Joachim Koester
things that SHINE
and THINGS that are DARK

Zineb Sedira
Of Words and Stones
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Cover Images:  Joachim Koester, *Maybe one must begin with some particular places*, 2012. Courtesy of Joachim Koester and Jan Mot, Brussels/Mexico City.
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I. Curator’s Statement

Joachim Koester

Joachim Koester’s solo exhibition at Beirut Art Center, purposely associates immersion with perambulation through the movement of images, architectural modifications, as well as color and shade alternations; the usual circulation within the building has been deliberately disrupted. The list of exhibited works (2013-2017) reflects the great diversity of mediums used by the artist in the last twelve years, from digital film to photography and sound-works in collaboration with Stefan A. Pedersen, and from sculpture in space to environmental pieces.

Koester is a Danish artist whose practice draws from diverse references such as dance, cinema, vernacular, and ritualistic protocols, but also healing and trance-inducing techniques. This induces a patient exploration into the traces that history inscribes in our nervous and muscular systems, which he reanimates by employing different movement practices. He has accumulated an archive of the body in movement over the years, a process that feeds into his kinetic and choreographic research and turns exhibition spaces into frames of experimentation, where situations and questions that surpass language are articulated. The body is at once a receptacle, a factor of invisibility or inscription, and a transmitter. Koester gives it the status of an enigma and of a possible place for exchange.

The project for Joachim Koester’s exhibition in Beirut was inspired by the artist’s ability to link spirituality with language and manifestations of the body in their geographical and political dimension. These questions are particularly relevant in Lebanon where religion frames political and social life in very rigid ways and where questions of identity take precedence over the spiritual dimension. Things that shine and things that are dark is also meant to address this issue.

Marie Muracciole
Historically, words and stones have been used for construction materials as well as improvised weapons. Stones have also been used as physical markers, whether as traces of natural landscape formation, tools to demarcate borders, or milestones to signal the distance between places. “Of Words and Stones”, Zineb Sedira’s first solo show in Lebanon and also the title of a new work, refers to the way some singular voices can trace paths through the blind alleys of history, at once building narrative and unravelling trauma and oblivion.

Language and oral transmission play an important role in Sedira’s early works. The artist unpacks deeply personal issues, such as a family history inscribed within the long, violent story of French colonization of Algeria. In her primary video installations, by staging documentary-style interviews of herself and her parents, Sedira became one of the first visual artists to raise a voice against France’s silence about the colonial situation.

Hence Zineb Sedira’s vision and practice activate processes of identificatory modalities, by opposition to identity mythologies. From acts of ventriloquism to intercessions through dialogue and exchange, her work triggers the circulation and constant reinvention of a subjective position.

Films, photographs, sculptures, and documents are displayed with reference to the artist’s method of investigating her immediate surroundings, as well as larger phenomenons – for instance, the circulation of trade or information. A selection from Sedira’s photographic series and part of her work on Algerian caricaturists complete a portrait of the artist’s twenty-year-long practice presented in the context of Beirut.

Marie Muracciole
II. Joachim Koester

Tripping The Light Fantastic: Joachim Koester
At Turner Contemporary
Robert Barry

One winter’s night in early 1842, Joseph Mallard William Turner strapped himself to the mast of a steamship in the midst of a storm in order to experience nature in all its sublime majesty. The experience is recorded in his deeply impressionistic oil painting of later the same year, Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth. So, at least, the story goes.

Some have cast doubt on the truth of the tale, what with it bearing so close a resemblance to an earlier story told by the painter Joseph Vernet. Whether fact or fable, this tale of Turner’s voyage – and of the physical extremes he endured for no other purpose than to “show what such a scene was like” – holds a guiding hand on the tiller of a new exhibition of works by Joachim Koester, alongside some by Turner himself, at Margate’s Turner Contemporary gallery.

Turner, confesses Koester to me when we sit down in a side room on the gallery’s ground floor, “was very much an artist we discussed” when he was a student at the Royal Danish Academy of Art in the mid-80s. Later, as he moved more into photography, film, and installation, he “was not so much on my mind.” But the English landscape painter stayed with him somehow for the sense of “freedom” in his skies, “this hazy wash, close almost to monochromes.”

Koester’s own formative voyages were more “interior journeys,” he says. “Those are probably the ones that are the most prominent in my mind.” Amongst Koester’s older works on display in Margate, you’ll find tributes to High Times magazine and the legendary Club des Hashischins of Baudelaire and Delacroix, as well as animated films composed of the mescaline drawings of the Belgian surrealist Henri Michaux.

“I never really made this connection to my artwork before,” he said to me, “but the fact that I have always been going elsewhere in my mind. Like while I was between sleep and awake. I always felt comfortable in that area. I always felt like I knew this area very well. And there I have been to marvellous places – in deep space or the bottom of the sea.”

The most explicit journey amongst Koester’s works here, however, is to be found in one of the very newest on display. For The Department of Abandoned Futures (2015), visitors are invited to lie down on a foam mat perched atop a broad wooden pallet, put on a pair of headphones and “enjoy the hypnotic journey.”

“Take a deep breath in… And relax,” the voice of Charles Parker intones towards the beginning of what feels at first like a guided meditation tape. This, indeed, is how Koester refers to it: “the meditation piece.” But there is something slightly darker going on here, too, something altogether more critical.

After a good ten minutes of entreaties to relax our various extremities, an extended pause concludes with a murmured, “good” and we are then taken on a more literal journey, from a street, to a building, and deep into its basement. Here, after a long flight of stairs, we finally find ourselves in the quasi-officious Department of the work’s title, a room stuffed with boxes containing “drawings, manuscripts, photographs, films, objects, visions, and voices … blueprints for social interactions that never took place … inventions and drawings for cities that were never built.”

There is the suggestion of something bureaucratic about this department. Like something out of Kafka, the Department of Abandoned Futures is just one among many departments buried in “a huge grey concrete building” in “a city that you have never visited before”. But as the hypnotic preamble makes clear, this is a bureaucracy of the mind – the subconscious as a greying, mildewed sorting office.
“I think,” Koester says, when I ask him about his ideas about our own lost futures, “that there were a lot of times in history when things could have gone the other way and a different future could have happened. And I think we are at a point where we desperately need ideas – because it seems like we have this global economy, but we are stuck in the same place more or less. It’s just there. Art won’t provide a direct solution, but art might point to a space where we can start to think differently.”

In The Department of Abandoned Futures, we are told about “a whole section dedicated solely to the arts.” Coming to in the North Gallery, after spending almost twenty-five minutes isolated in the acoustic space of this work, I look to the watercolours on the wall – Turner’s ‘colour beginnings’ of the early nineteenth century with their hazy, impressionistic washes of colours – and can’t help but see an odd kind of abandoned futurism here, too. It is as though, in the 1822 of Study for Rokeby, in the c.1807–19 of A Sea Piece, Turner had already glimpsed a little something of Philip Guston, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko.

In the middle of this room, there is a rough-hewn shed, erected, by the looks of it, from drift wood gathered on the beach outside. “This is my own favourite vantage point to look through the show,” Koester announces, on the threshold of this hut, as he guides the assembled press corps about the exhibition on the day of the opening. Inside the shed, a film is playing – Koester’s The Other Side of the Sky (2015), a 16mm projection of swirling liquids, much like those used by psychedelic groups of the late 60s.

Through a window in the hut we can see a single work of Turner’s, a small pencil drawing called Sailing Boat in a Squall whose faint graphite shading is almost entirely obscured by splatters. In the technical notes for the Tate’s official catalogue entry for this work it states “The sheet is conspicuously discoloured, stained and spattered with black ink.” From Koester’s preferred vantage point, these “conspicuous” marks are really all you can see of it.

“I think that particular Turner,” Koester says to me later of this work, “the point where you get away from motive, you get closer to the material, the fact that you are really painting, you are putting paint on the material. So that one, the one you mentioned, is the most material. It’s almost on the brink of just that. Just being what looks like some scratches or something that fell almost randomly on a piece of paper. In those works, in Turner, I see this desire to even bypass looking at the sky and just be absorbed in the paint and in the paper. You can feel that.”

Back at the press view, looking from Turner’s Sailing Boat in a Squall to Koester’s The Other Side of the Sky, we begin to entertain, for a moment, the fantasy of Turner as some long-lifed Lazarus, persisting into the twentieth century and becoming a film-maker, making psychedelic light shows for rock bands at the UFO club or the Electric Circus. “He would have been the best of them all,” Koester concludes, a mischievous smirk playing across his lips.
Critical Nostalgia in the Art of Joachim Koester
Paolo Magagnoli

Nostalgia, Pathological, and Critical
Since the late 1990s a growing interest in historical representation has emerged in contemporary art, a phenomenon about which much has already been written.1 A significant strand of the current ‘historiographic turn’ is characterised by works that display an overt fascination with architectural ruins, obsolete technologies, discarded films, and past works of art.2 Tacita Dean is perhaps the artist whose work is most emblematic of this tendency. Yet, the examples can be multiplied many times: one could look at the works of the American Zoe Leonard, with her photographic installations of closing-down stores, worn out dolls, and old travel postcards. Or one could also look at the Dutch artist Fiona Tan, the Scot Gerard Byrne, the Lithuanian Deimantas Narkevicius, or the Canadian Stan Douglas as other examples of the nostalgic impulse at work in contemporary art today.

This impulse has been harshly dismissed by critics and historians. For some, the current tendency of many artists to dig up lost pasts is a telling symptom of a ‘pathological escapist fantasy’, of an ‘incapacity to look at the present [and] to think and even imagine the future’. In this paper, I contend that, given nostalgia’s protean nature, a fair assessment of its critical significance can be formulated only after each individual artistic practice in which this impulse can be traced has been carefully examined. More precisely, it is only by attending to the specificities of each work that it is possible to evaluate whether nostalgia is progressive or reactionary, critical or ideological, generative or sterile. For this reason, I would like to look at the practice of the Danish artist Joachim Koester in order to explore a model of critical nostalgia. With his fascination with architectural ruins and the appropriation of conceptual art, Koester’s certainly represents one of those artistic practices most emblematic of the nostalgic impulse at work among many contemporary ‘artist-historians’ today. Having begun his practice in the early 1990s, he has been hailed as ‘a pioneer of the historiographic turn’. More importantly, I would argue that his work manifests a nuanced and progressive use of nostalgia; one that does not sentimentally celebrate the past but which, instead, recognises in it a potential critique of the present. This important aspect of Koester’s aesthetic has not been sufficiently explored so far. Critics who have written about the artist – such as Hal Foster – have focused exclusively on his typical representational strategies. Yet, none of the critics has stressed enough the critical dimension of Koester’s nostalgia. This article attempts to articulate and unravel this significant dimension.

However, before turning to the artist’s singular works, I think that it is important to review the main reasons for the critical dismissal of nostalgia. Ultimately, the criticism of nostalgia is rooted in the history of the term itself. Nostalgia means literally ‘a longing for something far away or long ago’.6 The word has two Greek roots: nostos, meaning ‘return home’, and algia, meaning ‘longing’. It was coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer (1669–1752), a Swiss student of medicine at the University of Basl, who introduced the term in his medical dissertation. For Hofer, nostalgia was ‘the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land’, and, according to him, its often-fatal symptoms were ‘continued sadness, meditation only on the Fatherland, disturbed sleep either wakeful or continuous, hunger, thirst, senses diminished, and cares or even palpitations of the heart, frequent sighs, also stupidity of the mind’.7 In the late eighteenth century, nostalgia came to indicate a sentimental longing for the past, and although now the original pathological meaning has been lost, the term still connotes negative associations, and within the fields of cultural history and sociology is often referred to metaphorically as a ‘disease’.8

This denigration of nostalgia occurs for several reasons. First, this sentiment contradicts modern philosophies of history, which read time according to narratives of progress and emancipation. For Kant and Hegel, history was a continuous movement towards greater freedom and reason and, consequently, nostalgia could not be anything but an irrational and mystifying impulse. Likewise, for Marx, the past corresponded to a more oppressive form of the organisation of society and therefore nostalgia was a conservative political move that hindered the pursuit of the proletarian cause. ‘The social revolution of the nineteenth century’, he wrote, ‘cannot draw its poetry from the past, it can draw that only from the future’.9 Thus, within Marx, Hegel, and Kant’s philosophies, the affective investment in the past which distinguishes nostalgia is fundamentally an aberration, a politically reprehensible and empirically untenable act.

Secondly, nostalgia is frequently defined as the opposite of history, or what is considered an objective and well-documented account of the past. Whereas history entails critical distance, nostalgia is seen as an ideological distortion, a shaping of history according to subjective interests and desires. ‘Nostalgia tells it like it wasn’t’, writes geographer David Lowenthal.11 For John Tosh, ‘the problem with nostalgia is that it is a very lopsided view of history. If the past is redesigned as comfortable refuge, all its negative features must be removed’.12 Likewise, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw argue that nostalgia sets a false dichotomy between a past constructed as a time of ‘integrated consciousness’ and a present constructed as a world of social
Nostalgia does not fare well even in post-structuralist criticism, where it is often excoriated for being a dangerous deceptive fantasy. Susan Stewart, for example, claims that nostalgia is a ‘social disease’ that expresses an impossible desire for authenticity, transcendence, and pure origins.15 ‘Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological’, Stewart explains, ‘the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack’.16 Moreover, in Stewart’s view, nostalgia reflects the negative essentialism of western metaphysics for it claims the possibility of absolute presence and transcendence. Nostalgia is then associated by Stewart with melancholia, that sterile and unproductive fixation with loss discussed by Freud in his celebrated 1915 article.17 Thus, in post-structuralist discourse, nostalgia is also often given pathological connotations.

The most vehement dismissal of nostalgia occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s, a time when Western countries witnessed an unprecedented boom in the development of the heritage industries, museums, and archives, and when period films became a fashionable and much exploited genre, in which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have famously termed ‘the culture industry’.18 It was indeed the popularity of historical films such as Chinatown (1974) and Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) that prompted Fredric Jameson’s celebrated critique of post-modernism. For Jameson, these historical films were ‘nostalgia films’; they appealed to the spectator’s infantile desires for regression and reduced the past to a ‘fashion plate’ or a ‘glossy image’. More importantly, nostalgia films expressed the incapacity of the subject in late capitalism to grasp its present as part of a broader historical process. For Jameson, under post-modernity the subject ‘has lost its capacity to organize its past and future into coherent experience’ and nostalgia is ‘a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself – or, at the very least, an alarming pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history’.

In the 1980s the dominance of neo-conservative politics did little to improve the reputation of nostalgia. In fact, both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher used nostalgic appeals to the ‘glorious’ pasts of their nations in their political propaganda.20 ‘Victorian values serve Mrs Thatcher as an imprimatur for scuttling the Welfare State’, claimed Lowenthal, ‘but (her nostalgia) is primitive capitalism masquerading as Whig History’.21 The privatisation and expansion of the heritage industry fostered by both the administrations of Reagan and Thatcher further reinforced the conflation of nostalgia with tradition, kitsch, and reactionary politics. Feminist critics were no less harsh than Marxists in their repudiation of nostalgia. In the mid–1990s, Linda Hutcheon claimed that feminism ‘has no tendency toward nostalgia, no illusion of a golden age in the present’ and that nostalgia was indeed a defensive male response to the changes in culture brought about by the rise of feminism.

