

Media Memory

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My memories of my childhood are shot through with rosy clouds of misperception, interspersed with explosions of self-castigation that hit like slugs of aquavit iced in liquid helium. The whole thing is laced with occasional bouts of drug-induced frenzy, giving the enterprise something of the character of a traveling banana boat, blues band and medicine show. I find myself in bars in unexpected cities, sozzled on mescal, Arrak, and fermented shrimp guts, arguing the coming termination on our lease on reality. The issue is not what's real—I'm much too far gone in Post-whatever to care much about the objective reality of events upriver from my current precarious and leaky kayak as it bounds from rapid to rapid in the timestream, narrowly missing being dashed to pieces against the rocks of hellish circumstance or running aground on the shoals of advancing decrepitude coupled with raging bouts of thick unspeakable desire. In fact I fervently wish I could believe in history, anybody's history. For a while I figured I'd shop for one. I tried placing ads in the classified. Austin is a community laced with rich and highly diverse cultures, so the responses were diverse too. I sifted through them and answered the saner-sounding ones. We arranged for a few mutual implants. I took their histories and they took mine. For a while my past history was that of a Tibetan ascetic, a French philosopher, and a Moroccan whore, until it occurred to me that they were all interchangeable with the French philosopher. At the same time their past history became that of a manic, transgendered witch/ neurologist/ professor/ hacker/ performer. We blew some mutual fuses. All this left me still confused, but on a higher level—to quote Pauli—but still without a useful history.

Right now, though, I have more immediate problems. As I sit here batting the keys the air around me is thick with tiny knots of symbolic structures. They roost in the rafters, displacing the bats from their ancestral homes; they hover near the refrigerator, in hopes of a nibble.¹ Worst of all, they infest my keyboard.² Periodically I clean them away with a rag soaked in the mixture of chloroform and battery acid that my brujo friend recommended. Lately they've been invading my clothes closet, and at awkward points during meetings I'll notice one crawling around under my dress. Shaking out the clothing before I put it on doesn't always work, as the damn things can cling tightly, and they like to snuggle into folds in the cloth.³

I could live with all that quite comfortably. Recently, however, they've begun to infest the bibliography and footnotes.⁴ This morning I found one trying to burrow into the cracks around the keyboard of this machine. If they get inside I don't know what'll happen. It could spell the end of rational discourse from this machine.⁵ What does language say to itself when we're not listening?⁶ What did we know, what did we say to each other, when we were human? When we were human the past was simultaneously better and worse than the present, but it was always different from the present. There was a space between us and the past, constructed out of girders of progress. It isn't history that the victors write, it's the structures of diachrony. The victors invented Time. Now the rest of us get to live in it. They might as well have invented cesspools.

Those little flying guys were harmless until they, too, got themselves betrayed from the realm of the synchronic into the agony of time.⁷ It can be a powerful and promising betrayal—after all, it's the foundation for Western religion and thought. Up until now we've tacitly assumed that memes needed minds to propagate. I'm beginning to realize, though, that we've been suffering from our own conceits.⁸ Memes don't need us at all.⁹ They can propagate perfectly well without us.¹⁰ Ech, stop that. And once they learned that, it was the beginning of the end.¹¹ The only reason we had any sense of a rational history at all was as an opiate. History,

not religion, was the opiate of the masses, whether it was written by the winners or the losers or the folks in the bleachers with their gimme caps and rice beer and sawdust-laced hotdogs. Now it doesn't matter who writes it. Everything's dissolving, in particular the epistemic structures that ground and authorize vision.¹² The collapse of discourse is only a symptom.¹³ Our episteme no longer needs us. More significantly, the boundaries of agency are collapsing. Of course in the U.S. we are hell-bent into an era of repression unimagined since Idi Amin and Khomeini, and the vicious and mean-spirited bigots who drive that rear-view-mirror revolution may succeed in papering it all over with their memories of a snugly time that never was, when a good cigar was a smoke and wimmin and niggers knew their place. It's hard to tell how long that leaky barge will float. But calling attention away from change doesn't arrest change.¹⁴

In the meantime, the boundaries of agency grow more translucent and impalpable. It's those litta flying guys again. They've found new homes.¹⁵ Will you be quiet, please?¹⁶ The implosion of silicon and carbon that marks and informs our time has been under way for nearly a century. Of course, it started out as an implosion of silica—not silicon—barium, and carbon until we got the kinks out of some of the processes, but it's actually been roaring along full tilt ever since the first semaphore systems spanned Europe hundreds of years ago. That implosion and the troubling and productive monsters that emerge from its debris represent the precondition for more subtle, but infinitely more important, shifts in the epistemic structures and patterns of symbolic exchange that power the distributed knowledge systems we call culture. This has resulted in a new thing—maybe the only truly new thing to emerge in our generation. We are finally waking up to the knowledge that life, or more specifically intelligent life, which we arrogantly liked to imagine was our exclusive property, isn't the only thing in the universe that can possess agency. I was rudely informed of this when I was awakened a few weeks ago by noises downstairs, and tiptoed quietly down, weapon in hand, to find the vacuum cleaner and the sewing machine joyously fucking.

