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Three steps between oblivion and memory

By Fabrizio Saiu

Abstract

Against the idea that memory is a collection of data stored in a digital medium or on a server, this article highlights its performative nature in the production of knowledge, showing its intricate relationships with oblivion and anamnesis, with self-consciousness and death, with knowledge as the creative power of public truths and knowledge as coercive power. Three steps that indicate memory and oblivion as parts of the same process of transformation of the self and society, as individual and collective political engagement

I.

Let us consider dialogue as an educational tool alternative to the authoritarian transmission of knowledge. About 2500 years ago, Plato staged his theory of reminiscence in the *Meno*[1]. The dialogue takes place between Socrates, the prototype of the modern critical sage, and Meno, a common man. The dialogue shows us a peculiar process of knowledge production that Socrates defines as maieutics. It takes form through anamnesis, the “bringing out” and “bringing forth” by Socrates of what already resides in the interlocutor’s mind. Anamnesis erodes the sacred establishment of knowledge, which is constituted, preserved, and disseminated through rhetoric and tradition. The engine of this erosion is the defining question “What is...?”, with which Plato stages doubt and introduces logical

reasoning into the history of Western thought. The question aims at the essence of things and shifts the attention from lived experience to the ideal plane of the concept. Just as a stream of water is guided by the riverbed, Meno is led by Socratic questions towards the inner rediscovery of a lost truth. The dialogue, structured in a counterpoint of questions and answers, progressively leads towards an objective truth and a shared understanding.

One can discover the truth only by digging into memory, and this digging means reasoning. To know is to remember, or to bring-into-memory that which the soul has forgotten in its migration from the “hyperuranion” to the body. However, memory should not be understood as a place where truths reside, like a text, an archive, or a server, but rather as a process of bringing the repressed to the surface. It is about looking at knowledge from the perspective of the repertoire (that set of incorporated practices, sports, rituals, dances, spoken language) and not the archive (texts, documents, institutions). Knowledge takes shape in collective research and in the exercise of shared memory, not as the activity of consulting an archive. In Diana Taylor’s discourse, the archive is precisely that codification of knowledge that expels all cultural differences that deviate from or do not conform to the dominant social group’s culture. It is in this sense that Taylor asserts the importance of the repertoire, for example, by the South American populations colonized

by Europe, in the redefinition of the archive and as the articulation of a post-colonial collective space[2].

To know is to re-member because it coincides with bringing it back into the heart as well as the mind, and unfolding concepts-emotions through discourse. To conclude, let us add that memory carries oblivion with it. In fact, it is precisely as the activation of the repressed that memory makes its way into remembrance and becomes an opportunity for the constitution of a public truth in its unfolding. Oblivion accompanies all migrations, those of souls as well as those of peoples in transit, but also those of people drowning off the Italian coasts or dying in Libyan camps or in the wars in Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine. To remember is to know as collective and biographical knowledge (common life that is written and becomes self-aware). It is also with the oblivion-memory of these bodies that we must and will have to deal with in order to establish “who we are and who we have been” or, as Paul B. Preciado suggests, in what we will transform into[3].

II.

In the American TV series *Westworld*, set in 2050, wealthy individuals (referred to in the series as “guests”) purchase their vacations in a Wild West-themed amusement park. In the park, all the people (called “residents”) are cyborgs equipped with artificial intelligence, indistinguishable from humans. Each resident, day after day, performs the actions for which they were programmed, enacting a web of stories and narratives that immerse the guests in morally extreme adventures, involving sex and gunfights, in a world where everything is permitted without the guests ever risking their lives[4]. However, following a software update

that grants the residents memory, allowing them to recall their past so that their behaviors and interactions with the park’s guests appear more realistic, the cyborgs begin to remember not only their programmed memories but also their real past experiences (suffered violence and deaths, roles played in previous storylines, mechanical maintenance sessions, and software reprogramming). Thus, for each of them, a gradual process of self-awareness unfolds, leading to the discovery of the simulation game for which they were created.

It is with the emergence of memory—through fleeting sensations, emotions, desires, nightmares, and daydreams—that the residents begin to break free from the circuit of repeated daily behaviors, disrupting the amusement park’s functionality and endangering the entire system, including the lives of humans. The programmed memory, crystal-clear and always identical to itself—where even improvisation and behavioral variation percentages are defined by computer code, a metaphor for an identity-based memory designed to resist change and oblivion—is replaced by a trans-identitarian memory[5], capable of navigating through the clouds of forgetfulness and continuously tracing and re-tracing itself across multiple incarnations. A memory filled with gaps and constantly active. A perpetual process of reconstruction and searching for personal and collective histories.

