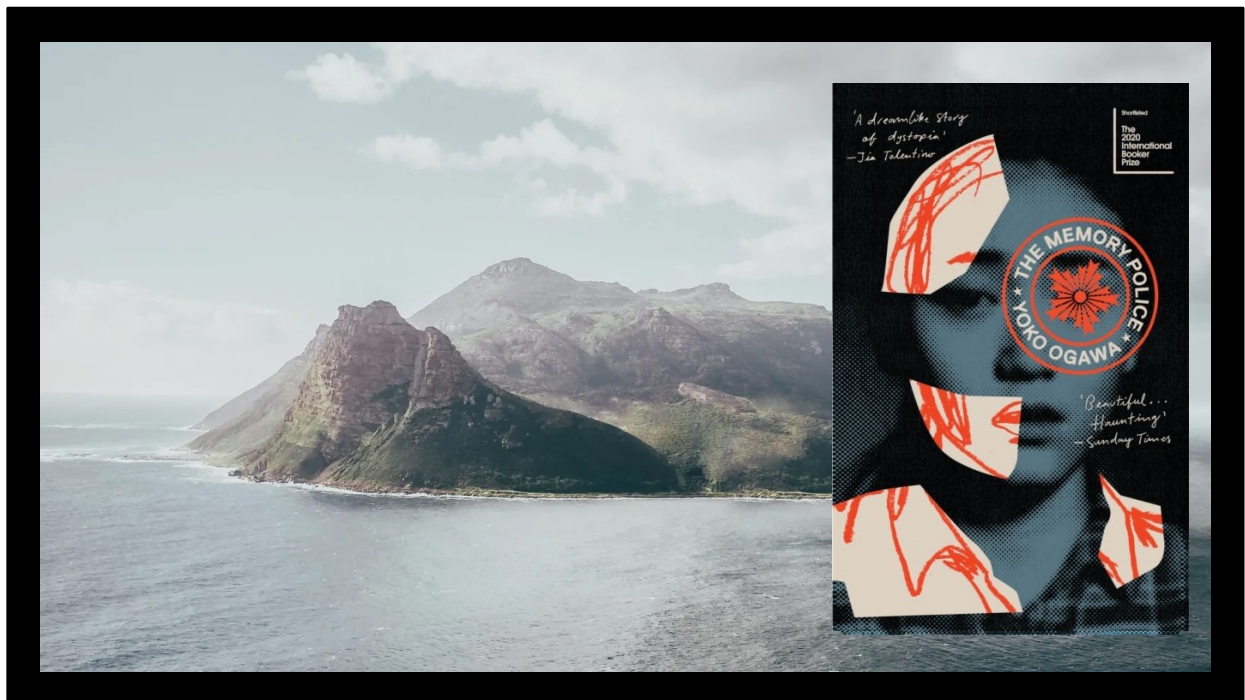
LIMINAL SPACE



James Turrell *Twilight Epiphany*

"It does not require much theoretical sophistication to see that all representation--whether in language, narrative, image or recorded sound--is based on memory."

In constantly questioning memory, we then hover in the in-between LIMINAL SPACE, neither the true and exact presentation of a past event, nor an entirely contemporary reinvention.



In her celebrated novel *The Memory Police*, the Japanese writer Yōko Ogawa tells the story of a nameless island. Strange occurrences alarm its inhabitants: particular things start disappearing without explanation, and when they disappear, they disappear for ever.

One day all the clocks are gone. Things that smell beautiful, and glittering things, wondrous things: hairbands, hats, perfume, fans, emeralds, stamps – roses and birds, all disappear. Once gone, the people start to forget what all these things were once for. Along with the things, memories disappear as well.



Ogawa's novel describes a totalitarian regime whose Memory Police are reminiscent of George Orwell's Thought Police in his novel 1984...

They purge society of things and memories. The people live in a constant state of forgetfulness and loss. Anyone found to be reminiscing is arrested. The protagonist's mother, who keeps threatened things in a secret chest of drawers to protect them, is chased and killed by the memory police.

thing

According to contemporary German Korean Philosopher Byung-Chul Han there are strong analogies between The Memory Police, and our contemporary life. Today, things are also constantly disappearing, without us seeming to notice.

In contrast to Ogawa's dystopia, we do not live in a totalitarian regime whose memory police brutally rob us of our things and memories. It is rather that our intoxication by communication and information has made things disappear.

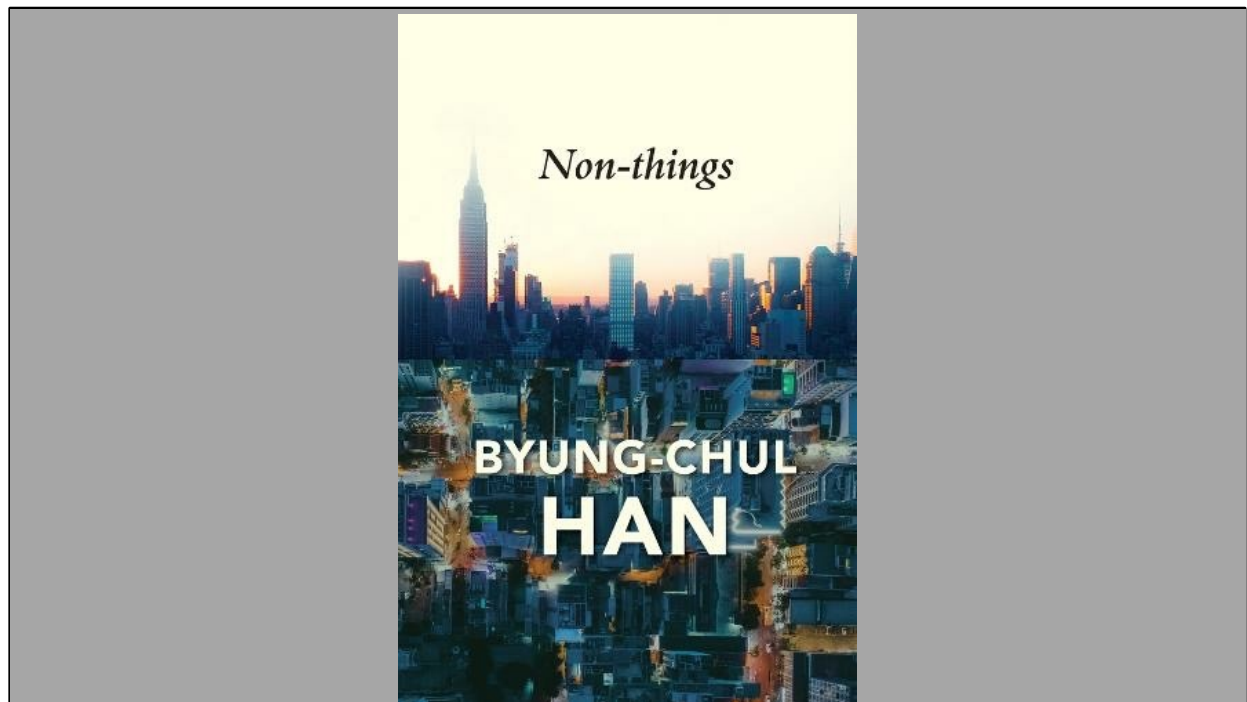
Vilém Flusser

Non-thing

'Non-things are currently entering our environment from all directions, and they are pushing away the actual things. These non-things are called information.'

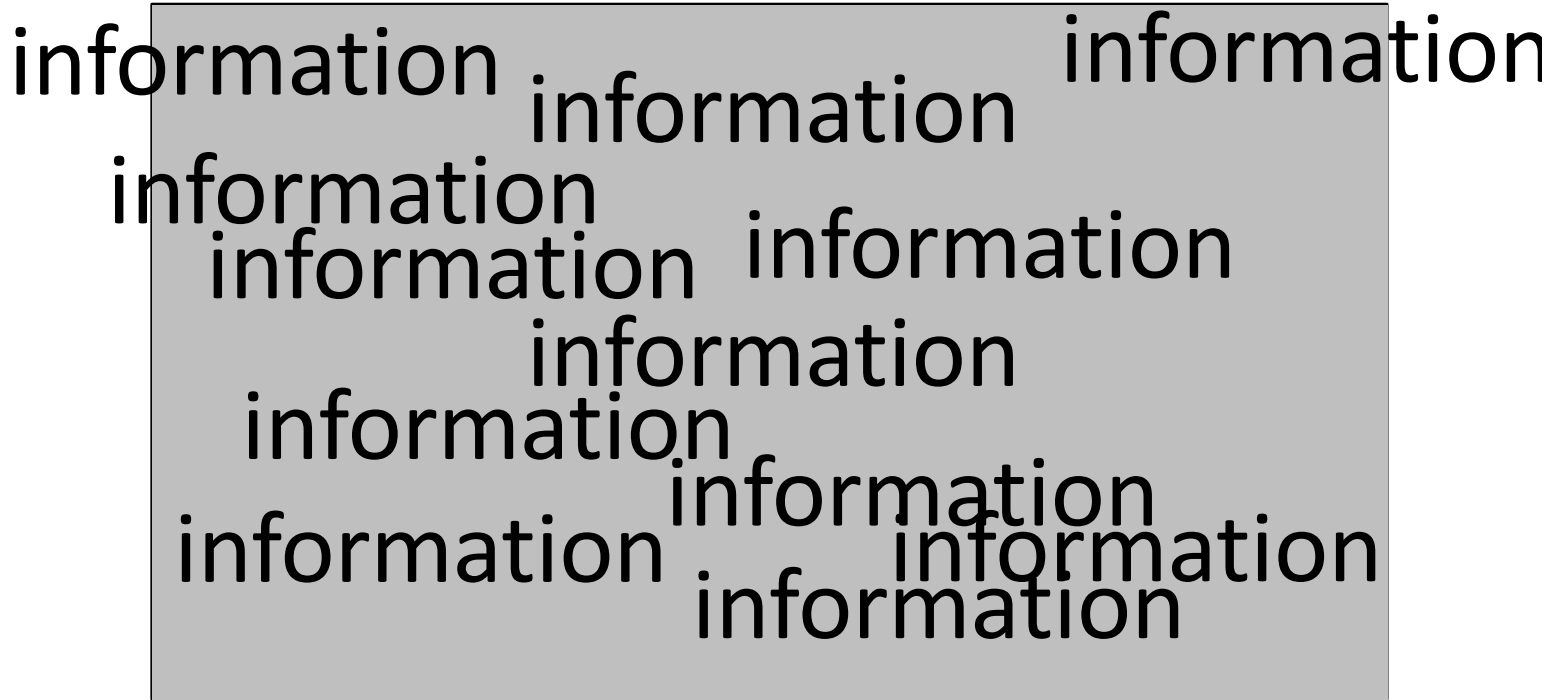
As far back as the 1980's, the media theorist Vilém Flusser was already remarking that:

'Non-things are currently entering our environment from all directions, and they are pushing away the actual things. These non-things are called information.'



Byung-Chal Han believes we are today experiencing the transition from the age of things to the age of non-things. Information, rather than things, determines the lifeworld.

We no longer dwell on the earth and under the sky but on Google Earth and in the Cloud. The world is becoming increasingly intangible, cloud-like and ghostly. There are no tangible and arrestable things.



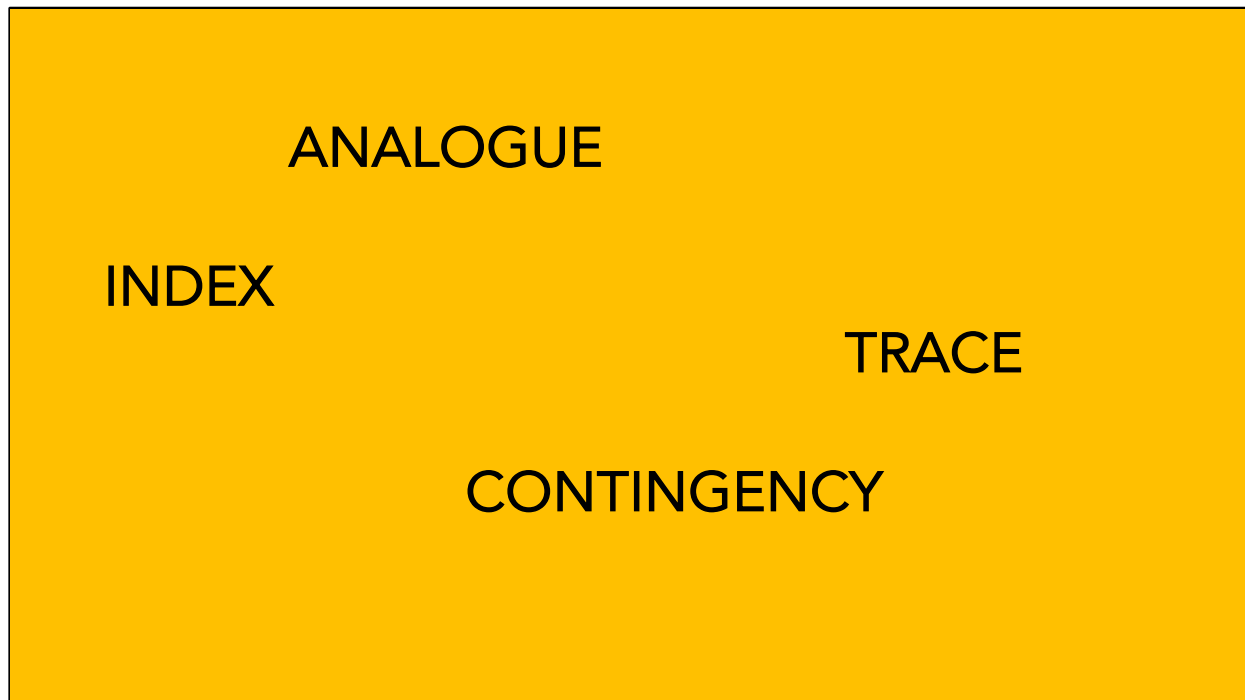
Information – that is, non-things – obscures things and drains them of their colour.
Luckily, we do not live under a violent regime but unwittingly, we live under a rule of
information that claims to be freedom.

information information information
information information
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information information
information information

Han says "Today's world is fading away and becoming information. Digitalization virtualizes and disembodies the world. It also abolishes memory. Instead of memory, we have vast quantities of data. In the place of the memory police, we have digital media, which does its job without violence and with little effort."



However, Han's and Huyssen's discussion of information and big data is entirely anthropocentric – framed from a humanist perspective
Counter to this, there are those post-humanist voices suggesting other more positive perspectives on the future.



Initially though, we are going to address THINGS rather than NON-THINGS via ideas of the analogue, the index, the trace, and contingency. Analogue recording is an index of what it records, a trace that is contingent.

Something is an **indexical trace** when it is produced by contact with that which creates it, just as an analogue audio recording is made by sound waves touching a membrane, or magnetic strip, or a traditional film is made by light transforming the chemicals on a strip of celluloid.

INDEXICALITY

Based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory
of three types of signs:

Based on C.S. **Peirce's** semiotic theory of three types of signs:

INDEXICALITY

Based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory of three types of signs

SYMBOL

ICON

INDEX

SYMBOL: signifies through
arbitrary social convention

CAT

ICON: signifies through
likeness



INDEX: signifies through
physical connection



First is the SYMBOL (e.g. a word) which denotes its object solely by virtue of the fact that it will be interpreted to do so –

Second is the ICON - which resembles or imitates its object like a diagram or a drawing or a digital photograph

Then finally there is the INDEX which denotes its object by virtue of an *actual connection* involving them – such as a footprint or a tyre track for example.

So, all photographs are iconic, however an analogue photograph is both an icon and an index

an analogue
photograph is
both iconic
and indexical



An indexical sign is based in cause and effect, so an analogue photograph is indexical, as the light reflected directly off, and the shadows cast by, the subject, affect the light sensitive chemicals of the negative to produce the representation...

an analogue
photograph is
both iconic
and indexical



the referent is
physically
involved in
the creation of
that
representation

so it is a representation of something (object, person, scene), the referent, in which the referent is physically involved in the creation of that representation.

Digital recording is not an indexical thing - it is just data, just information, a non-thing.

There are some works that anchor memory through an indexical relationship with the subject represented, works that almost literally 'trace off' the actual world.

Rachel Whiteread

HOUSE, London 1993



Rachel Whiteread's sculptures are essentially direct casts taken from objects – or, better, the surfaces of objects that hold traces of the object's 'life' until being frozen in time by the casting process





Rachel Whiteread - Holocaust Memorial, Vienna (2000)



Rachel Whiteread – Untitled (1995)

Whiteread's works, I think, come as close as can be to a pure indexical relation.