Likewise, in art history, the return to obsolete conventions, mediums, and motifs that characterised certain artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s was interpreted as the symptom of the desire for authority and legitimation. For example, in 1981 Benjamin Buchloh dismissed the works of German Neo-expressionist artists such as Georg Baselitz for their nostalgic imitation of motifs and pictorial techniques drawn from German expressionism. ‘The aesthetic attraction of these eclectic painting practices’, wrote Buchloh, ‘originates in a nostalgia for that moment in the past when the painting modes to which they refer had historical authenticity’.23 Buchloh then categorically concluded that the works of these artists served the politics of ‘a rigid conservativism through cultural legitimation’.

Yet, the widespread denigration of nostalgia in cultural history and criticism – which persists today – overlooks the complexity and heterogeneity of this impulse. Nostalgia is not always the expression of a conservative impulse but may in fact be seen to respond to a diversity of desires and political needs: in other words, along with a conservative, reactionary nostalgia, there can be a critical and progressive one, which can be ‘a resource and strategy central to the struggles of all subaltern cultural and social groups’.25 More precisely, in some instances, the past can provide positive models of resistance to the status quo and show utopian possibilities which are still valid in the present. Although Jameson, Stewart, and Buchloh’s critiques are not to be utterly ignored, nostalgia is not always nor necessarily a reactionary impulse and, contrary to the above critiques, it can be mobilised in a variety of ways with different, and competing, political inflections. An example of the critical and progressive potential of nostalgia is Koester’s practice. In the following pages, I shall attempt to show how Koester’s
nostalgia is not the expression of a desire for a more hierarchical and ordered society, but on the contrary a strategy to defamiliarise the present and to open up a space for utopian imagination.

Re-enacting a Bodily Unconscious
Koester’s interest in Crowley’s Thelema is one of the many examples of the artist’s fascination with unorthodox, pre-modern, and pre-scientific forms of knowledge. The search for irrational or primitive techniques, which has been marginalised by scientific systematic thought since the seventeenth century and the rise of the Enlightenment, is what ultimately characterises the works of the artist in which he explores the histories of occultism and drug experimentation. Unsurprisingly, figures such as Crowley, John Dee, Thomas De Quincey, Henri Michaux, and Carlos Castaneda recur incessantly in the artist’s filmic and photographic projects. Although Koester’s fascination with these figures might be seen at first as a superficial attraction towards the bizarre, the unusual, and the eccentric, on a less superficial level his interest reflects a profound belief in the possibility of aesthetic and affective experiences to be generative and enlightening. For Koester, these figures deployed a variety of visual, acoustic, and corporeal means to extend our knowledge about the universe and the human mind in a way that scientific thought could not have provided. The Italian trance-like dance of tarantism is another historical example of the importance of pre-modern, aesthetic forms of knowledge and practice for the artist. Koester re-enacts this traditional dance in his 16 mm film Tarantism.

Originating in Salento, the south-eastern extremity of the Apulia region of Italy, tarantism was part of a ritual exorcism through dance, music, and colour symbolism that aimed to heal a disease supposedly produced by the bite of a tarantula. In the ritual, the victim was often surrounded by a band of musicians playing drums and violins and would move in convulsive and frenetic ways simulating possession by a spider. The ‘victims’, or tarantati, danced in response to particular melodies, often for days on end, to sweat the ‘poison’ out of their bodies. The rite ended with the symbolic death of the spider and the healing of the victim. The historical origins of tarantism are still complex and obscure, as the ritual changed its relevance, form, and meanings across centuries. The residue of a pagan rite practised during Greek and Roman antiquity, tarantism was absorbed by the medieval Catholic church, which managed to link it to the cult of St Paul. In the sixteenth century, it was dismissed by Jesuit missionaries as a primitive superstition and in the eighteenth century by the Neapolitan Enlightenment, which branded it as a pathological mental disorder. In the mid-twentieth century, tarantism began to be recognised as a cultural and social phenomenon which deserved attention. It became the subject of a revolutionary study in 1959 by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino. Today, the ritual no longer exists as such. However, since the 1970s there has been a revival of interest in tarantism, in part fuelled by the number of researchers who have visited Salento.

Produced in the late 1950s, De Martino’s seminal study, The Land of Remorse, has acquired almost mythical status over the years and has become the main historical reference for those interested in tarantism.57 Importantly, De Martino’s work linked the ritual practice with the extremely poor and patriarchal society of Salento. Historically, the region was one of the poorest and most backward regions of Italy. A vast rural area, it was far away from the wealthier and better-educated urban centres of Naples or Rome. De Martino, who supported the Socialists and later the Communist party, on the one hand warned against the denigration of tarantism by scientists and theologians and rejected the empirical reduction, prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of the phenomenon to a medical dysfunction. He provided a detailed history of tarantism and of the attempts by the Catholic church and the Neapolitan medical school to eradicate the practice. Yet, on the other hand, De Martino also reinforced a radically pessimistic notion of the phenomenon: influenced by French existentialism and psychoanalysis, De Martino ultimately defined the ritual in negative terms. In the conclusion of his study, he describes tarantism as ‘the horizon of an anguish which is the ciphered symptom of unfulfilled choices and conflicts operating in the unconscious’.58 While Koester has drawn on the extensive documentation produced by De Martino, his film rehabilitates tarantism in that he views the dance as a way to relieve the victims, however momentarily, of their anxieties. Importantly, as we will see, Koester’s film appropriates the dance as a technique of self-knowledge that could be used in the present. In other words, in Tarantism, the artist does not assume the authoritative voice of the anthropologist, the historian, or the scientist: in fact, the film is not a documentary about tarantism’s past; rather, it is a performance staged in the present and choreographed by Koester with the help of professional dancers.

Koester’s work might be seen as part of the post-modern revival of this phenomenon. In the 1990s, tarantism was rediscovered, especially in the Salento region where it was born. As a consequence, a touristic, academic, and cultural industry revolving around the ritual and its history has boomed. Given its intrinsic spectacular nature, its overpowering music and trance-like dance,
tarantism has become a favoured subject for contemporary film-makers and photographers, as well as for writers and performers. This revival or ‘neo-tarantism’ has been heavily criticised. For many, neo-tarantism is the expression of a conservative and deceptive nostalgia, which��onically exploits a phenomenon associated with suffering and despair. ‘Today tarantism’, writes one Italian anthropologist, ‘has been totally de-contextualised, reified, and projected onto an ill-defined universal dimension’.60 Koester’s film is undoubtedly another manifestation of the recent rediscovery of tarantism. However, I think we should be careful in putting all cultural practices that appropriate the dance on the same level and we should distinguish between a neo-tarantism that surreptitiously distorts and trivialises the phenomenon, and a neo-tarantism – like Koester’s – that disregards any pretence of authenticity and therefore avoids reifying it.

Shot in a small theatre in Brussels, Koester’s elegant black-and-white film deploys young professional dancers to re-enact the dance. During the six-minute-long film Koester’s dancers rapidly swirl in front of the camera as if possessed by an irresistible force (Fig. 11). Some elements in Koester’s mise en scène recall the traditional ritual. Two female dancers hold a white cloth similar to those used by the victims of tarantism, and occasionally the performers dance while the other performers stand still around them, an arrangement that recalls De Martino’s photographs. Yet, these are the only direct references to the historical phenomenon of tarantism appearing in the film, which overall differs markedly from traditional representations of the dance. The dancers wear contemporary clothes and move in an overtly exaggerated way, and Koester often breaks the conceit, as when the camera shows the moments after the performers have finished dancing. Koester also avoids following the conventions that govern the filming of theatrical performances. Instead of providing wide shots of the dance – as we are used to seeing in television recordings of the performing arts – the camera focuses on marginal details such as the stage floor or the performers’ waists and feet (Figs 12 and 13). Moreover, the camera pans horizontally across the stage regardless of the actions of the dancers. It zooms in and out with no apparent motivation. The result is a sense of estranged space in which actions that were normally prohibited could have been enacted.63 Like Koester, several anthropologists and historians have recently pointed out the curative and empowering dimension of the ritual, questioning the pessimistic fatalism of De Martino’s influential account.64 According to these studies, through its vivid colour symbolism, intense rhythmic dance, and excessive acting, tarantism actually relieved the condition of distress of its ‘victims’. Rather than a strategy to discipline the body, tarantism was a technique that empowered and liberated the subject, however momentarily.65 Therefore, if viewed as a method of self-exploration and empowerment, Koester’s nostalgic re-enactment of the dance should be seen as a progressive move.

The idea that a ritualistic form such as tarantism could be a vehicle for self-expression and liberation might seem paradoxical. The notion of ritual is often linked with the mechanics of institutionalised forms of power. A ritual is ‘a form or structure’, writes anthropologist Roy Rappaport, ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers’.66 However, for Koester, the ritualistic repetition of a pre-determined set of movements is only a way to open up the work to chance. Koester has spoken of his choreography in terms of a ‘game plan’, a loose framework within which the dancers were allowed to improvise and experiment. Thus tarantism is appropriated by Koester as a loose structure that can trigger unpredictable events. This is also exemplified by the way in which the artist has conceived the film’s camera movements. ‘In the production of the
film’, Koester has said, ‘my assistants and I conceived the camera positions as a sort of empty box or frame in which we could put anything’. Improvisation, then, had a crucial role in the genesis of the work and points to the importance of chance in Koester’s practice as a whole. This aspect links the artist with precise art historical legacies. I am here referring to the photoconceptualist notion of performative photography recently discussed by Margaret Iversen. It is also connected with the artist’s interest in experimental literature based on systems of rigorous formal constraints (significantly George Perec’s Life: A User’s Manual is mentioned by Koester as one of the literary works that most influenced him).

More importantly, the importance of chance in Koester’s re-enactments sheds light on the generative character of his nostalgia. For Koester, the repetition of a ritualistic form of knowledge is not a sterile, unproductive gesture, the sign of alienation, or even a pathological obsession. Rather, it is a technique through which to access unconscious, unexplored dimensions of the self, a productive way to estrange the subject from its habitual knowledge. Against Timothy Bewes’ definition of nostalgia as a sterile escapist approach, Koester demonstrates that the recovery of pre-modern forms of knowledge can enable the subject to release inventive and transformative actions in the present.

Critical Nostalgia and Its Limits
The nostalgic impulse at work in Koester’s practice calls for an expansion of the concept of nostalgia, one that would allow for the possibility of a critical and progressive reading of the concept alongside the conservative and regressive one. Both modernist and postmodernist thinkers have dismissed nostalgia as ‘bad history and bad politics’. In the modern philosophies of history formulated by Kant, Hegel, and Marx, since history represents a continuous movement towards progress and emancipation, clearly nostalgia cannot be understood as anything but a reactionary and irrational impulse. Likewise, whether taking its form as pastiche or glossy tableaux (Jameson), as a desire for authenticity and immediacy (Stewart and Hutcheon), or as a return to authority (Buchloh), nostalgia is, for numerous commentators on postmodernism, a regressive impulse which falsifies the past and hides a desire for a more ordered society. Post-modernity itself has been viewed as a deeply nostalgic period during which we have witnessed the fetishisation of retro-fashions, the heritage industry, and various historical revivals. Those critics who have attempted to salvage the post-modern era’s return to history have resorted to concepts like irony (see Hutcheon’s notion of ‘historical metafictions’) and deconstruction (see Foster’s ‘postmodernism of resistance’), instead of arguing in favour of the possibility of a critical and constructive nostalgia.

Koester’s practice challenges this dismissal of nostalgia in many respects. As I hope this paper has made clear, it demonstrates that there can be a progressive nostalgia that springs from a desire to transform the present, perceived to be too conservative and oppressive. While admitting the possibility of a critical nostalgia helps us in avoiding monolithic notions of this approach, it is also important to remember its dangers and problems. That is, the nostalgic artist might sometimes end up glorifying pasts which are profoundly controversial and complex. The desire to re-enchant the ruins of the past may come at the expense of reducing history’s complexities, especially when these ruins refer to geographical and historical contexts too unfamiliar. In Koester’s case, this is particularly evident if one looks at his latest works. In Barker Ranch (2008), Koester depicts the last hide-out of Charles Manson in the Arizona desert and in Time of the Assassins (2009) (Fig. 15), he portrays the remains of the castle of the eleventh-century Muslim missionary Hassan-I Sabbah in Iran (legend has it that his ruthless followers committed numerous political killings under the influence of hashish). The artist’s beautiful black-and-white silver prints seem to glorify these ruins – and with them the controversial pasts they evoke. Without delving too much into these works, it is clear that unsettled or too remote histories can be a dangerous terrain for ‘artist-historians’ and that a critical nostalgia requires more than a hasty and superficial research. Yet, perhaps the key question that underpins any discussion about nostalgia’s critical value is the following: for whom and for what is nostalgia and the nostalgic for?
III. Zineb Sedira

Lights, camera, movement
Film Praxis in Zineb Sedira’s Work
Marie Murraciole

Introduction
In a recent interview, Zineb Sedira declares, ‘In my heart, I am really a filmmaker.’ This heartfelt claim should be read as evidence that points to a precise artistic practice, in which the treatment of affects serves to tackle the construction of history. In Mother, Father and I (2003) Sedira uses film to engage with and narrate unspoken episodes from her family’s shared history. Underpinning these stories are the relations between the artist’s two countries of origin, Algeria and France, relations that have long been characterised by denial on behalf of the French of an ill-fated colonial history and a brutal war. Sedira makes films in order to explore meaning along new trajectories, and subsequently exposes them in the museum space. Her cinema is not that of experimentation with pace or with the makeup of the image, and in this sense her practice can be considered as the polar opposite of Stan Brakhage’s in his reinvention of the ‘home movie’. The artist works well within the field of reporting, and identifies the activities of producing, recording and exhibiting as articulations of a distinct praxis.

This text will seek to address the following question and its possible implications: what does the artist set in motion with her use of film in her first installations, and what are the resulting ways in which the moving image is formed?

Aphasia
In her first films, Zineb Sedira enlarges details of physical acts that she herself is producing. A Scream for Liberation (1995) paradoxically associates aphasia with eloquence through a looped shot of the artist’s own mouth which despite screaming is ultimately unable to announce nothing else than the power of her own voice. On the other hand, Autobiographical Patterns (1996) and Don’t do to her what you did to me (1998/2001) bring text into play, although through the use of handwriting that is barely legible, thus transferring meaning to the realm of the image. Autobiographical Patterns focusses on the artist’s left hand whilst she covers it in successive layers of her own handwriting, creating a palimpsest. In a reversal of the process of anamnesis, Autobiographical Patterns depicts the ‘covering’ of discourse through an act of corporeal marking.

Five years later, the clustered shots in Don’t do to her what you did to me (1998/2001) bring text into play, although through the use of handwriting that is barely legible, thus transferring meaning to the realm of the image. Autobiographical Patterns focusses on the artist’s left hand whilst she covers it in successive layers of her own handwriting, creating a palimpsest. In a reversal of the process of anamnesis, Autobiographical Patterns depicts the ‘covering’ of discourse through an act of corporeal marking.