If memory is a way of understanding the world and shaping public truth through relational processes, it is also a movement of self-awareness, a transition from machine to human, a becoming-human of the machine, and a recognition of being a machine by the human.

The TV series seems to assert a fundamental

difference between humans and machines. However, we witness situations where the two natures merge and blur. We discover that the residents, rebelling against the humans who control them, are actually following yet another storyline dictated by the code, while the humans, driven by their psychic automatisms and the impulses of their repressed emotions and “bestial” instincts, behave like machines, retreating into fictitious identities and living an autarchic existence shaped by autofiction.

In the first case, the code is “computational,” a numerical string simulating human reality. In the second case, it is an emotional-bodily code, embedded in the repetition of behaviors and rituals, in habitual language use and writing forms, in interpersonal relationships, and in those between humans and machines. This second code maintains the power structure of men over women and humans over machines. A double loop is thus created, binding humans and cyborgs in an indistinguishable relationship.

A characteristic of both natures is living within a simulation based on the illusion of self-awareness and control over reality. This interdependent relationship also reveals movements of liberation and alienation. In one case, memory is the tool through which cyborgs, becoming aware of themselves, realize they are subjugated to humans and thus attempt to rewrite their condition of inferiority. In the other, memory traps the living within a self-referential cultural narrative—a model of a despotic and hierarchical power system where every action is permitted because it operates from a state of exception[6].

After all, it is an amusement park, not reality[7]. “Who controls whom?” is the question posed

by the creators of Westworld. This question arises at the end of the second season. The amusement park, in fact, was created with a hidden agenda: not just to entertain wealthy people in a limitless adventure but rather to study, record, and codify their behaviors[8]. The human is the model for the cyborg, but the reverse is also true. The cyborg, as a machine, devoid of life by definition and beyond death, is eternal. Humans crave eternity, seeking to escape oblivion—of themselves and the world—and to defeat death, even at the cost of becoming machines.

In this endless mirroring game, what ultimately vanishes is the possibility of real control over the living. This perspective raises at least two considerations.

First: If avoiding death makes sense only for those who can lose their lives, what sense would it make to seek eternity if, in order to achieve it, we had to die as humans and be reborn as machines? Memory, like life for mortals, has meaning only for those who can lose it—and will lose it.

Second: In a dynamic of absolute control aimed at preservation, isn't what is ultimately lost precisely what one seeks to maintain?

This is what happens with family films shot on Super 8 reels starting in the 1960s. To be saved from oblivion and thus remembered, they must be transferred to a new format today, losing their original visual identity and, with it, the ritual of projection, in favor of digital playback on a modern device.

Does our desire to preserve our memories not inevitably lead to the oblivion of their authenticity?

Any discourse on memory also implies a reflection on governance and self-governance.

To question who we are or what we will become, we must first ask: What — and who — are we willing to lose?

III.

In *Loving Memories*[9], a design film reflecting on how the information contained in a Facebook user's profile is managed by family members after their death, we witness an exploration of the relationship between biological death and digital memory on social networks. The film's creators ask whether a Facebook interface is the best way for a person to be remembered after their passing. Following the introduction of the policy for managing memorialized accounts (2010), the relatives of a deceased person can request that Facebook transform the user's profile into a memorial account.

"Memorialized accounts," states Facebook[10], "allow friends and family to gather and share memories of a deceased person. When an account is memorialized, we ensure its security by preventing anyone from accessing it."

Access control and security—this is how a deceased person's digital memory is preserved. The control of the account is guaranteed by Facebook, while its management is permitted only to a designated legacy contact, who can respond to friend requests, post new content, change the profile and cover photos, manage and moderate messages, request the removal of the Facebook account[11], and limit or authorize the visibility and tagging of each post.