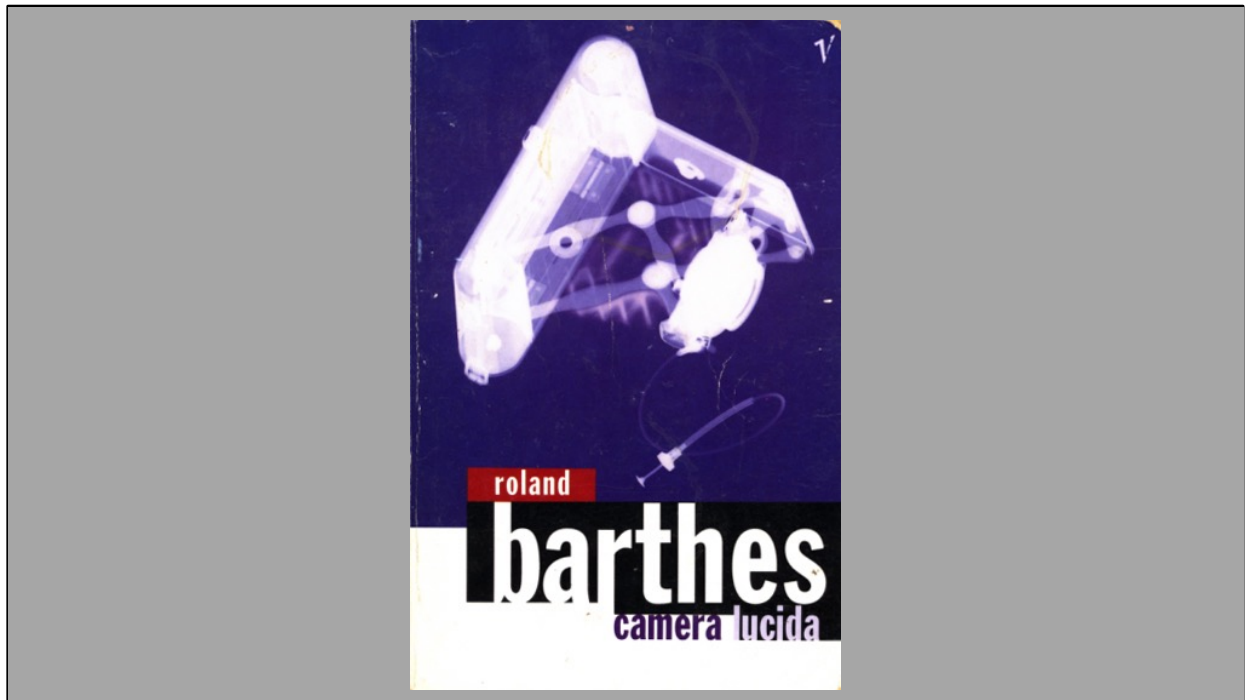
Rachel Whiteread - Holocaust Memorial, Vienna (2000)

Roland Barthes

Walter Benjamin

Marcel Proust

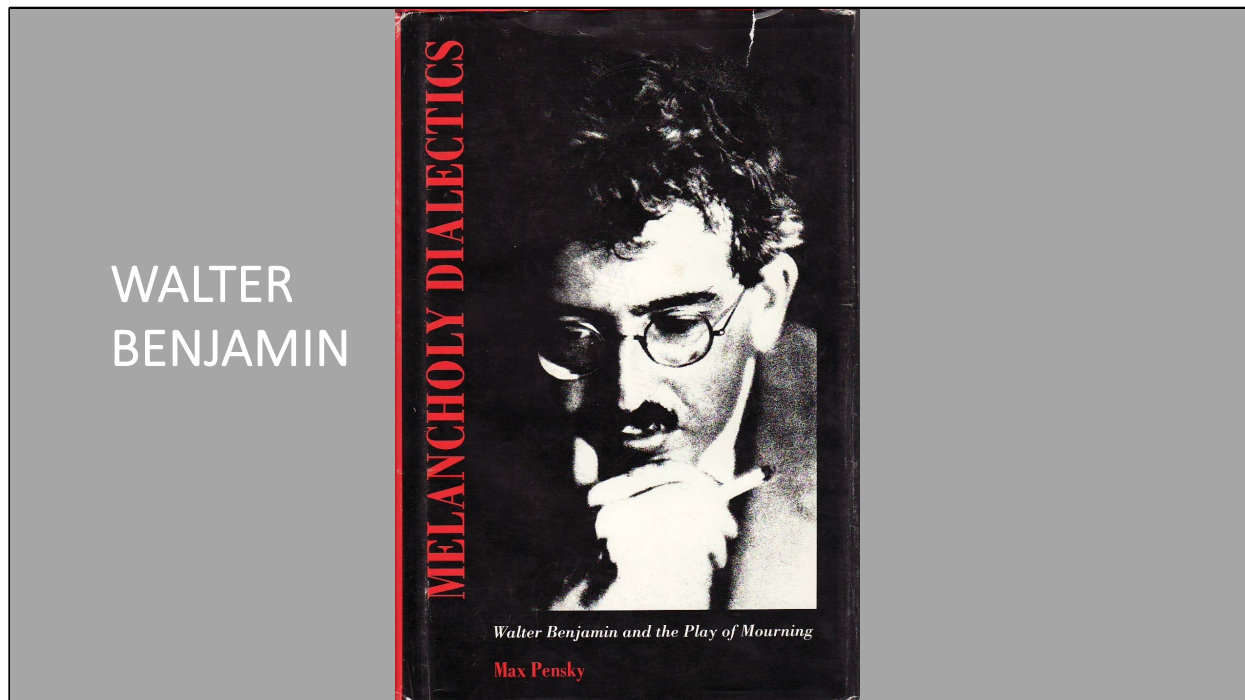
Within cultural theory many major thinkers have been fascinated by the index and have associated the indexical with melancholy and nostalgia, most profoundly are three key touchstones within my PhD: Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin & Marcel Proust –many of their key ideas relate to the indexical.



In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes final book, he abandons much of his early semiotic analysis to explore photography's phenomenological properties through a lyric meditation on the nature of death.

Greiving the death of his mother, he makes an attempt to find her essence through photography and the second half of the book is dedicated to the pursuit and eventual discovery of a single revelatory image of his mother - a true 'object of remembrance'. Of the many photographs that exist, he rejects all the apparently realistic images of his mother (as he had known her), in favour of a picture made of her long before his birth, beyond his knowledge of her lifetime.

This very famous photograph - known as the Winter Garden photograph - of his mother as a young girl - is discussed at great length - but never shown

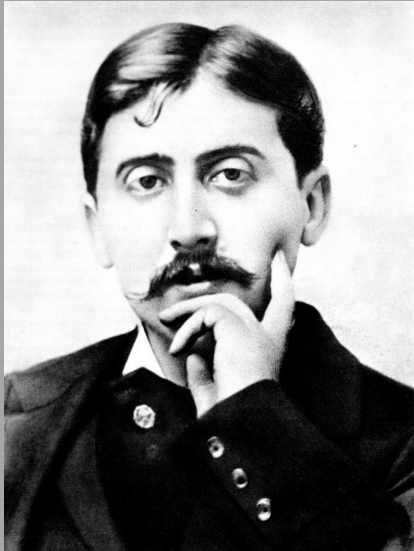


Another great thinker of the last century, Walter Benjamin the German philosopher, critic and essayist associated with the Frankfurt School. He was also obsessed with representation and the index – and is most known for his concept of AURA. In 1931, five years before *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

His first concept of AURA was conceived in *A Short History of Photography*, relates directly to its indexicality... "a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be."

He talks of photographs inviting you to look for "the tiny spark of an accident" much like Barthes Punctum.

MARCEL PROUST



Proust's concept of the *Madeleine*, which incites involuntary memory

And both Barthes and Benjamin refer repeatedly to the 19th Century writer Marcel Proust, and his great novel *In Search of Lost Time*.

In the most famous passage of the novel, Proust's main character Marcel is struck by an indescribable feeling when he brings a cake – a madeleine - dipped in tea to his lips. He experiences a profound sensation in recollection of his childhood.

This phenomenon he terms as *mémoire involontaire*. INVOLUNTARY MEMORY

Within a photograph OR any INDEXICAL ARTEFAT , the 'optical unconscious' is revealed and *memoire involontaire* is triggered.

MELANCHOLY



All these thinkers have been described as melancholy... As I said, these indexical artifacts could be a range of things, from films, sound recordings, worn objects or clothing –



MELANCHOLY

The origin of the term is found in the Greek: μελαγ-χολια , 'melaina kole', which literally means *black bile*.

THE FOUR HUMOURS (or temperaments)

The Sanguine

The Choleric

The Melancholic

The Phlegmatic

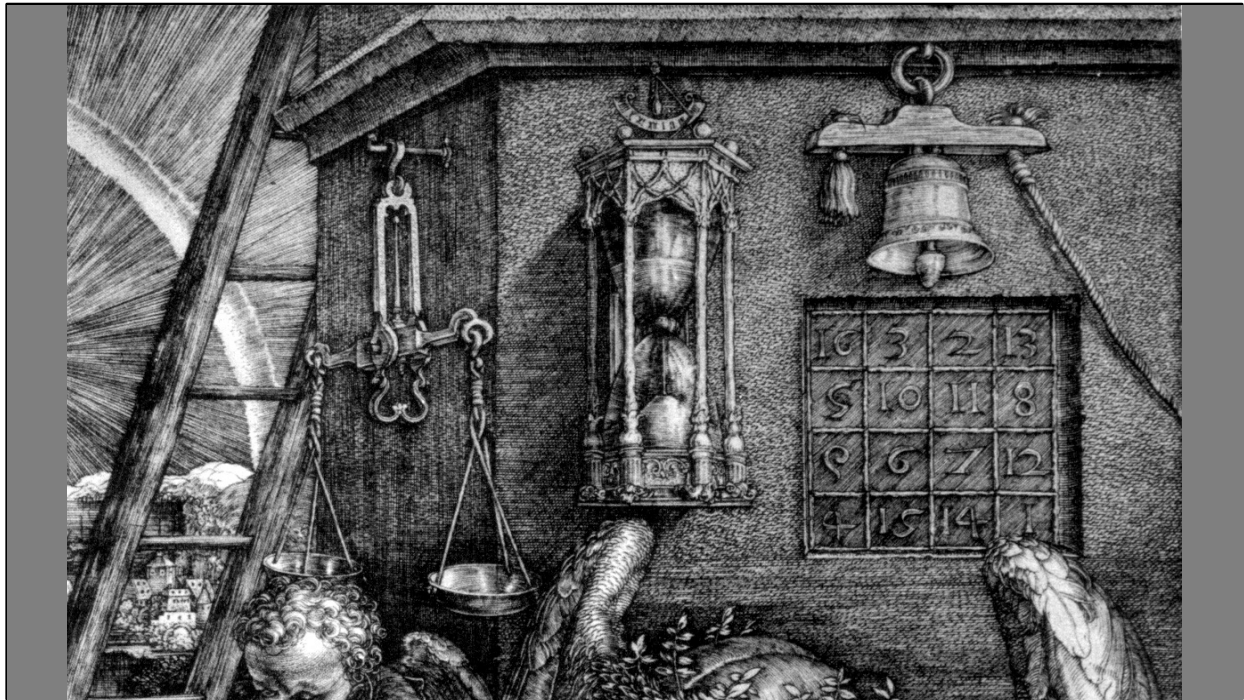
In early medieval doctrine, every man, woman and child was regarded as; either a choleric, a phlegmatic, a sanguine or a melancholic. One of the four humours prevails in every individual and determines his or her entire personality.