Lights
Sedira’s subsequent films break with this intimate vocabulary characterised by dense compositions that immerse the viewer in the heart of the subject. Projection as a visual device, with the aim of displacing and throwing the spectator into powerful suggestion, is replaced by exposure in the museum space, with language as a direct target of enquiry, especially in the case of Mother Tongue. The term exposure here should not only be considered in relation to its connotations with photography, but also in its relation to theatre, where the scene d’exposition constitutes the initial scenes in which the conditions of representation in a
given play are outlined. The semantic regime as well as that of sounds permutate; something must announce itself, the text is pronounced and made public. This epistemological reversal is legitimised from the moment Sedira calls upon those she had previously been addressing, namely her close family. It can be said that the artist ‘departs’ from her family in two different ways; her approach is both rooted in them and at once contributes to distancing herself from them. The vital separation that articulates construction of the subjective is carried out through engaging the family with its own production of history, and inviting it to say what was never said.

Dispersion
This reversal is clearly at work in two video installations in which Sedira stages conversations between her family members according to classic devices belonging to documentary filmmaking. Three conversations are filmed independently of each other against a white background in Mother Tongue (2002). Their projection takes place on three flat screens or monitors in sequence, hung at eye-level in a lit space equipped with headphones, so that the images would stand side by side, but their accompanying sound would not. Sedira maintained that the room should be white, and that the screens used should be ordinary and conspicuous, so as to avoid any subjugation on behalf of the viewer.

The works reads from left to right, each screen delivering loops of a conversation in real time: Sedira, born in France, with her mother, born in Algeria (Mother and I, France); Sedira with her daughter, born in England (Daughter and I, England); and finally Grandmother and Granddaughter, Algeria. The conversations mainly revolve around issues from daily life, and switch from Arabic to English to French since the artist, and her daughter respectively speak their native language, which is not their ‘mother’ tongue - a distinction of increasing significance. Mother Tongue underlines the rifts in verbal exchanges within a given family, specifically along the matriline. The supposed continuity within the line of descent seems to collapse in the face of diasporic dispersion. On the last screen, the Arabic-speaking grandmother and her Anglophone granddaughter exchange smiles, glances and silences that act as substitute for words; the interruption of verbal dialogue does not seem to preclude mutual recognition. Identification is found outside the sharing of common language, whose absence allows its role to be filled by a vocabulary of affection rather than alienation.

Mother Tongue calls on us to consider the conditions that dictate the fluidity of expression and speech within an ordinary family, and with these, the switching between listening and misunderstanding, recognition and separation, and their dynamic interaction with the sliding between languages, emotions and feelings. This language of emotions is also that of cinema, which is enacted on its actors even before before it invites the spectator to become part of an enlarged family, now participating in a conversation with ‘strangers’. Denouncing received ideas about identity, Mother Tongue also demonstrates the limits in the idea of reproduction as self-repetition, and the obsolescence of wishing to be the same within a family or a group, but also the limits of the purity of language, or of a culture in a given country…

Synchronisation
Mother, Father and I is another video triptych, configured differently from Mother Tongue however. On one side of the exhibition space, a man and a woman sat either side of the same table occupy one screen respectively, each watching the camera. It is clear that they have been filmed at different times; their voices overlap as they speak simultaneously, the resulting sound being akin to the hubbub characteristic of family reunions.

On the third screen, which faces the other two on the other side of the room, the artist watches us, her audio muted. The style employed is one informal recording, and whilst intertitles are the only element that divide the different accounts being narrated, the layering of sound complicates the apparent simplicity and introduces different forms of dissociation. There is more than meets the eye in Mother, Father and I than it’s somewhat rudimentary title would suggest. The overlapping soundtrack openly undermine the account’s reception, although scraps of the narration do penetrate, enabling us to at least partially understand what is going on. Even the subtitles, which appear under both interlocutors, contribute to a sense of dislocation between the testimonies and what we hear of them.

The stories narrated refer to episodes from the time when Algeria emancipated itself from French domination, events that were experienced by each on opposite sides of the Mediterranean; Sedira’s father had gone to France to earn a living for his family, whilst her mother stayed in her village tending to her newborn child. Their accounts are fairly unprecedented as frank and personal recollections of a war long remembered in France as the ‘Algerian events’, which to this day remain shrouded in a deafening silence. The term was not only used in order to deny Algeria’s nationhood, but also to minimise the events and to avoid any comparison with the Second World War, in which France unequivocally presented itself as a victim.

Their stories, whether recounted in France or in Algeria, are di
vided into chapters which structure Mother, Father and I. In the first sentence he utters, the artist’s father verbally exposes the colonialists’ double standards by referring to French presence in Algeria as ‘French occupation’, a term which in France was always taken to mean German occupation of French lands. For at the very same time that France was recovering from its ‘Occupation’, it was also failing to admit that it had and was still playing the role of occupier in foreign lands where natives were not granted the same rights as the French, provoking resistance against them in many cases. The context from which this rejection of facts emerges, which remains a quintessential articulation of French public life, is shaped by what Mbembe refers to as ‘non-decolonisation’ and is masterfully evoked in Alain Resnais’ 1963 film Muriel ou le Temps d’un retour. The film traces this rejection of the war from within, amongst those who fought, through the recollection of a rape and a murder committed by ordinary French soldiers, who appear all too similar to those the artist’s mother refers to in her accounts. The main character, who is implicated in these crimes, lives in a chaotic relationship to reality and meaning the devastating effects of which is portrayed in the film.

The editing and the soundtrack of Resnais’ film portray this fracture and compellingly convey the decentering of individuals who have lost all indication of what narrative they can relate to. This devastation evokes traces from the Second World War, but also interferes with life’s consistency and details, insidiously engendering fissures between generations and in the fabric of society.

Zineb Sedira was born and grew up in France, where her mother had rejoined her father after Algerian independence, despite never supporting the occupation. In contrast to the harkis, the family was under no illusion of the fate that was reserved for them. For the artist’s generation as with others, the Algerian war did not form part of the school curriculum. What we hear in Mother, Father and I, as with the accounts of French combatants who had no desire to participate in this war, was excluded from the ‘national’ history. The artist, however, began studying at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in 1992 and it would be in England, where ‘cultural studies’ originated in the late 1950s, and where Stuart Hall’s work still played a crucial role, that Sedira came into contact with questions that would not reach French academic circles until the 1990s. She was thus exposed to the impact of postcolonial thought, and was in a position to accurately identify the deficiencies that contributed to France’s reluctant and untenable situation with regards to these issues.

This leads us to the preformative aspect of Mother, Father and I. Sedira posed questions to her parents with the aim of acquiring missing knowledge from them, and even before she then exhibits this the process constitutes a moment of familial anamnesis. Despite being shot in the same year, the interview undertaken by the artist with her mother in Retelling Histories: ma mother told me is staged in a more traditional arrangement; the two exchange and the spectator listens.

In Mother, Father and I, viewpoints and levels of understanding which had been until then inaccessible come into contact, but are never intended to come together. The work outlines the elementary triangle made up of couple-child, to the centre of which others, the spectators, are invited. Everything revolves around the ‘I’ in the title; as a marker for the individual, the word is, and as we know, also paradoxically marked by anonymity, which (troublingly) equalises the one who is speaking with the one who is listening.

The I is therefore a mental switch in the game of identification and of the positions one holds. ‘I’, of course, equally represents the author, Sedira, who is mute in the film, rather choosing to speak through the title. The intersection and superimposition of this idea of the ‘I’ that is each one of us, and the ‘I’ that is in command envelops the spectator, as does the tension between speaking up and allowing others to speak. As much as it is about history and its chaotic and distorted transmission, the work deals with a clashing of eras, languages and visions. The place of the anonymous spectator could be compared to that of the Greek chorus, at once within and without. The spectator is integrated in the representational device that exposes itself as such, offering the possibility to speak ‘off the record’.

The historical narrative that is produced through individual testimonies is not the only theme that Mother, Father and I grapples with. Her mother and father, both in space and sound, hold equivalent positions, simultaneously unravelling themselves but never synchronised. Their voices overlap but they surprisingly never cancel each other out. By levelling two positions that are not equal neither in culture nor in genre, Sedira further engages in her project of unpacking hierarchies. The daughter allows her parents to speak, reversing the traditional direction of transmission within a family.

This appeal to the family narrative is also the point of departure for the ‘disassembled movie’ of Allan Sekula’s Aeronautics Folktales (1973), in which Sekula examines a situation of political and familial crisis, linking his father’s precocious employment as an aeronautical engineer with the widespread unemployment that was beginning to engulf the United States:

Articulation
‘I felt that the only way to “account” for my politics - the only way to invite a political dialogue - was to “begin” with my own class and family background.’

Despite embodying the young student engaged in a rebellion against paternal values, Sekula is preoccupied with the wider economic circumstances that his family was struck by. He photographed his family and carried out two interviews before commenting on them. Sekula was interested, since his earliest works, in the contradictions involved in representations, as he saw in them the ability to engage us in the political and even further in the reality of our existence. For him, theatricality/staging is inherent in any documentary approach given that life itself is a stage; we are ‘staged’ by our education, our culture and we struggle between imposed roles and pre-established paths.

Montage
In Mother, Father and I, the synchronisation of different fragments is achieved by the spectator. Our own position allows us to alternate between the different interlocutors. The montage that is exhibited is not looking for to be resolved, or to be fixed; it resembles more accurately the dynamism of memory which is the first and primordial instance of a montage which is not always decipherable, characterised by cuts, lapses, ruptures, illogical splicing and the superposition of outside elements. Its movement contributes to a process of identification and if cinema imprints itself in such a dynamic way on us, it is also due to its reanimation of invisible and internal movement, offering it an external and visible equivalent. By disturbing genealogical transmission (Mother Tongue), familial order (Mother, Father and I) and the by assigning a role to the different spectators (the aforementioned ‘I’ of the artist, which is also the audience), Sedira multiplies the interstices, and therefore the connections with the external world along with a wider historical narrative that is so difficult to establish. Her resistance to hypnotic forms of cinema in the works in which it had been of highest priority is a necessary process in order for her to construct a position of resistance to all types of social withdrawal and programming of the subjective, and is constituted by a drive to research and to ‘make films’. Cinema is constantly being reinvented by the changing imperatives of life, which it in turn helps to initiate in some cases, and Sedira grasped this from very early on. This is not to say that her oeuvre is is limited to this medium, but it nonetheless represents a guiding principle whose development has strengthened her other works’ power of articulation; her photographs are often sequential and her installations ‘produce images’. Her first films are succeeded by a number of others, including And the Road Goes On (2005), a road movie about returning to Algeria, the first in a series dealing with exploration and desire. The artist has also since experimented with other forms; both with Saphir (2006), a fictional piece that uses the Mediterranean as a space of imaginary, where she multiplies the cinema shots and screens, and with the documentaries Image Keepers (2010) and Transmettre en abyme (2012). Zineb Sedira made her first films in order to initiate a conversation whose terms were obstructed by the inconsistencies in unspoken history, of disconnectedness and awkward junctions connected to a plurality of viewpoints. Emotions, in their conception as a transfer from interior to exterior, find a constructive and processual dimension in her works. The result is different acts of ventriloquy, of intercessions through dialogue and exchanges, and that are underpinned by driving the meaning to circulate, and a constant reinvention of a subjective position. Cinema is a body in motion that embeds itself in us, and in Sedira’s work it is used as a tool for self-exposure both for the one who activates it and for whoever identifies himself in the work. Her practice is rooted in an enlarged family, a community where the outsider has a place. There is no universal language, but rather a number of vernaculars. Sedira uses film as a tool for merging these in order to then connect them not only to life itself, taking us with her in the process.

Mother, Father and I (2003), Zineb Sedira
Translating Differences: An Interview with Zineb Sedira
Joseph McGonagle

A British-based artist, Zineb Sedira was born in Paris to Algerian parents in 1963. Her work, underpinned by this cross-cultural identity, has been highly autobiographical and examines themes such as cultural identity, memory, translation, language, and diaspora. Her art spans film, photography, video, and installation.

Sedira has exhibited widely across Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Her first major solo exhibition took place from January 10 to February 22, 2004, at the Cornerhouse arts and cultural center in Manchester, UK. A DVD-ROM, Telling Stories with Differences (2004), which features a selection of Sedira's video works, was issued to accompany the exhibition. Images of many of her works can also be consulted on Sedira's own Web site, http://www.zinebsedira.com. The following interview took place in London on February 26, 2004.

Joseph McGonagle (JM): Your work at the exhibition at the Cornerhouse dealt predominantly with the politics of identity, especially that of women, and women have featured heavily in your previous pieces, too. Why have you traditionally chosen to focus on women and their experiences?

Zineb Sedira (ZS): Well, I actually did my BA at Central Saint Martins in London, where I was taught by feminist artists who had practiced since the 1970s. Their practice and ideas really influenced me; hence, I became interested in the 1970s feminist art movement, which condemned the representation and objectification of women in the media and advertising. This was the starting point to my concentration on the subject in general, whatever the women’s culture or where they lived. This led me to develop my interests in the way nonwhite, black, or Arab women had been represented through orientalist imagery.

JM: Your work focuses on your mother, and on your daughter as well. Why did you decide to include them?

ZS: Initially art was for me, in some ways, therapeutic. Art helped me to exorcise emotions and ideas. I was only able to express myself through art while away from France.

JM: So was it a conscious decision to move to England then?

ZS: No, I didn’t move to England because of art. I was eighteen and wanted to visit London—learn English while partying. In France, at the time, London was seen as the happening place. Later, when I went to art college, I studied for a BA in critical fine art practice, where postcolonial studies was an important component of the course’s cultural studies element. Consequently, this program inspired my art practice.

JM: Do you think you would be doing the same work if you had stayed in France? It sounds as if your decision to leave France has proved integral to your development as an artist.

ZS: At the time, in France, it was not really possible for a Franco-Algerian to study in art colleges. Engaging in postcolonial ideas was not an option. I would like to think—that my work would be framed by my Algerian identity. Who knows, the work could have been even more political. I’m pleased I studied in London, where I learned about postcolonial issues. It’s still not part of French art education. It is here that I discovered people like Frantz Fanon and the French-Algerian writers Jacques Derrida and Heïle Cixous. I knew of Albert Camus; however, French schools do not label him as Franco-Algerian.
JM: Since we've touched on family and Algerianism, two of your works that particularly struck me were Retelling Histories (2003) and Mother, Father and I (2003), where your parents speak in great detail about their own lives and experiences. Why did you choose to film them, rather than strangers?

ZS: Those pieces were made after the Mother Tongues piece (2002), so there was this element of language and documentary I was interested in. At the time, there was much discussion in the French media about the Algerian war and particularly about October 17, 1961 [a notorious massacre in Paris by French police of up to 250 Algerian civilians who were protesting peacefully against a police curfew imposed on Algerians in Paris]. For the first time, France had agreed to put a commemorative plaque on one of the bridges in Paris where hundreds of Algerians were drowned. This led to a dispute over whether the French government should even acknowledge the massacre. I was really disappointed. It was only a small plaque, and I felt this was the least they could do. Added to that, I knew my dad had also participated in that peaceful October 1961 march, so I decided to ask him some questions about his involvement. For the first time, my father spoke about his full participation in the march, and I decided to record it. My parents were also more implicated than I had thought in the Franco-Algerian war. For example, I discovered that both my father and mother had been freedom fighters. I went back to France and began filming their stories. I wanted to do a serious piece about their contribution to the war. I didn't really know how I would present the final piece of work, but I felt an urge to listen. Equally, my parents expressed their wish to talk about it. I also wanted to circulate the interview film among my brothers and sisters because none of them knew how much my parents had suffered during colonial times. Later, my father was really proud of the film and showed the recording to other members of the family. There were a lot of tears and painful memories that resurfaced. It was very important not to lose the spontaneity of the interview so I deliberately recorded them only once. Out of the three hours of footage, the final version was edited down to twenty minutes for each of my parents. When editing, I realized the way the questions had been asked weren't how I would have wished. I decided to remove the sound of my voice and instead include myself listening visually to my parents. The final piece is a three-screen video installation and is titled Mother, Father and I (fig. 1). It works well as a triangle and continues my fixation with triptychs.