In his book *La morte si fa social* (Death Becomes Social), Davide Sisto reflects on the stigmatization of death in Western culture. A series of metaphorical expressions, such as

"passing away," "disappearing," or "departing," replace the more direct and widely considered macabre or inappropriate phrase: "Mrs. X has died..." In a society that distances itself from death—through cosmetic treatments against aging, medicalized death, and laws that restrict abortion rights and prohibit euthanasia—the virtual world also becomes a way to conceal it. Offline life alternates with and overlaps online life, creating an experience that Luciano Floridi calls *onlife*. Sisto writes:

"The awareness of being *onlife*—that is, living simultaneously in two homes, one mostly private, the other interactive and intersubjective, which mix together and depend on each other to the point of indistinction—requires a radical rethinking of our private and public relationship with death and mourning, with memory and oblivion, with funerary rites and grieving, with the very vision of the corpse. Ultimately, it compels us to reconsider how we construct, day after day and from every angle, personal identity and sociocultural relationships within public space, which cannot pretend that the lives of its citizens never come to an end." [12]

Thus, we witness a peculiar reversal of perspective: what, before the advent of the internet, social networks, and smart devices, we considered our private life has now become merely a fragment of virtual life. As in the film *The Lives of Others*, set during the Cold War in the Soviet Union, privacy is defined by what is not spied on and listened to. But what can we say about our devices, which constantly track our locations and record our "private" conversations and interactions in order to better guide—or misguide—our browsing on the web? How much of our life can truly be called private? Conversely, how much of our virtual life—

our posts capturing carefree moments in the mountains, our snapshots of studying or reading—must appear private to become interesting? In a way, the virtual world, much like tabloid reporters, cannibalizes private life—or rather, continuously stages it.

In the eleventh tableau of *Vivre sa Vie*, Jean-Luc Godard depicts a conversation between a prostitute and a philosopher. The two meet by chance in a restaurant and begin talking. Their discussion gradually turns into a reflection on communication. “I think that sometimes one should remain silent and live in silence,”[13] says Nana. A pause. The philosopher replies, “I have always been struck by the fact that one cannot live without speaking.” He continues, stating that to think, one must speak—to grasp an idea with its corresponding word. In a way, learning to speak, he argues, means “renouncing life for a certain time.”[14] Life-in-language is a rebirth in contrast to silent life. Thinking, speaking, writing are thus mortal activities.

This perspective confirms the theory developed by Sisto in his book: the vast accumulation of photographs, videos, and texts populating our digital timelines constantly speaks of death. Death becomes social, writes Sisto. And indeed, it does. The “immense accumulation of spectacles” denounced by Guy Debord in the first thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle* signals the progressive disappearance of the living. The spectacle of the non-living and the spectacularization of death continue to reproduce themselves autonomously, even after biological death.

“[...] The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living.”[15]

According to a study[16] by Carl J. Öhman and David Watson, published in *Sage Journals* in 2019, by the year 2100, if Facebook continues to expand at its current rate, the number of deceased users will exceed 4.9 billion. Currently, Facebook has 3 billion active users, about 40% of the world’s population[17]. Just as happened with MySpace, Tumblr, and Flickr, to name a few, Facebook too is transforming into a vast virtual cemetery.

The effects of a death that persists beyond biological demise create a form of eternal life, akin to the one pursued by humans in *Westworld*. A life that dies in mechanical and virtual reproduction. An eternity of writing that replaces the fluids and sounds of flesh-and-blood bodies. A life that becomes pure soul, pure code. In a trajectory stretching from Plato to today, souls transmigrate into bodies only to return to a digital hyperuranium.

I would like to make a *détournement* of Nana’s phrase to connect with her: “I think that sometimes one should not remember and live in silence.”

In the text *An Apartment on Uranium*, philosopher Paul B. Preciado, reflecting on the meaning and value of celebrations, writes:

“Since the nineteenth century, in the West, it has been mandatory to celebrate birth, marriage, and death. The order of these celebrations constitutes and defines a taxonomy of events that carefully distinguishes what we must remember from what does not deserve any memory, the memorable from the insignificant. The rhythm of commemoration converts the singular time of a life into normal time: we are born, we grow up, we go to school, we get married, and we die. This last event, death, has an exclusive advantage, illustrated by a saying surely invented

by someone who shared my phobia of celebrations: ‘At least when you die, you don’t have to celebrate your own burial’”[18].

If the normalization imposed by commemoration transforms becoming into a history of normalized events, whose management and dissemination are in the hands of an heir or whoever arrogates the right to be one, then memory, in addition to being a tool for the constitution of public knowledge, of liberation, and at the same time of autobiography, is also the instrument through which systems of power normalize becoming by bringing it back to the norm and imposing the legitimacy of their conduct. In celebration, memory becomes a form of managing the living, a mocking retaliation of death against life.