The four types differ enormously, each marked by particular physical, moral and intellectual characteristics, susceptibility to specific diseases and suitability to certain professions.

Of the four humours, the sanguine was regarded as the most fortunate, exemplified by natural talent and cheerful, sociable, generous character. The melancholic temperament was obviously the least preferred associated with being awkward, miserly, spiteful, greedy, malicious, cowardly, sad, forgetful, lazy and sluggish.

Rather than seeing this melancholy from a negative perspective, the great art historian, Erwin Panofsky, saw positivity in Dürer's dark and withdrawn angel, so I'm going to cite Panofsky to discuss the positive aspects of melancholy

Dürer's angel is surrounded by the discarded tools and symbols of both scientific research and creative endeavour, in the middle of what looks like an abandoned building project, referencing perhaps the blind advances in human knowledge and technology.



The scales are perfectly balanced and even the sand in the hourglass has stopped at exactly half-way. To compound this equilibrium, below the bell hangs "a magic square" on which numbers are arranged in rows of four. Whether counted vertically, horizontally or diagonally, these numbers always add up to the same amount.

Almost every detail suggests a code, a mysterious cosmological meaning. Panofsky recognises that although melancholia is often associated with fear, withdrawal and depression, it is also associated with great knowledge, wisdom, and an insight into the nature of the world that is almost too much to bear.



In a contemplative state, Dürer's angel sits inactive yet pensive, their forearm resting on a closed book, whilst to the rear, in deliberate contrast, a busy putto actively and strenuously scribbles on a slate.



Panofsky notes the clear disparity between the angels physical stillness and the puttos bustling activity.



The work contains significant reference to the concept of Artist's Melancholy. In the 15th and 16th centuries, as with today, the training of an artist was expected to include knowledge of both theory and practice : mathematical perspective, optics, geometry, anatomy and philosophy, as well as the attainment of practical skill.

xa

This explains the disparity between the angel's physical stagnation and the putto's bustling activity. The angel reflects mature and learned 'theoretical insight' which thinks before it acts, whereas the ignorant infant reflects only Practical Skill which acts but cannot think.



Its energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought; the angel is what Panofsky describes as:

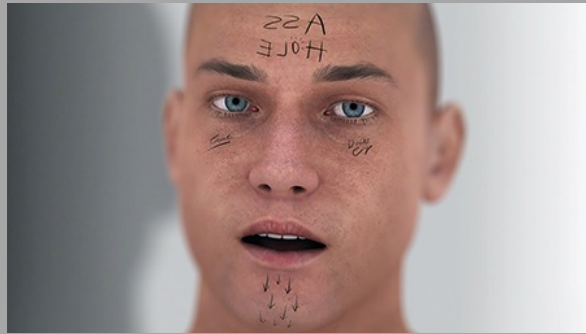
"super-awake"

Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 160

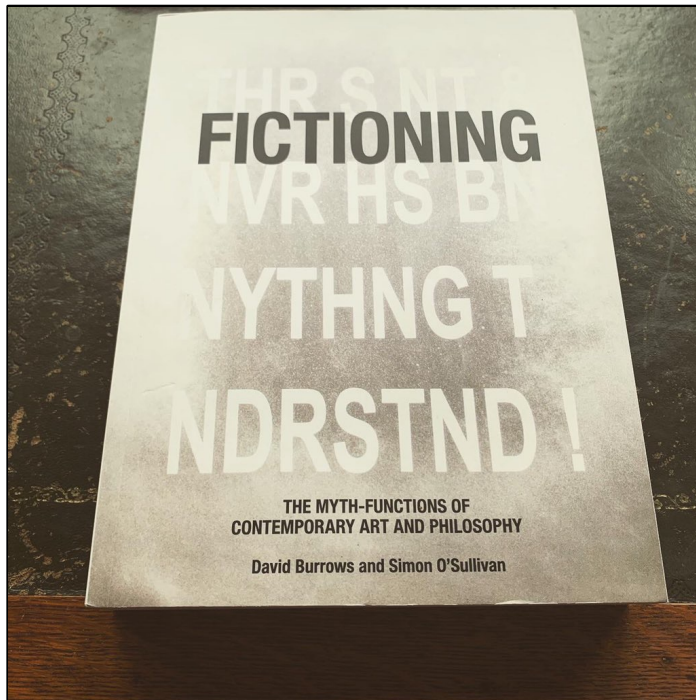
Dürer's angel is inactive not through laziness, but "because work has become meaningless to her;

her energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought"; she is what Erwin Panofsky describes as: **"super-awake"**.

DIGITAL MELANCHOLY



A contemporary artist who deals with concepts of melancholy is Ed Atkins. Atkins' video art uses hyperreal CGI avatars to explore affect in the digital age. Works like *Ribbons* evoke a sense of disembodied sadness. His art reflects Fisher's hauntology: the digital self is haunted by the impossibility of authenticity.



FICTIONING

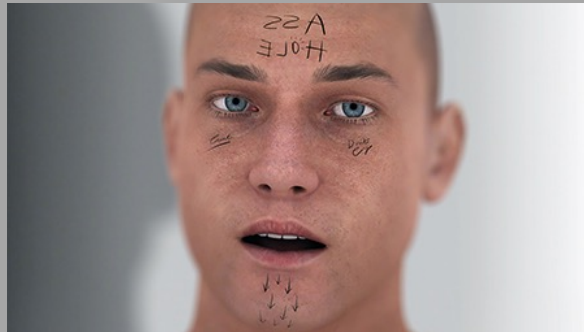
The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy

David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan
(2019)

In their book *Fictioning* David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan cite ED ATKINS . Atkins' work draws attention to the way in which we perceive, communicate and filter information. His videos combine layered images with incomplete or interrupted excerpts of singing, speech, subtitles and handwriting.

They say: We now exist within complex informational spaces that produce affects, simulate, analyse and respond to user and environmental data. Within these conditions fiction and reality become increasingly blurred, machine and human voices difficult to distinguish.

DIGITAL MELANCHOLY



Working with CGI Atkins exploits the hyperreal surfaces produced by new software systems to create complex, nightmarish environments populated by virtual characters, avatars of ambiguous provenance and desires. Atkins has described the male figure that appears in these works as “a character that is literally a model, is demonstrably empty – a surrogate and a vessel”.

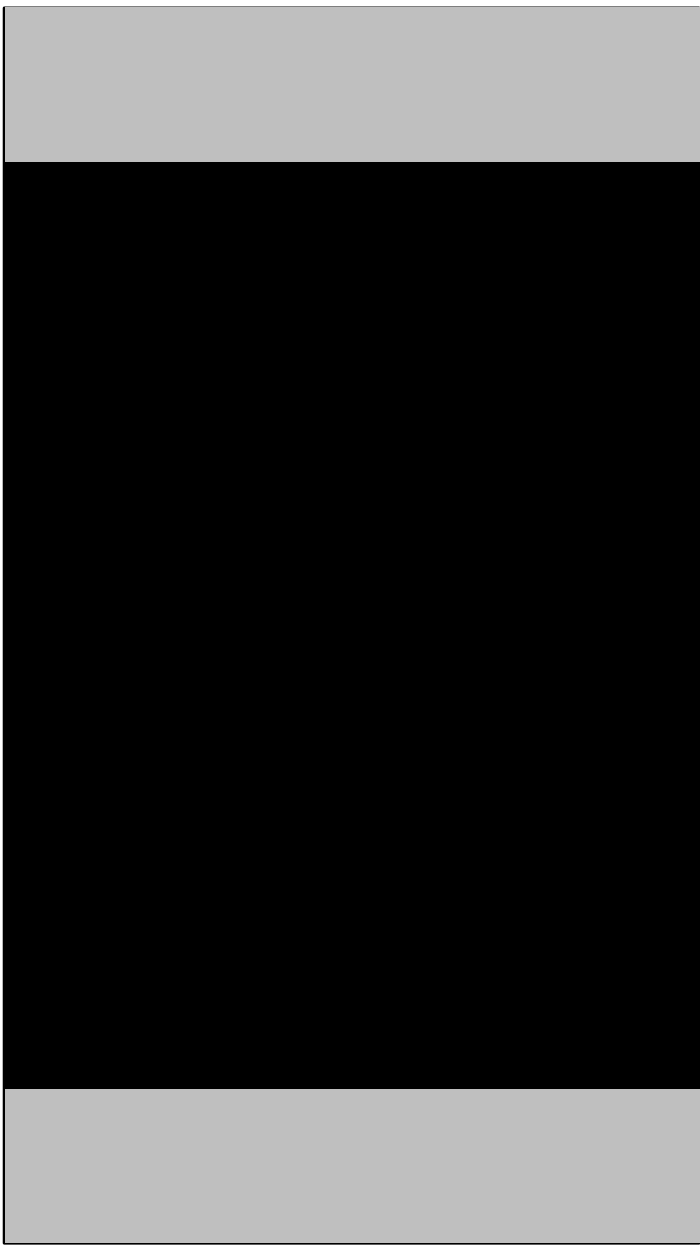
Despite the emotive music and poetic syntax of the protagonists, their emptiness serves to remind the three-dimensional, warm-bodied viewer of their own physicality.