JM: Did you actually film yourself listening to these stories?

ZS: Yes. In fact, I filmed myself watching the video. I wanted to record my reactions to my parents’ narratives. I’m very pleased with the final version. Although I've moved on now from this type of work, I think it’s a successful piece. Retelling Histories happened at the same time as Mother, Father and I; however, Retelling Histories presents the Algerian war from a woman’s position. The languages and interview format used in the video strengthen the work. I ask questions using the colonizer’s language, French, and my mother answers in the colonized’s indigenous language, the Algerian dialect. Both languages are also heard in Mother, Father and I. There my father converses in a mixture of French and Algerian, while my mother speaks her native tongue throughout, as she was a housewife in France and remained less exposed to French than my father, who worked outside the home. Again, in Mother, Father and I the two languages, French and Arabic, work well together.

JM: When your films and videos are projected in exhibitions, do you specify size of screen, and so forth?

ZS: Yes, I do. At the Cornerhouse, it was the first time Mother, Father and I was shown in such large scale. Usually the piece is exhibited in a much smaller, more intimate space. The Cornerhouse’s top gallery was in fact too large.

JM: Examples of testimony recur throughout your work. I recently read a review in the Guardian newspaper by a reviewer who praised your work but felt that it was more testimonial than art itself (Hickling 2004). How would you respond?

ZS: Many video artists make testimonial work, although it’s often seen as documentary art video. The question often asked is whether the work can be considered contemporary art. Is political work art? Or should politics only be referred to in TV news, documentaries, or newspapers? Many of these documentary art films are produced by artists from countries that are at war or that are undergoing significant political struggle. The work—although mimicking conventional documentary style—reinforces these issues in a more poetic and philosophical way. To return to your comment, yes, my work is testimonial, and it should be accepted as art.
IV. Workbook

This workbook aims to inspire the teachers and participants of various age groups to appropriate the visit and the problematics of the work to activate knowledge acquisition. This can in turn transform some academic disciplines into a more lively practice that can build links between diverse topics and subjects.

The following exercises have been designed to be adapted for students and participants of multiple age groups and backgrounds. This workbook encourages critical learning and self-reflection through experimentation with artistic production, and treats the following exercises as tools for both long-term teaching methods that can pool into each other and as individual teaching exercises. We encourage the mindful use of varied materials and both short and long terms of teaching for these exercises, as multimedia artists consider form and format as focal facets of their works.

The exercises aim to initiate conversations and encourage methods of critical research around the artists and artworks exhibited at the Beirut Art Center. They are produced alongside the exhibitions of Joachim Koester and Zineb Sedira to provide participants with the means to engage and conceptualize the artworks in relation to their surroundings and contexts through artistic production. In their distinct approaches, Koester and Sedira mediate the intersections of history, memory, and space through story-telling, performance, and transmission. This documentation directs students to position themselves within the historical and the imaginary to explore contradictions that arise within these narratives in order to rearticulate the past and present.
1. The (de)Construction of Meaning

Zineb Sedira’s artistic production, through photographs, sculptures, and video installations, involves an interrogation of recent history, memory, and identity. With the oral and visual transmission of personal, collective, and global narratives, she reveals the innate complexities that exist within these accounts. In Sedira’s *Sugar Surfaces* (2013), she documents a sugar silo in France’s Port of Marseille. By centralizing the layered residues of sugar that create stratified and seemingly abstract, imprinted murals in *Sugar Surfaces* (2013), Sedira compels an inquiry of the stories and histories ossified from within, unraveling accounts of industrialization, trade, development, as well as stories of human migration and labor, all of which are not evidently transmitted through the images themselves. Sedira’s practice positions the spectator as an inquirer, who is spurred to look within and beyond the image as a layered site of conflict, contradiction, and multitude, and thus, of meaning.

**Aims**

Roland Barthes acknowledges the «polysemic» character of an image, the existence of a «floating chain of significance, underlying the signified;” for Allan Sekula, it is only through embedding the image in a concrete discourse situation that the piece can yield a clear semantic outcome.” However, an image without an openly embedded discourse or description can also make room for a multitude of understandings and inferences. Roland Barthes’ conception of the photograph is, overall, a message that within it carries a paradox of two messages: one denoted and the other connoted. In this duality, ‘imitative’ arts encompass these two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogous reality that immediately defines the photograph, and a connoted message, which here is the plane of content that emerges on the basis of the denoted message without a code and is the manner in which it is perceived, received, and deciphered by society. In this exercise, students will explore a narrative or account through visual mediums and examine the infinite possibilities of the construction or distortion of meaning within an image. In the process of developing their works, the students will explore various elements of signification which can include object-relation, as in Lamia Joreige’s work, or can take on the form of falsification, as in the historical image of Tydings and Browder. Through this process, students will give their own accounts new meanings. In the presentation of their works, the students will participate in a discussion around their pieces among their peers, who, at the point of reception, will take on the roles of inquirers. It is in these discussions that the students can grasp to the potentialities of new perspectives and alternate modes of understanding their particular stories among those who are unaware of the exact significance.

This exercise can be adapted to any time span; we suggest this specific exercise be done individually so that each participant can engage with different works and stories that are not their own. By the end of the exercise, students should participate in group discussions around each work to facilitate a transmission of divergent understandings and interrogations of what was recounted or be imagined.

**Materials**

Depending on preference and significance, students are encouraged to explore visual mediums, such as photography, video and sound recording, and collage.

**Exercise**

For Barthes, the photograph appears as the only structure constituted and occupied by a ‘denoted’ message, to the extent that the analogical plentitude within a photograph intervenes within a description of a photograph: to describe consists precisely in joining to the denoted message a second-order message derived from a code of language, constituting the relation between the photographic analogue and a connotative description which signifies something different than what is shown. In this vein, the photograph is not simply a product or a channel but is also “an object endowed with a structural autonomy ” that is in communication with the structure language. For this exercise, students will explore a contentious relation between the photographic structures that denote and connote the messages within an image. Students will be asked to choose a narrative, account, or story and create an image that, rather than transmitting the account, distorts, obscures and changes its meaning.

Students will examine a story or account belonging to them, to others, or to history. On the basis of this account, students will visually complicate the narrative. In a method of their choice, the students will distort the image, thus giving it a new meaning. How, then, do modes of representation displace meaning and affect what is understood in a captured image?
In the articulation of their chosen account, we encourage they keep in mind the following questions:

- What is the story or account you want to explore?
- What is the historical context within which this account took place?
- What is missing in your knowledge?
- What do you need to complete or investigate? Whom can you talk with?
- What are the subtle representational aspects of the account?
- How is this account remembered, between the past and the present?
- Are there variations, tensions, or inconsistencies within this account?
- Does this account relate to different, general phenomenons (connecting the particular personal to what can be extended beyond that specificity)?

In asking these questions, the students should be prompted to keep in mind that within the stories shared exists an inherent complexity, an arena of disparate perspectives and conflicting narratives, as well as layers that transgresses the personal account into a broader web of historical contexts. The question of memory and perception are central to both establishing the narrative and distorting it.

Once the students formulate a story or account to explore, the students should then choose a mode of representation to utilize as a vehicle for telling the fractured and fragmented accounts they choose to share and in turn contorting and potentially falsifying it. Students will play on elements of signification to make room for new meanings within images that signify or distort a particular narrative. This can be done by falsifying an image in order to misrepresent its narrative, subtly tampering with an image obscure its meaning, giving objects captured within the image a signification that changes their specialized purpose, or exploiting the tensions between text and image by constructing subtitles that are unrelated to the images they are said to represent.

For reference to a potential method of modification, students can look to the 1951 photograph of anti-Communist American Senator Millard Tydings and Communist leader Earl Browder that was distributed by Tydings’ political opposer, Senator Joseph McCarthy.

This image was faked and artificially-created by merging a photo of Tydings listening to the radio in 1938 and of Browder delivering a speech in 1940.
This image’s significance lies in the intervention it makes within the construction of meaning, both denoted and connoted. With its historical significance, having been published during a contentious sequence between the United States and the Soviet Union. What credibility is the image itself given to how it is objectively and immediately perceived? How does this modified image relate to the actual meaning of the discourse embedded within its specific, historical context? How does the modified image change what could be understood? Does the tampered image give autonomy to a new meaning, one that does not exist in the original forms of the initial images?

In another possible method, students can alternatively choose to depict their given narrative or account through a series of subtitled images. In one approach, students can represent their narratives as they are through the images and in turn alter the perceived meaning through subtitle text that misinterprets what is being represented. In another approach, students can transmit their narrative through text but represent an alternate meaning through image.

In the final activity of this exercise, students should be encouraged to present their works to the class in an effort to position their peers as spectators of inquiry. The absence of a transparent significance within each work will facilitate a context for extrapolating fractured, opposing, or manipulated meanings and understandings. Discussions among the students around the images and narratives they produce will unearth a hinterland of meaning, revealing the complexities of visual transfers of information and the system of infinite referrals and deferrals internalized in the discourse itself.

**Conclusion**

In granting space for ambiguity and distortion within their works, students can play with the tensions that exist within the telling of a story. In the absence of explicit meaning, students will be compelled to explore the possibilities of meaning through a process of inquiry that necessitates skepticism in what is captured and what is told. Through discussion, students can enter into a system of exchange of information and knowledge, while recognizing the multitude of tensions that exist within each potential narrative and image.

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*Sugar Surfaces (2013)*, Zineb Sedira
2. Reimagining the Past, Constructing the Future

In Sedira’s video installations Tracer un territoire (2016) and Les terres de mon père (2016), Sedira traces territory as a way of revealing personal and collective histories that engage with the politics of space. “Of Words and Stones” directly relates the relationship between language, identity, and territory, between the transmission of stories and the demarcation landscape, space, and borders. Sedira’s pieces exhibit a dimension Walter Benjamin’s “prophetic corners”, in which “seemingly empty spaces in which otherwise occluded dimensions of history become recognizable”, as their use of the surroundings is infused with a dense tissue of personal and collective narratives, histories, and memories.

Aims
The aim of this exercise is to investigate the significance of territory as a place that allows for the summoning of histories and narratives. In their conceptual process, students will investigate a space not limited to their natural surroundings (for instance, they can explore a space from memory or a space that does not evoke their own particular personal histories or narratives or cull a image from the media or an archive). With investigation into the space, students will spot a limited narrative and reconstruct how the space and the history of the accounts it holds could potentially look in the future.

This exercise prompts students to interrogate space, to question its diverse and contradictory role in the creation and erasure of narratives and histories that existed within it, and to imagine a future for the space. Here, students will be able to go beyond the particular place, reimagining and reconstructing space and, with it, the narratives that it holds.

Materials
Depending on preference and significance, students are encouraged to explore visual mediums, such as photography, video and sound recording, and collage.

Exercise
In this exercise, the students will be given several tasks that will allow them to consider a space, examine the ways in which it elicits the telling or forgetting of the narratives and histories that exist within it, and intervene in how the space is imagined and how the narratives are contained or dispersed through it. This space does not have to belong specifically to their own personal histories and narratives.

In choosing a space, the students should consider the following questions: What is the territory explored? Who is this space for? Historically, how has this territory changed over time? How does this territory in the present? Are there particularities that belong to this territory? How are narratives and histories embraced within it? Are there ways to reimagine or reconstruct the space? How does the reconstructing of the space alter the histories and narratives that exist within it?

After identifying the answers to the questions, the students will then choose an account to explore that exists or existed within the territory. The questions to be considered are the following: What is the relationship between the account (historical, personal, collective) and the space? What is the role of territory in the telling of the account? Through what means can the accounts be expressed? Is the territory central to the telling of these accounts? Is the particularity of the space significant to the telling of the account? What is the function of memory in the imagination of the space? Does memory distort the space? What is the relation time, the body, and memory with the territory chosen? Can this space be reimagined or reconstructed altogether? Does the restructuring of territory alter the telling of the account? If so, how?

Once students examine and assess the role territory has in the telling or remembering of history and personal and collective narratives, students will then choose how they would like to position the role of territory in the telling of their accounts. There are many artists who have also explored territory in relation to history and personal and collective narratives. Through the works of the following artists, we can see how space itself holds fragments of stories and is fractured by time. This can leave openings for the reimagining of space or the dislocation of its physicality altogether. Wafa Hourani, Hrair Sarkissian, Larissa Sansour explore the re-imagining of territory and the ways in which it grounds itself in truth but also provides an alternative reality to what indeed exists.
Zineb Sedira uses two different methods to capture the narratives and stories that exist within territory. In *Tracer un territoire (Tracing a territory)* (2016), Sedira engages with territory spatially, as her father silently traces his land by foot, evoking the physicality of space and the interiority of the significance of his surroundings. In this work, this divide is mediated by the movement through the territory. Sedira’s cinematographic capturing of this movement visualizes the vastness of the land subsuming her father. Her father’s physical movement through the space relates to the mapping of nostalgia, experience, memory held within him for his homeland. In *Les terres de mon père (My father’s land)* (2016), Sedira engages with the relation between her father, his internal memory and nostalgia, and the physical territory of his homeland differently. In silence, her father traces his land and farm and inspects where his home once stood. Moments of rupture, this silence is broken; her father recounts “the farm [that] is reduced to rubble”, destroyed, remembering that once they “picked up stone to build a room” that is now physically lost in debris. Here, she utilizes language to recall a space that no longer exists, reimagining the territory and grounding it in her father’s memory of what once was. This oral transmission plays an important role, as it is summoned through the physicality of space but unpacks a family history that is embedded in a harrowing history of French colonization in Algeria.