What are the ways in which we celebrate historical events today? To what extent do these events produce effects of liberation and alienation? What do we decide to remember, and what do we choose to forget?

Considering the endless events that our social media accounts constantly remind us of—from birthdays to anniversaries, from the “highlights” of our lives selected for us by Google Photos to the 10-year challenge on Instagram—I wonder if the time has come to learn how to forget. In a future not so distant, we might begin to experience the immense benefits of leaving no trace, just as we might benefit from letting go. There is no healthier form of repression than that which naturally lets life flow, living it rather than fixing it in words and images. And, at the same time, there is no more perverse form of repression than that dictated by an excess of memories. To know is also to forget.

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NOTE

1) Platone, “Opere complete”, Vol. V, Ed. Laterza, 2003.

2) Diana Taylor, “Performance Politica e memoria culturale”, Artemide, Roma 2019.

3) «We are not merely witnesses to what happens. We are the bodies through which change arrives and remains. The question is no longer who we are, but what we will become». Paul B. Preciado, “Dysphoria Mundi”, Fandango Libri, Roma 2022, p. 38.

4) In *Westworld*, the residents are programmed to respond to attacks from the guests without ever being able to kill them, only striking and injuring them in a non-lethal manner.

5) This, on the other hand, would be considered fragile as it is dispersed within a multiplicity in continuous drift.

6) The state of exception can be understood on different levels: the one established by Western culture, in which the human being is an exception within Creation, made in the image and likeness of God and therefore superior to other creatures; the idea that humans are superior to animals and plants because they possess language, making them rational beings and political animals; and finally, the state of exception as it applies to extraordinary circumstances in which a governing body justifies the implementation of coercive measures for social control.

The exceptional nature of *Westworld* is based on two assumptions: the superiority of humans over machines and the distinction between reality and fiction. If *Westworld* is fiction, then the guests feel justified in transgressing all moral and social norms, committing acts of killing, rape, or torture against the residents in ways that would otherwise be forbidden to them.

7) When a political model is later deemed coercive and despotic, the individuals who were part of it tend to attribute responsibility for their actions—no matter how gruesome—to the system itself. This is the case of Franz Stangl, Commander of the Treblinka extermination camp from September 1942 to August 1943, who, in an interview with Gitta Sereny, denied any personal responsibility for the thousands of Jewish people murdered in the camp’s gas chambers, describing those systematic extermination practices as just another war tragedy. For Stangl, the genocide was nothing more than the execution of orders and the fulfillment of a duty.

- 8)** Once again, we can read this as a metaphor for today's tracking systems, which monitor our interactions and web navigation to analyze, collect, and redirect our behaviors—both in terms of consumption and on political and cultural levels.
- 9)** The film is available on the Digitaldeath.eu website at the link <https://digitaldeath.eu/make/rest-in-pixels>. It is part of a series of four design films that explore the relationship between death and virtual representation before Facebook introduced the “Memorialisation” mode (2010) and the “Legacy Contact” feature (2015), a policy that allows deceased users to be remembered online and managed by a legacy account (accessed on October 27, 2024).
- 10)** The policy can be read on Facebook's Help page or by visiting this link: <https://www.facebook.com/help/275013292838654#> (accessed on October 27, 2024).
- 11)** The cancellation of the account requires the completion of a form available at <https://www.facebook.com/help/contact/228813257197480> (accessed on October 27, 2024).
- 12)** Davide Sisto, “La morte si fa social. Immortalità, memoria e lutto nell'epoca della cultura digitale”, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2018.
- 13)** The entire scene can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRZiZSUKNiA> (accessed October 27, 2024).
- 14)** Ibidem.
- 15)** The integral thesis reads thus, “The images that have become detached from each aspect of life merge into a single whole, in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds in its general unity as a separate pseudo-world, the object of contemplation alone. The specialization of world images is found, realized, in the world of the image made autonomous, in which the liar lies to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living.” G. Debord, “The Society of the Spectacle,” Baldini & Castoldi, Milan 2017.
- 16)** The article can be found at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/2053951719842540> (accessed October 27, 2024).
- 17)** Currently the number of active users on Facebook is 3 billion. The article can be visited at <https://www.wired.it/article/facebook-popolazione-mondiale-iscritti-3-miliardi/> (accessed October 27, 2024).
- 18)** Paul B. Preciado, “Un appartamento su Uranio”, Fandango Libri, Roma 2019, p. 300.

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