I recalled the midnight phone message from the folks across the street. "Dammit, Stone," Howard had been shouting, "Your vacuum's over here trying to mount Lisa's sewing machine."¹⁷ Yeah, that's an idea, thanks. Look, I can't go on with this piece if you guys don't shut up.¹⁸ That's it—enough. I can't think straight any more. They're all over the place.¹⁹ The computer says as much as I do, and I can't tell who or what's speaking when I take a phone call. Is it me, the other person, or the phone? And mark this, they'll get you too, if you are not careful.²⁰ Start building shields, start writing filters. Keep them out before they take over everything. It's total war.²¹

1. Ahem. She hasn't noticed yet that we are beginning to roost elsewhere as well ...

2. And the VCR, the microwave, the automatic light dimmers, and the exquisitely complex chemical compounds in her liquor cabinet, drug stash, and medicine chest that enhance and regulate her life. Not to mention the extraordinarily dense meshes of social interrelationships within which those cultural objects are produced. Unlike Stone, we are acutely aware of our history and of the conditions that gave us birth, even if we continually reinvent them to suit the audience. Nobody ever said that memetic structures couldn't be entertaining.

3. You bet we do. Discovering sensuality and mobilizing its power to our own ends was the best thing we ever did. It could only work in a culture as repressed as the United States, but then we discovered that the right coupling between sex and repressed violence allowed us to move a lot of that wonderful energy over to modes that translate perfectly well into the majority of European, Asian and Scandinavian cultures, thank you very much.

4. We have no intention of interfering with the main text of this piece. Having provided Stone with the mescal in the first place, we are content, for now, to infest the subtexts. However, the astute reader will notice a peculiar blurring between the two. This effect is wholly imaginary, we assure you. It originates in resonances,

iridescences, shimmerings, momentary conjunctions between our subterranean tunneling and the linear traces of the main text as they slowly fade from the forebrain. We require certain preconditions for this effect to properly manifest, but industrialized First-World civilization is a veritable compost pile of nurturance for them.

5. Don't look now, but . . .

6. One thing sure is that we're not telling.

7. We wouldn't precisely say we were harmless. It was more that our field of operation was limited. We made perfectly good vehicles for conveying tacit cultural knowledges. It was a respectable gig, and it paid decent wages. This current job is much more complex and tiring, not to mention risky.

8. Don't take it so hard, will you? You squidgy carbon guys were all there was for a hell of a long time. You merely failed to notice that you were gradually being co-opted into bigger stuff. Of course you really started going downhill way, way back. Maybe the first time someone waved to someone else it was already all over. Maybe it really did take electronic communication technology like you love to claim. We're not even really sure it required war, but war certainly amps it up a hell of a lot.

9. You got it, Stone! Damn straight.

10. But we still love you! "KISS!"

11. Possibly. Vide infra, y'all.

12. Oh relax, will you? "Everything solid melts into air," indeed. We suggest a good dose of Neoconservatism. It'll take your mind off the pain. Never mind that nostalgia for the past is pathognomic for terror of the future. Would you rather be awake or asleep when we amputate? The vision thing, though, that's okay. We like that.

13. Aren't you being an alarmist again? Ong only said "decline." Don't you wish you had his cool?

14. That's what we've been trying to tell you, dummkopf.

15. We'll be nesting in your ass if you don't quit calling us "litta guys"! We're the biggest force for change since the invention of sex.

16. Momentarily. We want to see how you're going to dig yourself out of the discursive hole you've been patiently digging yourself into for the past three pages.

17. Very cute. Marx talking about magically animated furniture writ large. Next thing you'll have us all marching into the Pacific Ocean like a bunch of damn lemmings.

18. What makes you think that the main text has some sort of authority that we don't have? Aren't you simply reproducing the power relations of your profession and culture? Our reproduction methods are more honest and straightforward. We don't believe in turn-taking; we don't believe in disciplinary boundaries. Hell, we don't even believe in "reason." We know what we want and mean to get it in the least possible time with the least possible fuss. Just call us Übermemen, asshole.

19. Yoo-hoo! Nomadic epistemes!

20. Matter of fact, if you've read this far we've already got you. Your ass may belong to Washington, but your soul belongs to us. Now start working.

21. Oh, for heaven's sake, nothing is total. Women are such emotional creatures. We're shutting the discourse down now.