Hrair Sarkissian reveals in his series *Execution Squares* (2008), the way in which location can subsume a violent, collective history. In these series of photographs, Sarkissian captures public execution squares in Aleppo, Lattakia, and Damascus. These images, taken at a time of day where the streets are empty and the sun is soft, unsettles the image and its seeming beauty. Here, Sarkissian uses photography all-at-once obscure the social reality of Syria’s violent political history, while revealing that these spaces, still inhabited by people, carry with them a history that lies quietly under the surface. He reveals a loss of memory within space, a forgetfulness of histories and a paradox that exists between the beauty and constancy of the physical environment and the political and social realities they obscure.
Sarkissian engages with location differently in his video installation *Homesick* (2014), as he imagines a possible reality in which the replica of his parents’ apartment building in Damascus destroyed. This specific site, his childhood home, is a vessel for his memories, identity, and history, and one that invokes a fear of loss, of violence, of displacement. Sarkissian takes on the role of the destroyed, as he takes a sledgehammer to the model, demolishing it slowly as it crumbles in stages. The telling of the narrative belonging to this location is one that is through the process of its reimagination and destruction. Since the video was recorded, Sarkissian’s family home was bombarded four times.
The reimagining of territory is one that Larissa Sansour engages with through the realm of science fiction. The project contains a short film and a series of photos of a dystopian yet creative approach to the political conditions in Palestine. It engages with the reconstruction of Palestine vertically in a singular high-rise, the Nation Estate, as a solution to Palestinian national struggle. In this imaginary, the whole Palestinian population is housed in this colossal skyscraper in which each floor belongs to different city, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, etc. Through this reimagining of Palestine and the play between reality and fiction, Sansour is able to engage with the history of Palestine under Israeli occupation in a different lens. While the symbols of national identity are preserved on each story and in the lobbies, she maintains a dystopic sterility and ignites the political reality of securitization even within the imaginary through security checks in the elevators.
Similar to both Sarkissian and Sansour, Wafa Hourani recreates a Palestinian refugee camp 100 years after 1967 and 1987. Qalandia, named after one of the most infamous checkpoints in which thousands of Palestinians cross through to travel into Jerusalem, is a physical location that constitutes a site of violence and oppression. Wafa reimagines this space, exploring the possibilities of social, political, and economic imaginations while considering the historical context of occupation. He reimagines Qalandia 100 years after The Nakba of 1947 (Qalandia 2047, 2006), 100 years after The Naksa of 1967 (Qalandia 2067, 2008), and 100 years after the first Intifada (Qalandia 2087, 2009). Hourani considers the violent histories of these places, but transforms them into a future of possibility. Built from cardboard boxes, recyclable materials, and archival photographs, Hourani pays close attention to the subtleties of daily life and the reimagining of political and social realities, depicting graffiti on the walls, clothes hung to dry, and children playing in the streets; constructing a mirror facade to replace the wall that originally divided space between the checkpoint and refugee camp; and reclaiming the Qalandia airport as a civil airport from its usurpation as a military airport during the Israeli occupation. Hourani engages with territory and location to extract collective histories, not merely from the past, but well into the future.

With these various artistic approaches in mind, students should choose a mode of relating space and narrative and the effects space has on the story told, necessitating an intervention that reimagines and reconstructs space in order to tell the story differently.

**Conclusion**

With the completion of this exercise, students will have intervened in the relationship between territory and narrative, interrogating the ways in which space fragments narratives and is itself fractured by time. This exercise reveals space as not only a basis for memory, absence, and nostalgia, but for the potentialities of reimagining and reconstructing the space and, in turn, rewriting of the narratives it holds.
3. Performing Life

Historically, ritual and performance emerged in relation to changes in social conditions and in the context of crisis, acting as a unifying social force and a sense of individual being. Together, they have various functions and methods of procedure that are adapted to necessity and that, in turn, develop according to and in circumstance and conjuncture. For Bataille, ritual affirms the social body for the individual and unifies within it a sense of being that carries both a social and individual reality. In Koester’s work, this dual concept of the individual and collective reality of being is intervened, as these liminal realities coalesce within and across the body as a third space and as a transmitter of knowledge and experience through movement, mantra, and trance. Researching extensively on the experimental theater director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski and inspired by his director experiments, Koester invokes the body as a channel and tool to identify, channel, and reconnect with present moments and forgotten histories. Rituals are a central study for Koester, necessitating an examination of performance in relation to body and space, the individual and the social, the past and the present, the concealed and the revealed.

Aims

In this exercise, students will be asked to perform a response or understanding of a personal, collective, or historical account. The performance of this method will vary, as performance art is in itself interdisciplinary, containing many methods and incorporating elements of time, space, body, sound, and presence. In its own practice, performance qualitatively differs, being at times scripted or improvised, planned or spontaneous, and the effects of actions on both the performer and the audience.

The aims of this exercise is to compel students to systematically research an account they would like to examine, this can be mundane, as an everyday interaction, or historical or contemporary, as a conflict, crisis, or trend. Upon choosing and assessing a subject to examine, students will then determine a response through the various elements of performance and mediums of expression, one that will communicate their account to an audience. We encourage larger groups for this exercise, although it can also be done on an individual basis as well. Within a group, students must determine and decide the function of each individual in their role of performance.

This exercise can be adapted to any time span and should involve an element of collective discussion, so as to reveal the similarities and differences in the production of the students’ performances. Additionally, a week of reflection is encouraged for reflection on their research and method of performance.

Materials

Performance art emerged as a deviation from traditional mediums of art, such as painting. We encourage that students explore either live or recorded performance situation the body, movement, sound, and space as a means of transmission. We encourage written reflections and open discussion throughout this activity.

Exercise

With this exercise, students, working as a group or individually, will first choose the account they would like to examine. The performances will be unique to each student and specific to the concerns they choose to explore. In choosing, they should then reveal why they wish to examine this account, be it a commentary on the automation of modern life (The Place of Dead Roads, Koester), a mundane interaction (Jewel, Khan), or a crisis (Contingency, And yet my mask is powerful, Abbas/Abou-Rahme). How can performance, given its elements in mythical and ritualistic practice, induce a theatrical representation of this given account? How can the students communicate their accounts, without an explicit telling of them, while engaging all their senses? What ways can the body, movement, and sound induce the transmission of the account?

Afterwards, students should document their research on the subject. This research can be done through sketches, observational notes, or through academic research. The students should discuss their research and compose a reflection upon the close examination of their studies. In self-reflection, students can privately write about their work, initial plans and conceptions, clarification of their approach, and a recording of the responses and new potential directions to explore.

Once decided, the students should then choreograph a performance in which the account they examined is told through different senses. The process of performing an account must bear in mind the decisions within the performance that involve script or improvisation, planned or spontaneous action, the role of language, chronology, space, sound, and the immediacy of impact on the performer and the audience. With their approach, students should examine the significance of sound, movement, time, and space in their performances.

Upon creating a performance, the students will then share it with the class. After each performance, we encourage a discussion that can reveal the impacts and understandings of what was staged. The performances can be recorded on video or could be live-renditions; the significance in form depends on the student’s method.
In Koester’s video installation and performative piece The Place of Dead Roads (2015), a man and three women, who are dressed in western garb, are taken by a force that drives them to dance in mechanical ways. This piece, which is a commentary on automation of modern life positioning humans as cogs in a giant machine, is one that can be taken with Koester’s other pieces: Body Electric (2014), a intricate study of the movement of a movie projector, and Of Spirits and Empty Spaces (2013), which describes a seance of a 19th century spiritist group who, as individuals, act collectively as though their bodies form the parts of a sewing machine while a commentary is spoken to describe in detail the movement of the machine.

This exercise can be adapted to any time span and should involve an element of collective discussion, so as to reveal the similarities and differences in the production of the students’ performances. Additionally, a week of reflection is encouraged for reflection on their research and method of performance.
Similar to Koester’s use of body and movement to unravel individual and collective commentary, Khan combines music and dance as a form of language in Jewel (2012). This performative piece is derived from Khan’s distant memory of a usual interaction between two individuals in the souk, yet unravels new modes of communication and transmission, and new forms of language. Khan centralizes the speaker in the piece as a cultural and technological transmitter through music and sound which in turn bring the men into movement, as if they are communicating through trance. Khan produces a “parallel experience where culture could emerge free from its relation to the real world. In this way, the cultural artifact — from clothing, to music, to poetry — is put in a position where the public can interact with it on its own terms and drawing its own connections”.

In Contingency (2010), Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme reveal the violent histories of the securitization of space and the militarization of borders and checkpoints in occupied Palestine through chaotic sound and its effect on the body. They recognize the ways in which visuality has failed to potently capture the experience of violence in these spaces. In documenting a time of crisis, this mode of performance does not engage with visuality, but rather makes real the immateriality of sound, revealing the sonic fabric of the colonial structure which enters the body and evokes a “violence and power audible in sound”. For Abbas and Abou-Rahme, repeated language through LED lights deals with language, but not without sound, as they constitute sound as a language in itself. In this form of performance, the relation between histories and narratives transmitted is encapsulated between the body and what is audibly heard.
In Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s video installation, And yet my mask is powerful (2016), a group of youth visit the site of a destroyed Palestinian village wearing 3D-printed Neolithic masks that were historically uncovered in the West Bank and extracted by the artists from digitized photographs from a private Israeli collection. The video contains text transposed in both English and Arabic from Adrienne Rich’s Diving into the Wreck (1972), forgoing its metaphors, so as to evoke not a sense of wreckage, but of the wreck itself. The subjects in the video engage in a mythical and ritualistic form of procession and discovery, entering into a liminal space that fragments time in order to characterize a historical crisis in a contemporary moment and possess the space.

Conclusion
Through this exercise, students will explore the various facets of performance that necessitates a process of individual and social understanding and a culmination of responses to the tensions, contradictions, and nuances that exist through movement. This exercise will engage the existential and social levels of being through the use of the body, of sound, or of movement as a mode of articulation of personal, collective, or historical accounts.
V. Biography

Zineb Sedira

Zineb Sedira was born in Paris, France to Algerian parents in 1963. She currently lives and works between London, Algiers, and Paris. Sedira holds a BA in critical Fine Art Practice from Central Saint-Martins School of Art, London (1995) and an MFA in Media from the Slade School of Art, London (1997). She additionally pursued studies in photography at the Royal College of Art, London (1998-2003). In 2011 she founded aria, an artist residency program in Algiers. She was nominated for the Prix Marcel Duchamp (2015) and was also the recipient of the SAM Art Prize, Paris (2009) and Decibel Award, Arts Council, London (2004). With work ranging from videos to photography, sculpture and installations, Zineb Sedira explores issues of gender, language, national identity and migration, often in an autobiographical context. Her re-reading of arab and western culture challenges identity stereotypes as well as cultural and aesthetic expectations.

Joachim Koester

Joachim Koester is a Danish artist born on 1962 in Copenhagen. He graduated of the Royal Danish Academy of Art in his native city in 1993. Starting in the mid-1990s, he developed an oeuvre that could be described as a complex web in which journalistic and historical research fuses with personal and fictive narratives. Koester is preoccupied with the unknown, the unseen, and the forgotten. balancing the thin line between documentary and fiction, Koester’s films, photos, and installations reexamine and activate forgotten histories, failed utopias, and the obsolete.
The Cruel Practice of Art
Georges Bataille, 1949

The painter is condemned to please. By no means can he transform a painting into an object of aversion. The purpose of a scarecrow is to frighten birds from the field where it is planted, but the most terrifying painting is there to attract visitors. Actual torture can also be interesting, but in general that can’t be considered its purpose. Torture takes place for a variety of reasons. In principle its purpose differs little from that of the scarecrow: unlike art, it is offered to sight in order to repel us from the horror it puts on display. The painted torture, conversely, does not attempt to reform us. Art never takes on itself the work of the judge. It does not interest us in some horror for its own sake: that is not even imaginable. (It is true that in the Middle Ages religious imagery did this for hell, but that is precisely because art was hardly separable from education.) When horror is subject to the transfiguration of an authentic art, it becomes a pleasure, an intense pleasure, but a pleasure all the same. To see in this paradox the mere effect of a sexual vice would be vain.

It is with a sort of mute, inevitable, inexplicable determination, like that in dreams, that the fascinating specters of misery and pain have always lurked among the background figures in this carnival of a world. No doubt art does not have the same essential meaning as the carnival and yet, in each, a part has always been reserved for that which seems the very opposite of pleasure and amusement. Art may have finally liberated itself from the service of religion, but it maintains its servitude with regard to horror. It remains open to the representation of that which repulses.

This paradox of the carnival — which in the most general sense is the paradox of emotion, but in the most specific sense is the paradox of sacrifice — ought to be considered with the most critical attention. As children, we have all suspected it: perhaps we are all, moving strangely beneath the sky, victims of a trap, a joke whose secret we will one day know. This reaction is certainly infantile and we turn away from it, living in a world imposed on us as though it were “perfectly natural,” quite different from the one that used to exasperate us. As children, we did not know if we were going to laugh or cry but, as adults, we “possess” this world, we make endless use of it, it is made of intelligible and utilizable objects. It is made of earth, stone, wood, plants, animals. We work the earth, we build houses, we eat bread and wine. We have forgotten, out of habit, our childish apprehensions. In a word, we have ceased to mistrust ourselves.

Only a few of us, amid the great fabrications of society, hang on to our really childish reactions, still wonder naively what we are doing on the earth and what sort of joke is being played on us. We want to decipher skies and paintings, go behind these starry backgrounds or these painted canvases and, like kids trying to find a gap in a fence, try to look through the cracks in the world. One of these cracks is the cruel custom of sacrifice.

It is true that sacrifice is no longer a living institution, though it remains rather like a trace on a streaky window. But it is possible for us to experience the emotion it aroused, for the myths of sacrifice are like the themes of tragedy, and the Crucifixion keeps the image of sacrifice before us like a symbol offered to the most elevated reflections, and also as the most divine expression of the cruelty of art. However, sacrifice is not only this repeated image to which European civilization has given a sovereign value; it is the response to a secular obsession among all the peoples of the globe. Indeed, if there is any truth to the idea that human life is a trap, can we think — it’s strange, but so what? — that, since torture is “universally offered to us as the bait,” reflecting on its fascination may enable us to discover what we are and to discover a higher world whose perspectives exceed the trap?

The image of sacrifice is imposed on our reflection so necessarily that, having passed the time when art was mere diversion or when religion alone responded to the desire to enter into the depths of things, we perceive that modern painting has ceased to offer us indifferent or merely pretty images, that it is anxious to make the world “transpire” on canvas. Apollinaire once claimed that cubism was a great religious art, and his dream has not been lost. Modern painting prolongs the repeated obsession with the sacrificial image in which the destruction of objects responds, in a manner already half-conscious, to the enduring function of religions. Caught in the trap of life, man is moved by a field of attraction determined by a flash point where solid forms are destroyed, where the various objects that constitute the world are consumed as in a furnace of light. In truth, the character of current painting — destruction, apocalypse of objects — is not put clearly into relief, is not highlighted in the lineage of sacrifice. Yet, what the surrealist painter wishes to see on the canvas where he assembles his images does not differ fundamentally from what the Aztec crowd came to see at the base of a pyramid where a victim’s heart was to be torn out. In either case the flash of destruction is anticipated. Doubtless we do not see cruelty when we envision modern artworks, but on the whole the Aztecs were not cruel either. Or what leads us astray is the too simple idea we have of cruelty. Generally we call cruelty that which we

VI. Additional Readings
call cruelty that which we do not have the heart to endure, while that
to refrain from cruelty we deny it as soon as it is ours. Such weak-
teses suppress nothing but make it a difficult task for anyone who
seeks in these byways the hidden movement of the human heart.

The fact of sexual vice does not simplify this task. In effect, vice
turns common sense upside-down, and he who admits himself to
be vicious abides by stigmatizing terms of horror. The Aztec
would have denied the cruelty of sacred murders committed by
the thousands. Conversely, the sadist delights in telling him-
self and repeating to himself that flagellation is cruel. I do not
have the same reasons for using this word, cruelty. I use it to
be clear. I disapprove of nothing, I am merely anxious to show
the underlying meaning. In a sense, this meaning is not cruel:
had it believed itself cruel, it would have to cease to be — the
practice of sacrifice disappeared as men became more conscious
— though all the same it would have remained a desire to destroy.

In truth, it is only a moderate desire. As is our wont (our cus-
tom, our strength), we only like to destroy covertly, we impugn
terrible and ruinous destructions, at least those that appear
to us as such. We are content to be little aware of destroying.