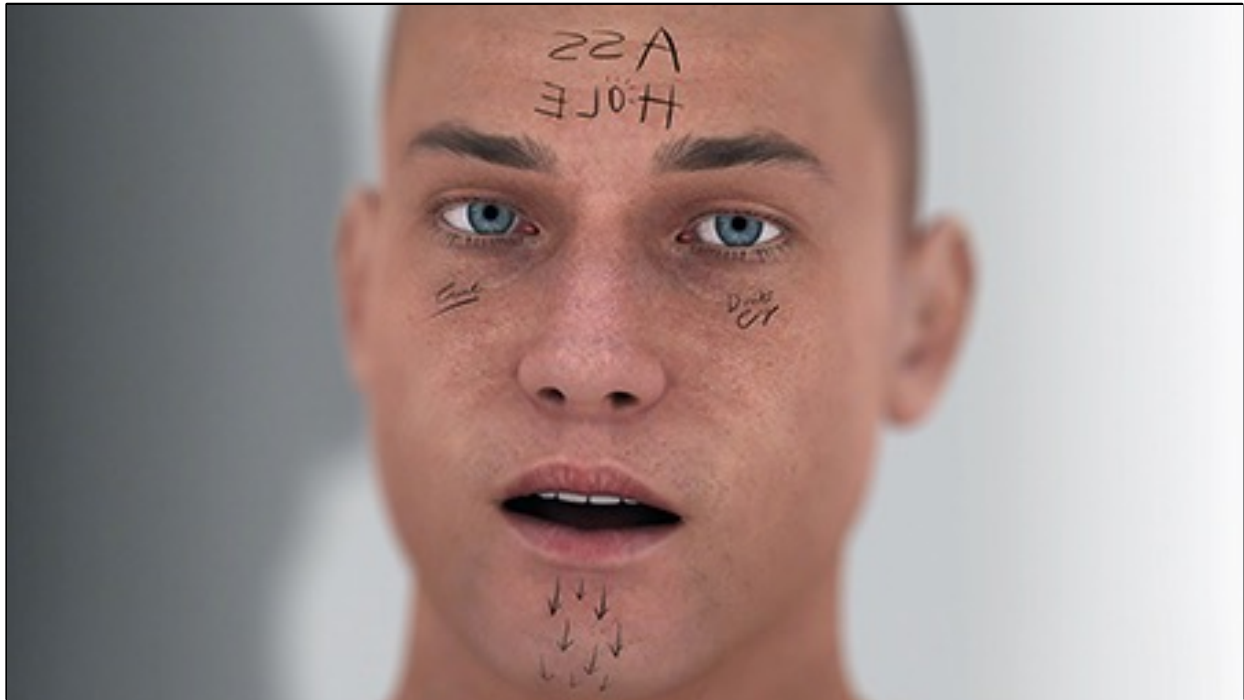
In Ribbons, Atkins presents a digital protagonist CALLED "DAVE through (or as) a CGI simulation of the artist himself, but this high-definition avatar communicates to an audience through analogue means – via projected light and speakers which broadcast the avatar's words.



Sounds from a suite of synchronised projections positioned throughout the Gallery led the visitor through the space, with glimpses of song, swells of orchestra, murmuring voices and waves of sub-bass. *Ribbons* is part musical, part horror, and part melodrama; Naked, lonely and misanthropic, the palpable melancholy of Atkins' CGI avatar hero is 'rendered' as HD graphic, troll, voyeur and, perhaps, artist.



preview of the film which is 14 mins and shown on a loop.



The skinhead character is a 3-D model that Atkins bought online and then customised from a zipped-up folder off large image files that constitute a skin and then data that tells you how he might move in response to animate him Atkins then records his own voice and performance using facial capturing technology and maps that data onto the figure.

Atkins has said - "He's supposed to kind of archetypal generic, but also kind of presumptuous male figure - the ones that you can buy online are always kind of buff muscular generically handsome, almost always white, always average in some kind of ridiculous idea of a man"



The drunken digital protagonist of Ribbons is unmistakably a young white man, abject and full of self-loathing, with words and images drawn on his skin. The avatar talks to the viewer in a tone which Atkins identifies as drawing on internet trolling, presenting a form of 'contemporary alienation' or 'a response to being forcefully made alien'



Atkins says big part of the work concerns masculinity as the character series vignettes - singing songs, peering out through glory holes, both a contemporary idea of representation of the body of a particular young male body and a white male body which I guess means that in some way a surrogate for me but not really an autobiographical surrogate.

It is me occupying that costume in a way this relationship between something being very realistic and also very obviously artificial lies at the heart of the work - using a realistic computer generated imagery to solicit a particular sort of feeling in the viewer.



ATKINS WORK is often DESCRIBED AS repulsive – producing a feeling of the uncanny - of watching something that really shouldn't be so alive but it also comes to that uncanny point where you're very aware that it's completely fake and not real at all - as his body pretends to go through the kind of traumas and emotional experiences a real person might



Atkins has speculated on the loss in that to become a representation is to die, and that moment you are recorded digitally you become a high-definition 'thing'. Burrows and O'Sullivan suggest that This Warholian diagnosis of digital film and video suggests a passing over from the material world to an immaterial realm, and, with that, a giving up of the body.

While this idea has religious connotations, Atkins' proposition can be thought of as an evolutionary process, too, one in which the body is no longer captured as a mediated and material index (by 35mm negative, 16mm film, magnetic video tape, etc.) but is written as code on memory cards and other storage devices.

In this way, as the artist states, 'there is nothing there'.



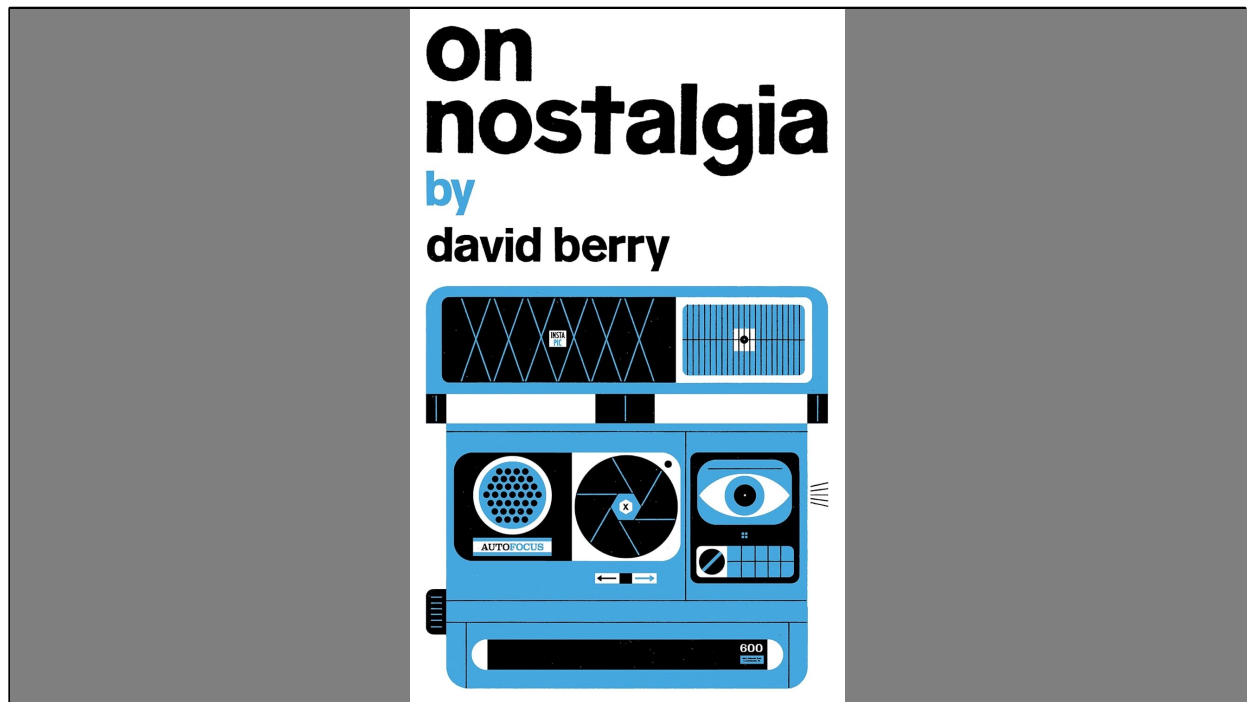
But for Atkins, the physicality of indexical works is not banished by the digital, and he does not give up on materiality and embodiment, arguing that: 'we must still look for it, and one of the places that one might try to find this material aspect of the digital would be inside the viewer, where it would reterritorialise and become manifest' (Atkins 2012).