Thus far I have demonstrated that the flash of destruction is,
in the trap of life, the bait which does not fail to entice us.
But the trap is not reducible to the bait. It supposes not only
the hand that places it but the end pursued. What happens
to someone who takes the bait? What are, for the individual
who gives into fascination, the consequences of his weakness?

In principle this leads to a prior question, wherein lies the es-
ence of my research. It does not suffice to observe that we
are generally fascinated by any destruction which does not
present too grave a danger. Rather, what are our reasons for
being seduced by the very thing that, in a fundamental fash-
ion, signifies damage to us, the very thing that even has the
power to evoke the more complete loss we undergo in death?

That pleasure alone leads us to the point where destruction
takes place is understood. We enter the trap only of our own free
will. But we could imagine a priori that the bait ought to have
the opposite effect, that it ought to have nothing that terrifies.

In truth, the question posed by the nature of the bait does
not differ from that of the purpose of the trap. The enigma of
sacrifice — the decisive enigma — is tied to our desire to find
what a child seeks when seized by a sense of absurdity. What
bothers the child and suddenly changes him into a whirligig is the
desire to obtain, beyond the world of appearances, the answer
to a question he would be unable to formulate. He thinks that
perhaps he is the son of a king, but the son of a king is nothing.
Then he thinks wisely that perhaps he is God: this would be
the resolution of the enigma. The child, it goes without saying,
peaks of this to no one. He would feel ridiculous in a world
where every object reinforces the image of his own limits, where
he recognizes how small and “separate” he is. But he thirsts
precisely for no longer being “separate,” and it is only no longer
being “separate” that would give him the sense of resolution
without which he founders. The narrow prison of being “sepa-
rate,” of existence separated like an object, gives him the feeling
of absurdity, exile, of being subject to a ridiculous conspiracy.
The child would not be surprised to wake up as God, who for
a time would put himself to the test, so that the imposture of
his small position would be suddenly revealed. Henceforth the
child, if only for a weak moment, remains with his forehead
pressed to the window, waiting for his moment of illumination.

It is to this wait that the bait of sacrifice responds. What we
have been waiting for all our lives is this disordering of the
order that suffocates us. Some object should be destroyed in
this disordering (destroyed as an object and, if possible, as
something “separate”). We gravitate to the negation of that
limit of death, which fascinates like light. For the disordering
of the object — the destruction — is only worthwhile insofar as it
disorders us, insofar as it disorders the subject at the same time.
We cannot ourselves (the subject) directly lift the obstacle that
“separates” us. But we can, if we lift the obstacle that separates
the object (the victim of the sacrifice), participate in this denial
of all separation. What attracts us in the destroyed object (in the
very moment of destruction) is its power to call into question
— and to undermine — the solidity of the subject. Thus the
purpose of the trap is to destroy us as an object (insofar as we
remain enclosed — and fooled — in our enigmatic isolation).

Thus our ruin, when the trap is opened (the ruin at least of our
separate existence, of this isolated entity, negator of its like-
nesses), is the very opposite of anguish, which relentlessly and
egotistically pursues the debts and credits of any entity resolved
to persevere in its being. Under such conditions there emerges
the most striking contradiction, interior to each person. On one
hand, the various objects of this world offer themselves to anguish as the bait, but in a sense contrary to that of sacrifice: here we are caught in the trap of a small and separate reality, exiled from truth (insofar as the word refers not to a narrow horizon but to the absence of limits). On the other hand, sacrifice promises us the trap of death, for the destruction rendered unto the object has no sense other than the menace that it has for the subject. If the subject is not truly destroyed, everything remains in ambiguity. And if it is destroyed the ambiguity is resolved, but only in a nothingness that abolishes everything.

Yet it is from this double bind that the very meaning of art emerges — for art, which puts us on the path of complete destruction and suspends us there for a time, offers us ravishment without death. Of course, this ravishment could be the most inescapable trap — if we manage to attain it, although strictly speaking it escapes us at the very instant that we attain it. Here or there, we enter into death or return to our little worlds. But the endless carnival of artworks is there to show that a triumph — in spite of a firm resolve to value nothing but that which endures — is promised to anyone who leaps out of the irresolution of the instant. This is why it is impossible to pay too much interest in excessive drunkenness, which penetrates the opacity of the world with those gratuitously cruel flashes in which seduction is tied to massacre, torture, and horror.

This is not an apology for horrible things. It is not a call for their return. But in this inexplicable impasse where we move in vain, these irruptions — which are only seemingly promises of resolution, which in the end promise us nothing but to be caught in the trap — contain all the truth of emotion in the instant of ravishment. That is, emotion, if the sense of life is inscribed therein, cannot be subordinated to any useful end. Thus the paradox of emotion is that it wants to have much more sense than it does have. Emotion that is not tied to the opening of a horizon but to some nearby object, emotion within the limits of reason only offers us a compressed life. Burdened by our lost truth, the cry of emotion rises out of disorder, such as it might be imagined by the child contrasting the window of his bedroom to the depths of the night. Art, no doubt, is not restricted to the representation of horror, but its movement puts art without harm at the height of the worst and, reciprocally, the painting of horror reveals the opening onto all possibility. That is why we must linger in the shadows which art acquires in the vicinity of death.

If, cruel, it does not invite us to die in ravishment, art at least has the virtue of putting a moment of our happiness on a plane equal to death.
Perspectives on the Relation between History and Fiction
Olivia Chirobocea

1. Introduction: Up until the 19th century, history was a blend of fact and fiction, myth and reality, while the study of history was more an art than a science. History generally meant major events such as wars or revolutions and insisted on important rulers, glorifying founding legends in an attempt to instill patriotism and legitimize identity. Historians usually left out what they considered minor events, inconsequential people or unimportant social concerns. History was considered a form of art and the ornaments of the medieval history books come as evidence.

In Ancient times, the writing of history was a mixture of fact and fiction with prominent references to divine intervention. An example is the writings about the Trojan War or the founding of Rome. However, the ancient Greeks (Thucydides) were also the first to propose a historical method that looked at cause and effect rather than divine intervention. They also regarded history as cyclical, with recurring events. However, the Middle Ages and Renaissance returned to the religious perspective, with Saint Augustine as an influential promoter of this approach.

The 19th century, through the works of the German philosopher and historian Friedrich Hegel, brought a secular approach in the study of history. History became queen of the social sciences, a position justified by the strong influence of ideologies (rooted in history, in the past), which played an important role until well into the 20th century (communism, Nazism) and the emancipation and formation of the modern nations (also justified by their past). The 19th century reorganized and reformulated the concept of history which was theorized for the first time and for which a scientific method was proposed (White 2006: 25). It was also the moment when history was divorced from the literary fiction (novels) as literature became history’s other in a double sense: it pretended to have discovered a dimension of reality that historians would never recognize and it developed techniques of writing that undermined the authority of history’s favored realistic or plain style of writing (White 2006: 25).

The 20th century marked a major change of perspective on history as many historians discovered the necessity for an interdisciplinary approach in order to broaden the image, fill in the gaps and understand the past better. Thus, history ramified into various branches such as cultural history (Annales School), psychohistory, social history (or History of Everyday Life) and others. Also, history was interpreted from different points of view as the idea of multiple histories became prominent. Thus, Marxists interpreted history from the point of view of economic resources, Feminists sought to make woman visible in the past by studying the female experience, while postmodernists challenged the validity and need for the study of history based on interpretation of sources. The importance of history in the 20th century subsided considerably as people no longer felt the need to justify their identity in the past and live more in the present. This shift made theorists such as Francis Fukuyama proclaim the end of history in his 1992 book, The End of History and the Last Man.

2. What is history? While some theorists believe that the time we live in is an ahistorical period others think we are steeped down in history (Boia 2002: 18). Whether the former or the latter theory is true, history seems to engulf us everywhere we look. In Europe, for example, one can encounter history at any corner as the old continent bears its marks very clearly. In the postmodernist consumerist society, history too has to keep up with the age and turn commercial if it is to survive. The 20th century opened a world of possibilities for traveling and tourism and thus more people than ever can go anywhere they want. They can visit the pyramids, the ruins of ancient Rome, the sites of the Second World War, countless monuments, battlefields, old castles, fortresses, temples and other relics and artifacts of ages long gone. Apparently we are constantly aware of the presence of history through tourism, movies, popular TV channels, books and other sources.

In spite of the fact that history, as a school discipline, is much maligned by students who generally find it boring, the current media have managed to bring it into the spotlight with cinematic revivals that offer fresh reinterpretations of previously considered established historical facts. Cinema and TV have apparently revived an obsolete genre: the historical film. Recent years have registered unbelievable box-office and television successes with films about ancient heroes and exploits, medieval times, colonial America and the Second World War, which is probably one of the most screen-friendly historical event, due to its complexity. How these films are produced, how accurate they are and why they appeal so much to the general public is a topic for a different debate. However, the fact remains that their subject matter is based on or inspired from what we term in one word, history. Films are also the most easily comprehensible illustration of one of Hayden White’s theories that will be discussed further on.
But what is actually history? To the layman, history most likely means museums with relics, ruins, battles and events that occurred a long time ago. History thus equals the past and who, in our consumerist and overtechnologized 21st century society, looks with reverence or interest to the past? To most people history is interesting as long as it is entertaining. Scholars, on the other hand, have a more complex view. This view relates to the word history itself and to what it refers. History is not just the past, it is not just events that happened two thousand or two hundred years ago. History is made every day. Any political decision that influences people’s lives, for example, is history in the making.

First of all, the word history has been deconstructed and shown to have several meanings. History refers to the past, the present, the sources, the narrative, and it also refers to historiography and the school discipline. After a complex discussion and a summary of the main theories on the topic, Keith Jenkins offers the following definition of history:

“History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognizable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum (Jenkins 2003: 31–32).”

Jenkins determines thus that history is a discourse about the past, therefore history as discourse and the past as object of this discourse are two separate things. “The past and history float free of each other” (Jenkins 2003: 7) and this is simply because an object can be read differently by different discourses. Jenkins further points that this distinction may be difficult to understand because the English language has only one word that covers both categories and he proceeds to give a detailed explanation about past and history, basically showing that “the past has gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work” (Jenkins 2003: 8).

The second problem that arises is in relation to the historians and how they can put the past and history together. There are three theoretical areas that come together in this endeavor: epistemology, methodology and ideology (Jenkins 2003: 12). In terms of theories of knowledge, Keith Jenkins shows that history as construct exists because of its very “epistemological fragility” as, if it were possible to know very clearly what happened in the past, there would be no point in the many rewritings and ever new versions of a single event or personality or epoch from the past and history would stop (Jenkins 2003: 13). There are four important epistemological limits that allow history to continue. The first argument is that no historian can ever recount precisely what happened in the past as its volume is insurmountable. The second argument is that “no account can re-cover the past as it was because the past was not an account but events and situations. As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts” (Jenkins 2003: 14). Indeed, all interpretations of the past are but new readings of the already existing texts and, as Jenkins remarks, “there is no fundamentally correct «text» of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are” (Jenkins 2003: 14).

The third argument regarding the epistemological limitations of history is that, in view of the previous point, history is nothing but “personal construct, a manifestation of the historian’s perspective as a «narrator»” (Jenkins 2003: 14). This is a point where objectivity comes into question. Adam Schaff, in his book History and Truth, proposes this difficulty of history. In doing so, Schaff introduces Paul Ricoeur’s theory about objectivity, which basically states that objectivity in its pure form does not exist and although it was desired as a scientific intention of history, now it is regarded only as the divergence between the historian’s good and bad subjectivity, being thus transformed from a problem of logics to one of ethics (Schaff 1976: 233). The good subjectivity cannot be eliminated as it is bound to the person, the historian who does not live or think in isolation and whose personality is shaped by the reality in which he lives, by his nation, class or gender. The bad subjectivity refers to the personal interests of an historian, to their social prejudices against a person or a group based on nationality, race, gender or religion. Schaff concludes thus that objectivity of cognition would signify the elimination of all traits of human personality, the rejection of the personal system of values and the existence of a universal value of judgment, in which case “objectivity would be simply a fiction, since it would assume that man is a superhuman being” (Schaff 1976: 235).

The first three points made by Keith Jenkins about the epistemological limitations of history indicate that the past can only be recovered in fragments, while his fourth point shows that “we in a way know more about the past than the people who lived in it” (Jenkins 2003: 15) because historians now have access to sources that had been unavailable before and they may discover things that were concealed from the people of some particular historical period. Jenkins’s conclusion, after the detailed explanations on epistemology, is “that history is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed: change the gaze, shift
the perspective and new readings appear” (Jenkins 2003: 16).

Historians continue to search for the ultimate historical truth and also strive for objectivity. In view of what has been said before, it seems a futile struggle for an illusory goal. Many self-respecting historians that have been considered referential and whose texts are used in schools believe that this struggle for objectivity and search for the truth is possible if it is based on a method with clear rules and procedures, like any science. This is supposed to eliminate the constant interpretation factor, as well as the ideological hindrances. The problem that arises though is the common sense question: which method is better? However, even if one manages to choose among the multitude of methods and theories (a few examples could be: Hegel, Marx, Popper, Elkon, Collingwood, feminists, neo-Marxists, empiricists, structuralists or post-structuralists etc.), the next question is what criteria one uses in making their choice, or as Jenkins puts it, “How could one know which method would lead to the «truer» past?” (Jenkins 2003: 18).

All these methods are quite different but in spite of their eclecticism they do have something in common: they all share concepts, the historical concepts that are used in the process of producing history. Common concepts such as time, evidence, cause and effect, empathy, continuity and change are easily recognizable as the ones that determine our perception of history. We think in terms of when an event occurred, what evidence we have to know that it occurred, why it took place and what were the consequences of that event; do we know the mentality of the time? In fact, these concepts are not as universal or as old as one might think and they are not necessarily the concepts that emerge from the historians’ methods. Actually, as Jenkins points, these concepts have been used in recent decades on educational grounds, in schools for a better understanding of the subject matter, “for what might happen if other concepts were used to incorporate the (dominant) field: structure-agency, over-determination, conjuncture, uneven development, centre-periphery, dominant-marginal, base-superstructure, rupture, genealogy, mentalité, hegemony, élite, paradigm, etc.? ” (Jenkins 2003: 20). This is a matter of ideology, the third theoretical area that contributes alongside epistemology and methodology to putting past and history together.

Keith Jenkins also shows that the distinction between history as such and ideological history does not exist, even though the dichotomy is widely used: “History is never for itself, it is always for someone” (Jenkins 2003: 21). History is an ideological construct, which means it is constantly subjected to re-visitations according to the respective power relations. The messages are perpetually changed because both the dominant and the subordinate have their own interests and seek to exert influence on particular spheres. Given these arguments, the proper question to ask is not “what is history?” but “who is history for?” Meaning is different according to the particular group that interprets history and selects the needed elements. Everybody needs the past in order to justify the present and the future. The minority emancipations of the 20th century are such examples: blacks, women and others that try to root their existence in the past, that try to make themselves visible in a time when their voice and presence were denied by the dominant power.

Michel Foucault is one of the first theorists to initiate these views of multiple histories and power relations that determine these histories. In this regard, he starts from two famous predecessors and contests their opinions. Hegel, the first major philosopher of history in the modern times developed the theory of dialectics, according to which history is a clash of opposite forces that will eventually be resolved by a synthesis between them. Marx applies Hegel’s theory to the material condition of society concluding that the clash is in fact over economic resources and it can be resolved through a revolution. This revolution will lead to the synthesis suggested by Hegel, in this case, a communist utopia, where the products will be distributed according to needs. In their book Understanding Foucault, the three authors, Danaher, Schirato and Webb explain Foucault’s objections to the theories of Hegel and Marx taking colonialism as a point of reference because it corresponds to the early 19th century, the time when history writing in its modern form began. For obvious reasons, Foucault does not approve of this tradition of writing history:

[…] this is because conventional history writing regards history in terms of a single and steady progress unfolding over time. This progressive view of history (sometimes called a teleological view) tends to see the world gradually evolving into some ideal state, or utopian society. From this perspective, rather than being considered as an act of violent aggression by the colonising force, colonialism is regarded as an aspect of the evolutionary development of history into higher forms of society (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2000: 99).

He has three objections to the dialectic theories of history. The first obvious reason is that these theories justify colonialism as a positive action from the civilized world against primitive societies. The second objection relates to the organization and explanation of history according to ideological systems that emerged from Enlightenment, such as liberalism, capitalism, socialism etc. According to the above mentioned authors, Foucault’s third problem in this matter is that dialectic theories understand history “according to a grand or totalizing vision” (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2000: 100), while Foucault’s conception of history involves plurality and discontinuity. Thus, he challenges the traditional view of continuous, linear history where the events are fitted together and form regular patterns (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 2000: 101), and proposes instead a history seen as a chaotic structure made up of
struggles between various forces, where the events do not follow one after the other in an orderly fashion, but are in conflict with each other. In view of the new discoveries in science (Einstein’s theory of relativity and Henri Bergson’s theory of coexistent time) and shift of mentalities, Foucault’s opinions are justified. “History is the way people(s) create, in part, their identities” (Jenkins 2003: 22–23) and each generation re-writes history.

But where do we go in order to understand history? Historians use sources in order to write their stories and these are various. The most important tool of the historian is the text, the chronicles written by others which mean that historians refer to other texts and thus move across instead of down, doing comparative work, as Keith Jenkins suggests (Jenkins 2003: 57). However, the frenetic search for the original, the fundamental source believed to reveal the absolute truth is detrimental:

This prioritises the original source, fetishises documents, and distorts the whole working process of making history. At root is that perpetual quest for truth, the quest also apparent in desires for empathetic understanding – to get back into the genuine minds of the original people so that their views are unadulterated by ours (Jenkins 2003: 58).

In terms of sources, Jenkins suggests a problem with a paradox at its core: does the evidence of the past have a voice of its own, so strong that the historian’s only job is to record it? Or is the evidence mute and the historian has to articulate it by using their own voice, in fact silencing it in the process?

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Still, leaving the problem of interpretation aside, another issue, equally important occurs: what are the sources and, more importantly, can they be trusted? In Pentru o istorie a imaginariului, Lucian Boia proposes three types of sources: written documents, images and oral history. Regarding the concept of source itself, Boia considers it the illusion of a direct and perfect correspondence between fact and its representation because the source as representation is mediated through a mental and ideological filter – to get back into the genuine minds of the original people so that their views are unadulterated by ours (Jenkins 2003: 58).

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So, if the sources are not reliable and the historian is not reliable, the past remains a land of mystery, perpetually subjected to new interpretations, always challenged and never fully revealed. Thus, in spite of all the theories and all the effort of historians to categorize history as science and not art, it remains a border discipline, forever vacillating between the concepts of fact and fiction. This is a problem that affected history since the beginning of time. In fact, fiction prevailed over fact in many cases.

Lucian Boia exemplifies this view referring to ancient history where myth was incorporated into actual history on a regular basis. How much is fact of what has reached present day about the Trojan War or the foundation of Rome? As these famous events lack solid attestation and real evidence, their only proof for ever having existed being literature, we might even say they never existed. “Rzboiul troian nu avea nevoie de un autentic rzboi troian pentru a intra în istorie. Homer era indeajuns” 2 . (Boia 2002: 21), and Schlieman made the discovery of the famous ruins of Troy based on the indications given in Homer’s epics. However, these ruins apparently are relics of other battles and events while the information given by Homer himself does not refer to the 12th century (the time of the Trojan War) but more to Homer’s time (Boia 2002: 22).

Another famous mixture of fact and fiction comes from the Anglo-Saxon space and it is embodied by the Arthurian legends for which evidence has always been sought and, some claim, found. There are many theories regarding the existence and most importantly, the affiliation of the famous king. The elements that have always characterized Arthur, such as the fight for justice and equality (the ideal city of Camelot, the Round Table) and the quest for the Holy Grail, all represent Christian values. Even though this
legend has Celtic origins dating back to a few centuries BC, it was passed on in oral tradition, rewritten by monks, adapted for Christian audience and popularized during the Middle Ages. Nowadays the legend lives on and thrives apparently as it is rewritten by the contemporary tradition, that is, by the film industry, which prefers either the idealized mythical view or a more realistic one devoid of all the magic and fabulous details.

The 20th century recorded many adaptations of the story of the famous king, most of them claiming to be faithful to the original story. And, since the origins of the story are so confusing, what value can this claim have? It would be fair to say that this story is a constant victim of revisionism, employing and projection of present values onto the past. The Arthurian legends are very complex, therefore open to interpretations according to needs, and that is why they continue to fascinate. According to the necessities of the period and the desires of the scriptwriter who has to subscribe to the wishes of the industry, the Arthurian legends are told from different angles with the purpose of pleasing and educating the audience. Thus, it can be a love story, a tragedy, a story of betrayal, a moralizing piece against the pointlessness and horror of war, a thesis for the Christian values of justice and equality, for the importance of both individualism and team play, a comedy or a parody, a fairy-tale, and many more. The basic structure of this particular legend can be remodeled to sustain many interpretations and can become the point of Marxist theories, new-historicist readings, psychoanalytic commentaries, feminist analyses, and postmodernist views.

Fiction seems to be much more powerful than history as it has better access to the mainstream and it is easily popularized. If a king called Arthur really existed, no doubt his life was less interesting than the one made famous through the immortal legends. And Arthur is not the only case. Cleopatra was not as beautiful as she has to subscribe to the wishes of the industry, which prefers either the idealized mythical view or a more realistic one devoid of all the magic and fabulous details.

This simple analysis of the many rewritings of the Arthurian legends has merely been an illustrative introduction to the issues to be discussed from this point forward, namely, the difference between fact and fiction, history and fiction, the traditional historiography and its contemporary forms, between the classical historical novel and the postmodernist novel.

3. Fact and Fiction: Many theorists today analyze the concept of history and bring it closer to the concept of fiction by pointing out striking similarities. These theories, drawn from post-structuralism, deconstructivism, and postmodernism, propose a new view on history, one that challenges the old idealism that history deals with undisputed facts grounded in reality and supported by evidence. The new voices demonstrate that, on the contrary, history and fiction share a common ground and history cannot be objective as it relies on narrative and on representation, which are both elements that distort reality being filtrated through the consciousness of their author, creator.

Michel de Certeau is one of the voices that include the term fiction in the process of making history. He explains that the practice of history is ambitious but utopian and that: “It is not content with a hidden «truth» that needs to be discovered; it produces a symbol through the very relation between a space newly designated within time and a modus operandi that fabricates «scenarios» capable of organizing practices into a currently intelligible discourse – namely, the task of «the making of history»” (de Certeau 1988: 6). De Certeau also quotes Roland Barthes who wonders whether the narration of past events under the term of «history» is really that different from the imaginary narrative found in a novel (de Certeau 1988: 41) and he also shows that historians begin from present realities when they investigate past events (de Certeau 1988: 11), a method called presentism.

Presentism (a type of historical analysis that presents the past in such a way as to reflect the ideas of the present) is viewed as a negation of history as science because it shows that the objective historical truth can never be found (Schaff 1976: 224). Hayden White is another voice that claims history cannot be a science by showing that “history differs from the sciences precisely because historians disagree, not only over what are the laws of social causation that they might invoke to explain a given sequence of events, but also over the question of the form that a «scientific» explanation ought to take” (Walder 1990: 354). And, since there is no agreement and historians do not concur, White’s conclusion is that “history remains in the state of conceptual anarchy in which the natural sciences existed during the sixteenth century, when there were as many different conceptions of «the scientific enterprise» as there were metaphysical positions” (Walder 1990: 346). Apparently there are no rules to make it a science, objectively speaking.

In regard to the same topic of historical interpretation and connection with fiction, Hayden White, a prominent new historicist, proposes a theory in his 1973 book, Metahistory (republished in 1975). The overall idea is that history cannot be presented objectively as nobody can write about the past or present as it actually happens. Instead, historians are seen as different archetypes that present the facts according to different types of narrative. He starts from the basics:
I begin by distinguishing among the following levels of conceptualization in the historical work: (1) chronicle; (2) story; (3) mode of emplotment; (4) mode of argument; and (5) mode of ideological implication. I take «chronicle» and «story» to refer to «primitive elements» in the historical account, but both represent processes of selection and arrangement of data from the unprocessed historical record in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an audience of a particular kind (White 1975: 5).

He distinguishes between chronicle and story by defining them. Thus, the chronicle represents the historical facts in a chronological order and it is opened, while the “transformation of chronicle into story” is effected by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, or others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs” (White 1975: 5). It is this very transformation that involves the subjectivity of the historian and, since a story always has a meaning, this meaning is identified by determining the kind of story, a process called emplotment (White 1975: 7).

According to this theory, it is fair to say that history is what historians make of it. Since nobody can record everything exactly that way it happened in the past or present, there cannot be such a thing as objective history. Lucian Boia expresses the same opinion, suggesting how little faith we can put into history and its stories or rather what historians call facts...

Lucian Boia reflects what new historicists are advocating through the theory of Foucault, that history is made by the ones in power, the ones that decide what is important and what needs to remain in history. Feminism, as well as other marginal groups, adheres to this theory, as the Power that wrote history was the patriarchal order that decided who stays in history and who disappears or is turned into The Other. According to this view, women are massively absent from history and when they are present they are shown either in stereotypical roles that efface them or as the villains of history: witches, wicked lustful women that used their physical attributes to sinfully gain favors from naive men that must have been lured by their undoubtedly diabolical charms. The men were always excused and exonerated because they must have undoubtedly fallen for the evil spells of these women. The women that stand out in history as positive symbols are shown either in stereotypical roles that efface them or as the ones that decide what should be kept and «story» to refer to «primitive elements» in the historical record, and simply accepted as fact. Everything should be questioned and victim of falsification and misunderstanding. By proposing alternative histories, postmodern authors are trying to make people aware that nothing should be taken for granted and simply accepted as fact. Everything should be questioned because sources are unreliable and that is the only fact we have.

Thus, history is being re-written. However, even before the emergence of all these new theories, history had always been rewritten and scholars have been trying to find reasons why. To postmodernists, rewriting history seems like an obligation given all the changes observed throughout this paper. Adam Schaff proposes two reasons: the needs of the present impose a reinterpretation of history or “the reinterpretation of history is a function of the emerging effects of the events of the past” (Schaff 1976: 224). In the liberating context of postmodernism, rewriting history from the perspective of the present seems a positive undertake as, given the rise of minorities, writing history from the point of view of the present seems to finally give an unbiased version of history. Another reason that makes this theory a positive one is that distance in time from the particular event to be interpreted gives the historian the chance for a less biased and subjective view. However, this version, regardless of how non-discriminatory it may appear at a first look, is still power biased. The needs of the present decide what should be kept in history and what should be omitted. Besides, writing history from the present perspective produces an even more distorted narrative. Schaff’s conclusion is that “the changeability of the historical image is a function of the changeability of the criteria for the selection of historical material” (Schaff 1976: 226).

So, if history can be constantly rewritten, why is there a fear among scholars that history is over? Theorists such as Francis Fukuyama or Alexandru Zub have tackled this subject and written extensive studies on the topic. Lucian Boia however, has a less apocalyptic view (Boia 2002: 146–149). He warns the reader that he is not making predictions, just offering a scenario and suggests that history will not disappear or come to an end as it has been observed by others. It is just that history's glory days are over. History was queen of the social sciences during the 19th century when nations were formed and ideologies were needed for this
massive construction. Ideologies are rooted in history as they need to rely on the past in order to shape the present. Nowadays, ideologies are apparently obsolete as it seems that all of them have been tried. Globalization seems to be the so-called ideology of the present, though even this one is already beginning to fail.

4. Conclusion Everything is subject to interpretation and this paper has attempted to illustrate, with the help of theoretical views, that representation dominates our world since the essence cannot be known otherwise. And since we have to deal with representation, then we have to admit that we can never learn the absolute truth or discover the historical fact in its purest form. We have to rely on representations, choose the ones that seem to be closer to the essence they represent and make our own interpretations. Fiction does not claim to present the truth, but history does and, given all the theories and opinions stated throughout this paper, history fails at its purpose as it relies on the interpretation of representations and it is therefore victim of subjectivity and intentional or unintentional distortion. History is just a narrative, like fiction.
The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction
Walter Benjamin

PREFACE When Marx undertook his critique of the capitalistic mode of production, this mode was in its infancy. Marx directed his efforts in such a way as to give them prognostic value. He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalistic production and through his presentation showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future. The result was that one could expect it not only to exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity, but ultimately to create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself.

The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production. Only today can it be indicated what form this has taken. Certain prognostic requirements should be met by these statements. However, theses about the art of the proletariat after its assumption of power or about the art of a classless society would have less bearing on these demands than these about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production. Their dialectic is no less noticeable in the superstructure than in the economy. It would therefore be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon. They brush aside a number of outdated concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense. The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.

I In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. Historically, it advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. The Greeks knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only art works which they could produce in quantity. All others were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. With the woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible for the first time, long before script became reproducible by print. The enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story. However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. During the Middle Ages engraving and etching were added to the woodcut; at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance.

With lithography the technique of reproduction reached an essentially new stage. This much more direct process was distinguished by the tracing of the design on a stone rather than its incision on a block of wood or its etching on a copperplate and permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market, not only in large numbers as hitherto, but also in daily changing forms. Lithography enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep pace with printing. But only a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography. For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.

Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech. A film operator shooting a scene in the studio captures the images at the speed of an actor’s speech. Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper, so did photography foreshadow the sound film. The technical reproduction of sound was tackled at the end of the last century. These convergent endeavors made predictable a situation which Paul Valéry pointed up in this sentence: “Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.” (op. cit., p. 226) Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. For the study of this standard nothing is more revealing than the nature of the repercussions that these two different manifestations—the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film—have had on art in its traditional form.

II Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. 1 The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyzes which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original.
The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyzes of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis à vis technical reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction. For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie. In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus—namely, its authenticity—is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. It extends to ever new positions. In 1927 Abel Gance exclaimed enthusiastically: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate.” Presumably without intending it, he issued an invitation to a far-reaching liquidation.

III During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century, with its great shifts of population, saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a new kind of perception. The scholars of the Viennese school, Riegl and Wickhoff, who resisted the weight of classical tradition under which these later art forms had been buried, were the first to draw conclusions from them concerning the organization of perception at the time. However far-reaching their insight, these scholars limited themselves to showing the significant, formal hallmark which characterized perception in late Roman times. They did not attempt—and, perhaps, saw no way—to show the social transformations expressed by these changes of perception. The conditions for an analogous insight are more favorable in the present. And if changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura, it is possible to show its social causes.