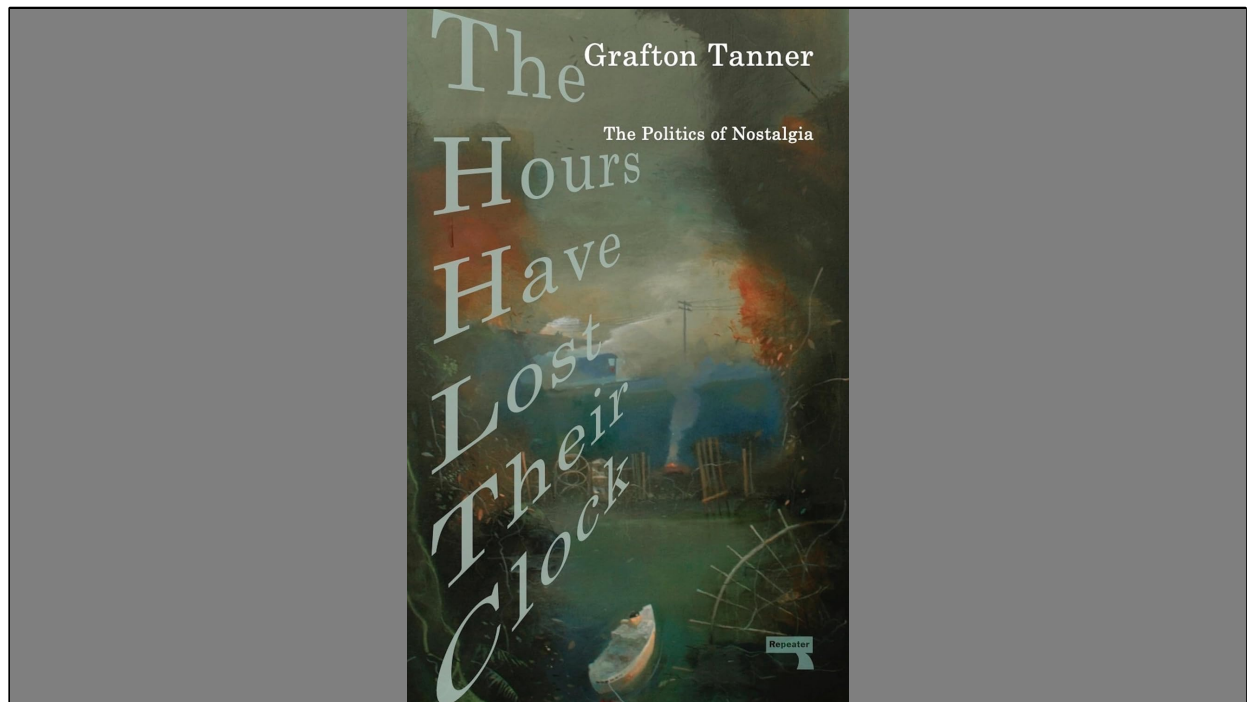
NOSTALGIA

The term was introduced to describe a serious MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS in 1688 by Johannes Hofer. A compound of the ancient Greek words nostos (return home) and algia (pain), it was a sickness that started occurring in [Swiss mercenaries](#) fighting abroad who were pining for their home landscapes.

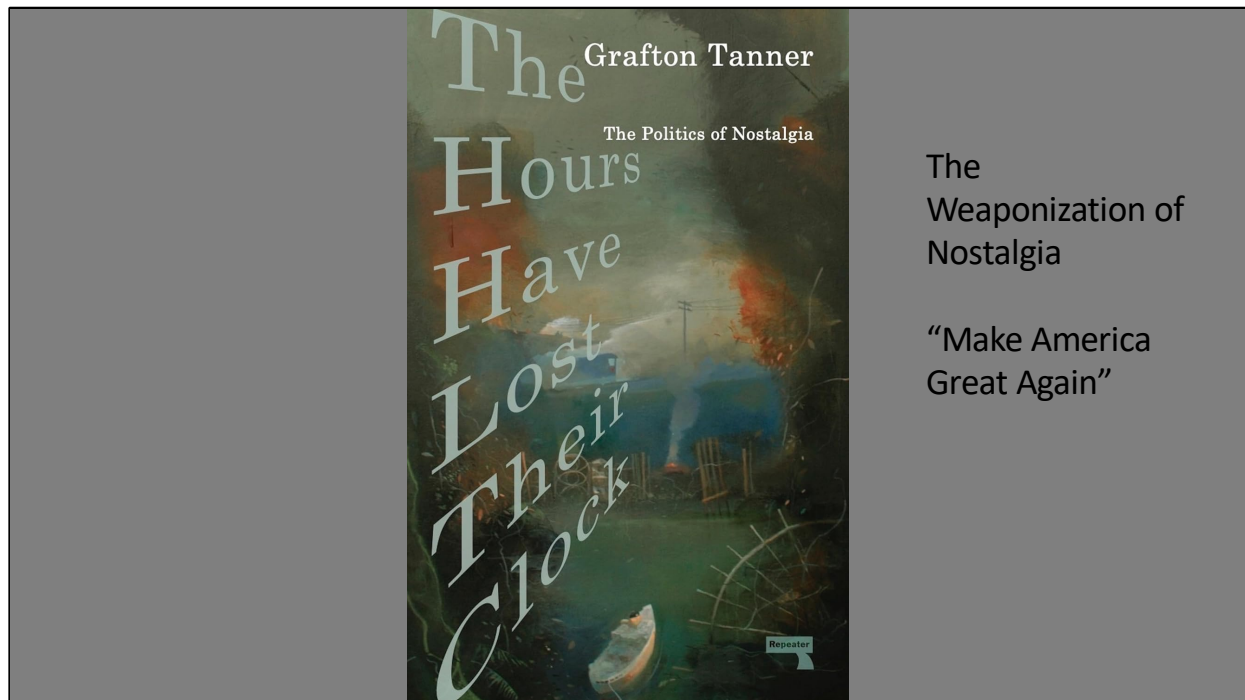


David Berry argues that nostalgia is a quintessentially modern condition, shaped by mass media, consumer culture, and political rhetoric. What began as a psychological diagnosis of homesickness has evolved into a pervasive emotional and cultural force—used both by us and against us.

Traces nostalgia from its origins with 17th-century Swiss mercenaries to its role in advertising, politics, and pop culture. Explores how nostalgia has become a reaction to modernity, especially in times of rapid change and uncertainty

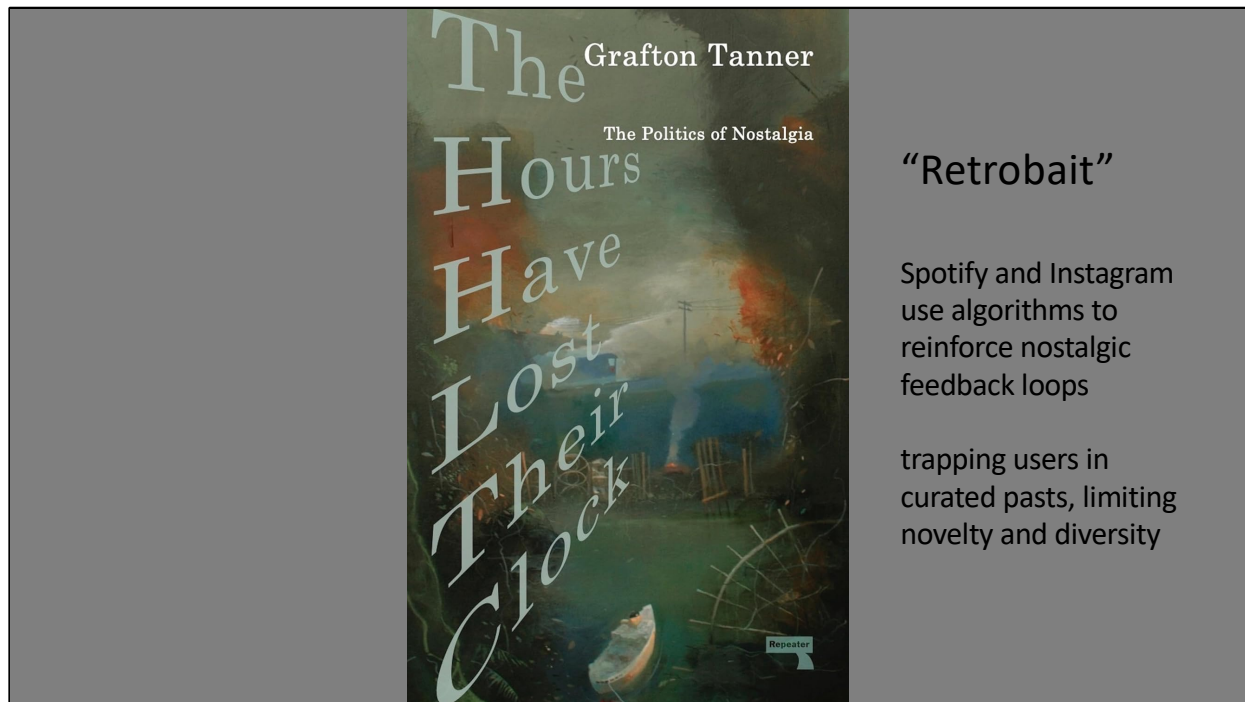


In his *The Hours Have Lost Their Clock: The Politics of Nostalgia* (2021), Grafton Tanner argues that nostalgia is the defining emotion of the 21st century, not merely a personal sentiment but a politically and commercially weaponized force.

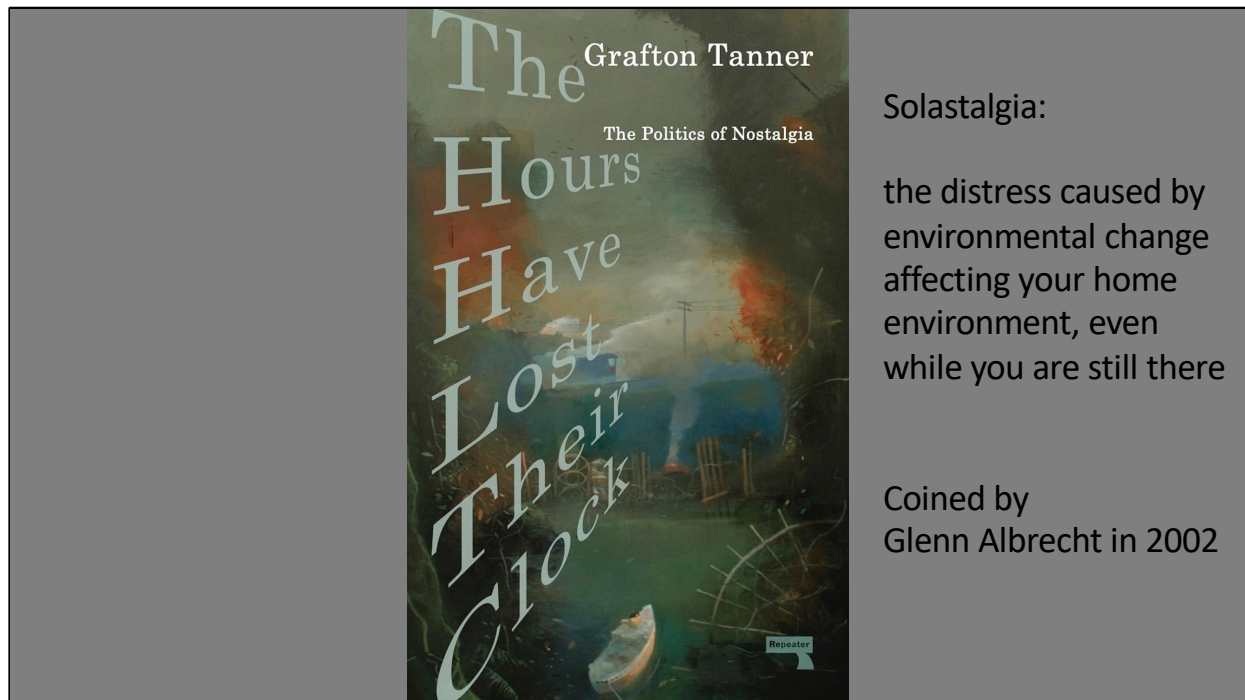


In an era marked by climate collapse, authoritarianism, economic instability, and digital saturation, nostalgia is used by elites, corporations, and reactionary movements to manipulate public emotion, obscure historical truths, and maintain control.

Weaponization of Nostalgia: Politicians (e.g., Trump's MAGA movement "Make America Great Again") and corporations exploiting nostalgia to sell ideologies and products. The "nostalgia industry" commodifies longing through reboots, retro branding, and curated digital memory.



Platforms like Spotify and Instagram use algorithms to reinforce nostalgic feedback loops. “Retrobait” (nostalgic content designed to extract data) traps users in curated pasts, limiting novelty and diversity



Solastalgia:

the distress caused by environmental change affecting your home environment, even while you are still there

Coined by
Glenn Albrecht in 2002

Tanner introduces the idea of Solastalgia (first introduced by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht in 2002): the mourning for a disappearing present due to ecological devastation. Nostalgia can be mobilized for climate action, countering denialism and nihilism.

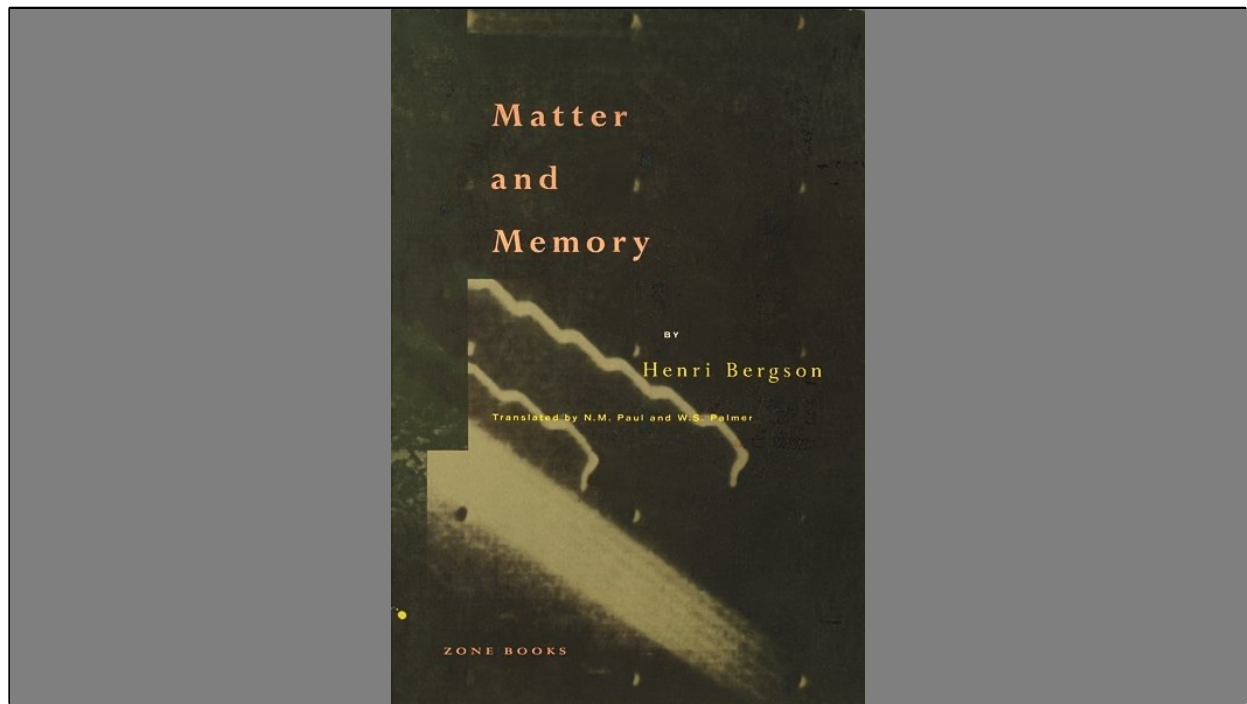
Considering how implicit mnemonic concepts are to life and creativity, as psychologist Professor John Sutton has remarked

"An understanding of memory has often
been curiously neglected by philosophers"



Henri Bergson

One of the first thinkers to proclaim the importance of paying attention to different types of memory was the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

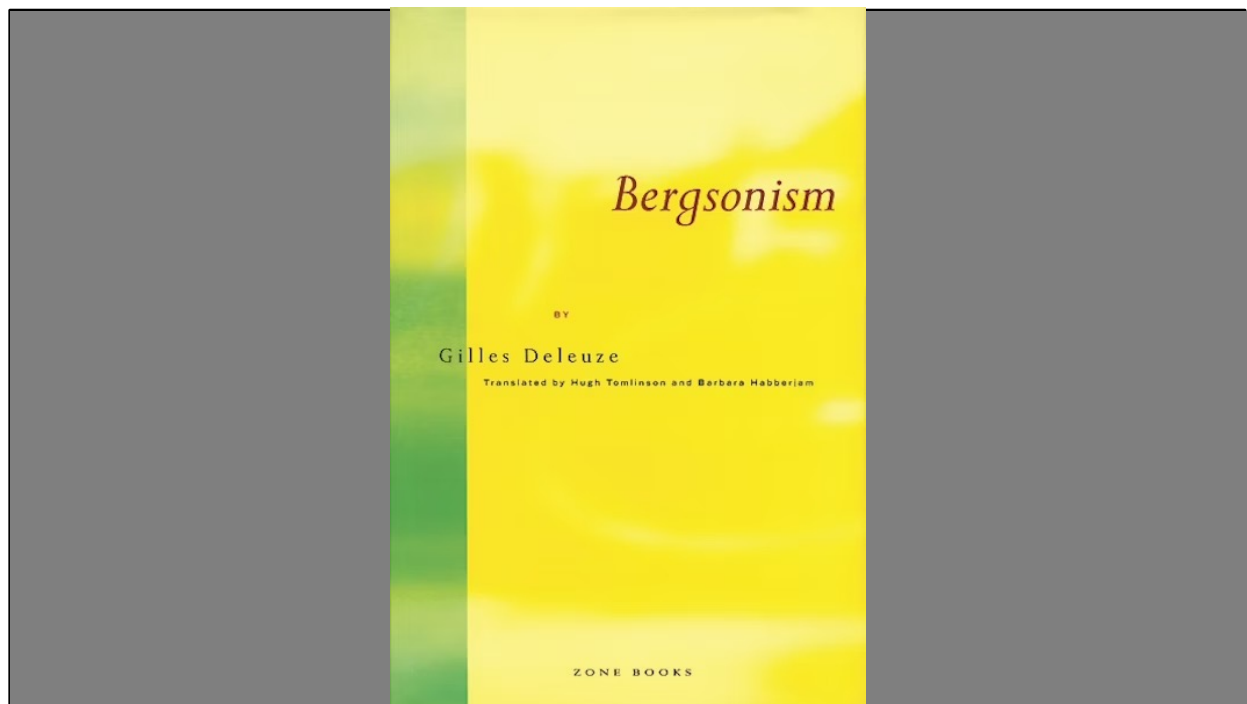


Bergson was convinced that memory should not be considered a diluted or weakened form of perception, but that a clear division needed to be made between the two. In his 1912 classic text – *Matter & Memory*, he suggests that we think of time in terms of duration (*durée*):

Henri Bergson

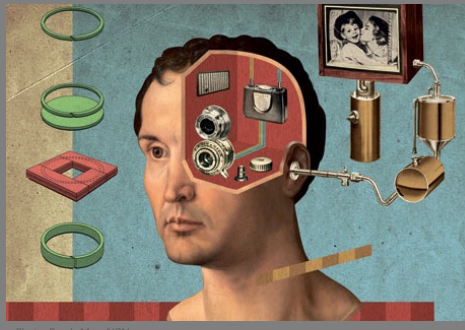
duration (durée):

“the preservation or
prolongation of the past
and entailing the co-
existence of past and
present”.



Gilles Deleuze, who drew many of his ideas on temporality and perception from Bergson, in his book *Bergsonism* (1966), describes duration as "a becoming that endures"

"there is no perception which is not full of memories"



Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1912)

Bergson insists that "there is no perception which is not full of memories" and that at every second of our lives we are presented with two facets, the actual and the virtual: Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image.

Every moment presents two aspects

actual and virtual

Perception

Memory

Every moment consists in this very splitting

paramnesia

Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment consists in this very splitting

This is Bergson's explanation for the phenomena of **PARAMNESIA** or of déjà-vu. Because the past, rather than merely preceding the present, effectively coexists with it, a recollection of the present can sometimes occur simultaneously with the present itself.

DÉJÀ VU

We believe that we have already experienced something that is, in fact, happening for the very first time at this very moment.

A FALSE RECOGNITION

The sensation is caused by believing we are undergoing an experience that we have already lived through, when in fact what is happening is a perception of the duplication we do not normally perceive, that of time into the two aspects, the actual and the virtual.

We mistake current experience for the very faithful copy of an original that never really existed... a false recognition

CONTRACTION

a memory of the present in the actual moment itself

This is the important Bergsonian concept of contraction, which attests that there is a memory of the present in the actual moment itself.

Déjà vu

There would be no memory if it were not, first of all, a memory of the present.

Déjà vu – the re-evocation of what is happening right now – is the natural condition of memory.

There would be no memory at all if it were not first of all memory of the present. But then why is déjà vu the exception and not the rule?

Déjà vu

There would be no memory if it were not, first of all, a memory of the present.

Why is déjà vu the exception and not the rule?

According to Bergson "The important thing to know... is not why déjà vu arises in certain persons at particular moments, but why it is not being produced at every moment in everybody"

The fact that we are remembering what is happening, *while it is happening*, disappears from view due to our

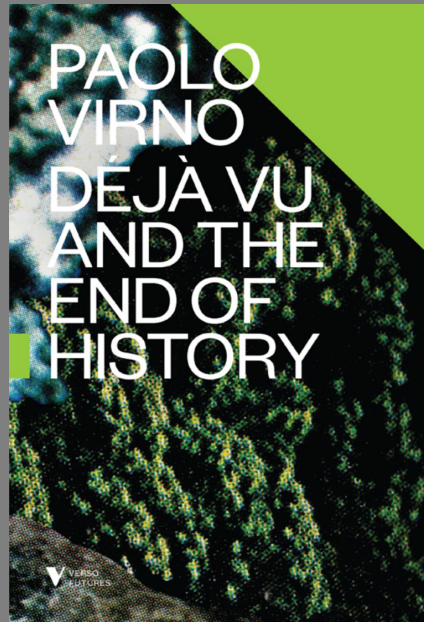
"attention to life" impulse

The fundamental fact that we are remembering what is happening while it is happening disappears from view due to what has been described as our "attention to life" impulse – the practical impulse orientated towards the future and the impending tasks posed by perception.

So – déjà vu is like a slippage - a re-evocation of what is happening right now - and seemingly occurs when the tension of life unexpectedly relaxes...



However, if we were constantly living in a re-evocation of what is happening right now, we would be “watching ourselves live” in a state of apathy, fatalism and indifference to the future... as it is impossible to change something that has taken on the appearance of memory.



In his book 'Deja Vu and the End of History', the contemporary Italian philosopher Paolo Virno employs this analogy and Bergson's ideas, to talk of a contemporary society in constant state of déjà vu.

Virno employs déjà vu as a lens through which to examine how notions of historical progress have dissolved into a permanent present marked by repetition and standstill.

The constant acceleration and recycling of fashion, media and technology locks society into an endless present-without-future. These ideas are very similar to those of Mark Fisher's concept of HAUNTOLOGY.



Hollis Frampton (*nostalgia*)

Now going to discuss a couple of examples of works that play with ideas of memory. One of the key films of American underground cinema. This is [nostalgia](#), from 1971. Running 36 minutes, and shot in black and white on 16mm, it consists of 12 3-minute static shots of 12 still photographs burning to ashes on a hot plate, accompanied by a voiceover describing their contents.

However, there is a catch: the voiceover describes the photograph that will appear in the next shot, leaving the first visible photograph unexplained and the last described photo unseen.



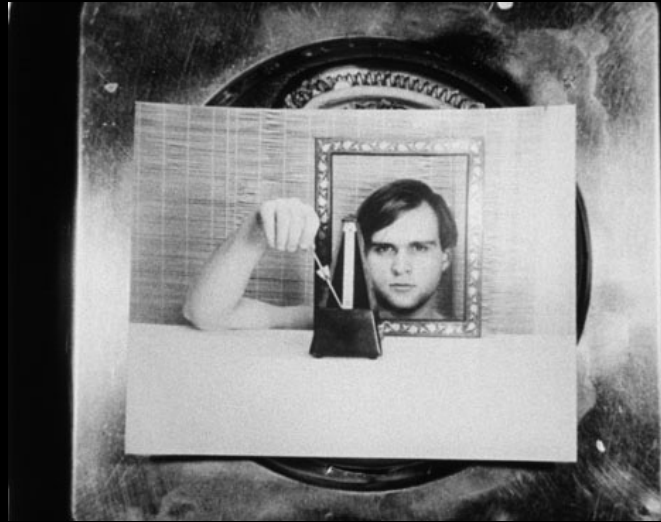
The film records the artist's experiences as a photographer in New York City from 1959 to 1966 and charts his photographic career from "the first photograph I ever made with the direct intention of making art" to the end, with the penultimate sentence, "I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again".

Experimenting with the experience of cinematic temporality, the time that it takes for a photograph to burn & turn to ash, becomes the clock within the film. The film is made up of thirteen 100ft spools of 16mm film (just under 3 minutes each) & runs for approx. 36 minutes in all. In twelve of the thirteen segments, a photograph appears on screen & a narrator starts to account for the content of the photograph in the first person, telling us facts about when and where it was taken.



Whist listening to Frampton's reminiscences, narrating & mythologizing his earlier art and his previous life, we see a series of still photographs slowly burning one at a time on a hotplate.

The narration is very confusing though, because details described in the photographs do not seem to be there. The major structural strategy of (nostalgia) is a disjunction between sound & image. As we watch each photograph burn, we hear the memories relating to the following photograph. The sound & image are on two different time schedules.



At any moment, we are listening to a commentary about a photograph that we shall be seeing in the future & looking at a photograph that we have just heard about in the past.