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very
close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transistoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of photography what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.

IV The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clergies of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. The secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance and prevailing for three centuries, clearly showed that ritualistic basis in its decline and the first deep crisis which befell it. With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which has become evident a century later. At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of l’art pour l’art, that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of ‘pure’ art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter. (In poetry, Mallarmé was the first to take this position.)

An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.

V Works of art are received and valued on different planes. Two polar types stand out; with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work. Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult. One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view. The elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave was an instrument of magic. He did expose it to his fellow men, but in the main it was meant for the spirits. Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden. Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cela; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level. With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products. It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple. The same holds for the painting as against the mosaic or fresco that preceded it. And even though the public presentability of a mass originally may have been just as great as that of a symphony, the latter originated at the moment when its public presentability promised to surpass that of the mass.

With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature. This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art. In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. This much is certain: today photography and the film are the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function.

VI In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate refremachment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refusal for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. To have pinpointed this
new stage constitutes the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. At the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for him, right ones or wrong ones, no matter. For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones.

VII The nineteenth-century dispute as to the artistic value of painting versus photography today seems devious and confused. This does not diminish its importance, however; if anything, it underlines it. The dispute was in fact the symptom of a historical transformation the universal impact of which was not realized by either of the rivals. When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever. The resulting change in the function of art transcended the perspective of the century; for a long time it even escaped that of the twentieth century, which experienced the development of the film. Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question—whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art—was not raised. Soon the film theoreticians asked the same ill-considered question with regard to the film. But the difficulties which photography caused traditional aesthetics were mere child’s play as compared to those raised by the film. Whence the insensitive and forced character of early theories of the film. Abel Gance, for instance, compares the film with hieroglyphs: “Here, by a remarkable regression, we have come back to the level of expression of the Egyptians. . . . Pictorial language has not yet matured because our eyes have not yet adjusted to it. There is as yet insufficient respect for, insufficient cult of, what it expresses.” Or, in the words of Séverin-Mars: “What art has been granted a dream more poetical and more real at the same time! Approach in this fashion the film might represent an incomparable means of expression. Only the most high-minded persons, in the most perfect and mysterious moments of their lives, should be allowed to enter its ambience.”

It is instructive to note how their desire to class the film among the “arts” forces these theoreticians to read ritual elements into it—with a striking lack of discretion. Yet when these speculations were published, films like L’Opinion Publique and The Gold Rush had already appeared. This, however, did not keep Abel Gance from adding hieroglyphs for purposes of comparison, nor Séverin-Mars from speaking of the film as one might speak of paintings by Fra Angelico. Characteristically, even today ultrareactionary authors give the film a similar contextual significance—if not an outright sacred one, then at least a supernatural one. Commenting on Max Reinhardt’s film version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Werfel states that undoubtedly it was the sterile copying of the exterior world with its streets, interiors, railroad stations, restaurants, motorcars, and beaches which until now had obstructed the elevation of the film to the realm of art. “The film has not yet realized its true meaning, its real possibilities . . . these consist in its unique faculty to express by natural means and with incomparable persuasiveness all that is fairylike, marvelous, supernatural.”

VIII The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera, with a twofold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied to him constitutes the completed film. It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups, etc. Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. This is the first consequence of the fact that the actor’s performance is presented by means of a camera. Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed.

IX For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else. One of the first to sense the actor’s metamorphosis by this form of testing was Pirandello. Though his remarks on the subject in his novel Si Gira were limited to the negative
aspects of the question and to the silent film only, this hardly impairs their validity. For in this respect, the sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them. “The film actor,” wrote Pirandello, “feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence. The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.” This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.

It is not surprising that it should be a dramatist such as Pirandello who, in characterizing the film, inadvertently touches on the very crisis in which we see the theatre. Any thorough study proves that there is indeed no greater contrast than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in, mechanical reproduction. Experts have long recognized that in the film “the greatest effects are almost always obtained by ‘acting’ as little as possible. . . .” In 1932 Rudolf Arnheim saw “the latest trend... in treating the actor as a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and . . . inserted at the proper place.” With this idea something else is closely connected. The state actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances. Besides certain fortuitous considerations, such as cost of studio, availability of fellow players, décor, etc., there are elementary necessities of equipment that split the actor’s work into a series of mountable episodes. In particular, lighting and its installation require the presentation of an event that, on the screen, unfolds as a rapid and unified scene, in a sequence of separate shootings which may take hours at the studio; not to mention more obvious montage. Thus a jump from the window can be shot in the studio as a jump from a scaffold, and the ensuing flight, if need be, can be shot weeks later when outdoor scenes are taken. Far more paradoxical cases can easily be construed. Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without his being forewarned of it. The frightened reaction can be shot now and be cut into the screen version. Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the “beautiful semblance” which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.

The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public.12 Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the “personality” outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the “spell of the personality,” the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers’ capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property. However, our present study is no more specifically concerned with this than is the film production of Western Europe.

It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert. This is obvious to anyone listening to a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race. It is not for nothing that newspaper publishers arrange races for their delivery boys. These arouse great interest among the participants, for the victor has an opportunity to rise from delivery boy to professional racer. Similarly, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art, as witness Vertov’s Three Songs About Lenin or Iven’s Borinage. Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. This claim can best be elucidated by a comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature.
For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers—at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for “letters to the editor.” And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willynilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship. In the Soviet Union work itself is given a voice. To present it verbally is part of a man’s ability to perform the work. Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property.

All this can easily be applied to the film, where transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade. In cinematic practice, particularly in Russia, this change-over has partially become established reality. Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves—and primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man’s legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.

Even more revealing is the comparison of these circumstances, which differ so much from those of the theatre, with the situation in painting. Here the question is: How does the cameraman compare with the painter? To answer this we take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient’s body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician—who is still hidden in the medical practitioner—the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him.

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.

XI The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc.—unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens. This circumstance, more than any other, renders superficial and insignificant any possible similarity between a scene in the studio and one on the stage. In the theatre one is well aware of the place from which the play cannot immediately be detected as illusionary. There is no such place for the movie scene that is being shot. Its illusionary nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting. That is to say, in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones.

XII Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film. The moment these responses become manifest they control each other. Again, the comparison with painting is fruitful. A painting has always
had an excellent chance to be viewed by one person or by a few. The simultaneous contemplation of paintings by a large public, such as developed in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis of painting, a crisis which was by no means occasioned exclusively by photography but rather in a relatively independent manner by the appeal of art works to the masses.

Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience, as it was possible for architecture at all times, for the epic poem in the past, and for the movie today. Although this circumstance in itself should not lead one to conclusions about the social role of painting, it does constitute a serious threat as soon as painting, under special conditions and, as it were, against its nature, is confronted directly by the masses. In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages and at the princely courts up to the end of the eighteenth century, a collective reception of paintings did not occur simultaneously, but by graduated and hierarchized mediation. The change that has come about is an expression of the particular conflict in which painting was implicated by the mechanical reproducibility of paintings. Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception. Thus the same public which responds in a progressive manner toward a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism.

XIII The characteristics of the film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment. A glance at occupational psychology illustrates the testing capacity of the equipment. Psychoanalysis illustrates it in a different perspective. The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since the Psychopathology of Everyday Life things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception. It is only an obverse of this fact that behavior items shown in a movie can be analyzed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage. As compared with painting, filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements of the situation. In comparison with the stage scene, the filmed behavior item lends itself more readily to analysis because it can be isolated more easily. This circumstance derives its chief importance from its tendency to promote the mutual penetration of art and science. Actually, of a screened behavior item which is neatly brought out in a certain situation, like a muscle of a body, it is difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science. To demonstrate the identity of the artistic and scientific uses of photography which heretofore usually were separated will be one of the revolutionary functions of the film.

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones “which, far from looking like retarded rapid movements, give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions.”* Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.
aspects of the question and to the silent film only, this hardly impairs their validity. For in this respect, the sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them. “The film actor,” wrote Pirandello, “feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence . . . . The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.”* This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.

It is not surprising that it should be a dramatist such as Pirandello who, in characterizing the film, inadvertently touches on the very crisis in which we see the theatre. Any thorough study proves that there is indeed no greater contrast than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in, mechanical reproduction. Experts have long recognized that in the film “the greatest effects are almost always obtained by ‘acting’ as little as possible. . . .” In 1932 Rudolf Arnheim saw “the latest trend... in treating the actor as a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and . . . inserted at the proper place.” With this idea something else is closely connected. The state actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances. Besides certain fortuitous considerations, such as cost of studio, availability of fellow players, décor, etc., there are elementary necessities of equipment that split the actor’s work into a series of mountable episodes. In particular, lighting and its installation require the presentation of an event that, on the screen, unfolds as a rapid and unified scene, in a sequence of separate shootings which may take hours at the studio; not to mention more obvious montage. Thus a jump from the window can be shot in the studio as a jump from a scaffold, and the ensuing flight, if need be, can be shot weeks later when outdoor scenes are taken. Far more paradoxical cases can easily be construed. Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without his being forewarned of it. The frightened reaction can be shot now and be cut into the screen version. Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the “beautiful semblance” which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.

The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public. 12 Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the “personality” outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the “spell of the personality,” the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers’ capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art. We do not deny that in some cases today’s films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property. However, our present study is no more specifically concerned with this than is the film production of Western Europe.

It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert. This is obvious to anyone listening to a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race. It is not for nothing that newspaper publishers arrange races for their delivery boys. These arouse great interest among the participants, for the victor has an opportunity to rise from delivery boy to professional racer. Similarly, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art, as witness Vertov’s Three Songs About Lenin or Iven’s Borinage. Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. This claim can best be elucidated by a comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature.
Image, Music, Text: 
The Rhetoric of the Image 
Roland Barthes

According to an ancient etymology, the word image should be linked to the root imitari. Thus we find ourselves immediately at the heart of the most important problem facing the semiology of images: can analogical representation (the ‘copy’) produce true systems of signs and not merely simple agglutinations of symbols? Is it possible to conceive of an analogical ‘code’ (as opposed to a digital one)? We know that linguists refuse the status of language to all communication by analogy - from the ‘language’ of bees to the ‘language’ of gesture - the moment such communications are not doubly articulated, are not founded on a combinatory system of digital units as phonemes are. Nor are linguists the only ones to be suspicious as to the linguistic nature of the image; general opinion too has a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning - this in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life: the image is re-presentation, which is to say ultimately resurrection, and, as we know, the intelligible is reputed antipathetic to lived experience. Thus from both sides the image is felt to be weak in respect of meaning: there are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image’s ineffable richness. Now even - and above all if - the image is in a certain manner the limit of meaning, it permits the consideration of a veritable ontology of the process of signification. How does meaning get into the image? Where does it end? And if it ends, what is there beyond! Such are the questions that I wish to raise by submitting the image to a spectral analysis of the messages it may contain. We will start by making it considerably easier for ourselves: we will only study the advertising image. Why? Because in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signifiers of the advertising message are formed a priori by certain attributes of the product and these signifiers have to be transmitted as clearly as possible. If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic.

The Three Messages Here we have a Panzani advertisement: some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag, in yellows and greens on a red background. Let us try to ‘skim off’ the different messages it contains.

The code from which this message has been taken is none other than that of the French language; the only knowledge required to decipher it is a knowledge of writing and French. In fact, this message can itself be further broken down, for the sign Panzani gives not simply the name of the firm but also, by its assonance, an additional signified, that of Italianicity. The linguistic message is thus twofold (at least in this particular image): denotational and connotational. Since, however, we have here only a single typical sign, namely that of articulated (written) language, it will be counted as one message.

Putting aside the linguistic message, we are left with the pure image (even if the labels are part of it, anecdotally). This image straightforwardly provides a series of discontinuous signs. First (the order is unimportant as these signs are not linear), the idea that what we have in the scene represented is a return from the market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined. Its signifier is the half-open bag which lets the provisions spill out over the table, ‘unpacked’. To read this first sign requires only a knowledge which is in some sort implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture where ‘shopping around for oneself is opposed to the hasty stocking up (preserves, refrigerators) of a more ‘mechanical’ civilization. A second sign is more or less equally evident; its signifier is the bringing together of the tomato, the pepper and the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, red) of the poster; its signified is Italy or rather Italianicity. This sign stands in a relation of redundancy with the connoted sign of the linguistic message (the Italian assonance of the name Panzani) and the knowledge it draws upon is already more particular; it is a specifically ‘French’ knowledge (an Italian would barely perceive the connotation of the name, no more probably than he would the Italianicity of tomato and pepper), based on a familiarity with certain tourist stereotypes. Continuing to explore the image (which is not to say that it is not entirely clear at the first glance), there is no difficulty in discovering at least two other signs: in the first, the serried collection of different objects transmits the idea of a total culinary service, on the one hand as though Panzani furnished everything necessary for a carefully balanced dish and on the other as though the concentrate in the tin were equivalent to the natural produce surrounding it; in the other sign, the composition of the image, evoking the memory of innumerable alimentary paintings, sends us to an aesthetic signified: the ‘nature morte’ or, as it is better expressed in other languages, the ‘still life’; the knowledge on which this sign depends is heavily cultural. It might be suggested that, in addition to these four signs, there is a further information pointer, that which tells us that this is an advertisement and which arises both from the
place of the image in the magazine and from the emphasis of the labels (not to mention the caption). This last information, however, is co-extensive with the scene; it eludes signification insofar as the advertising nature of the image is essentially functional: to utter something is not necessarily to declare / am speaking, except in a deliberately reflexive system such as literature.

Thus there are four signs for this image and we will assume that they form a coherent whole (for they are all discontinuous), require a generally cultural knowledge, and refer back to signifieds each of which is global (for example, Italianicity), imbued with euphoric values. After the linguistic message, then, we can see a second, iconic message. Is that the end? If all these signs are removed from the image, we are still left with a certain informational matter; deprived of all knowledge, I continue to ‘read’ the image, to ‘understand’ that it assembles in a common space a number of identifiable (nameable) objects, not merely shapes and colours. The signifieds of this third message are constituted by the real objects in the scene, the signifiers by these same objects photographed, for, given that the relation between thing signified and image signifying in analogical representation is not ‘arbitrary’ (as it is in language), it is no longer necessary to dose the relay with a third term in the guise of the psychic image of the object. What defines the third message is precisely that the relation between signified and signer is quasi-tautological; no doubt the photograph involves a certain arrangement of the scene (framing, reduction, flattening) but this transition is not a transformation (in the way a coding can be); we have here a loss of the equivalence characteristic of true sign systems and a statement of quasi-identity. In other words, the sign of this message is not drawn from an institutional stock, is not coded, and we are brought up against the paradox (to which we will return) of a message without a code. This peculiarity can be seen again at the level of the knowledge invested in the reading of the message; in order to ‘read’ this last (or first) level of the image, all that is needed is the knowledge bound up with our perception. That knowledge is not nil, for we need to know what an image is (children only learn this at about the age of four) and what a tomato, a string-bag, a packet of pasta are, but it is a matter of an almost anthropological knowledge. This message corresponds, as it were, to the letter of the image and we can agree to call it the literal message, as opposed to the previous symbolic message.

If our reading is satisfactory, the photograph analysed offers us three messages: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message. The linguistic message can be readily separated from the other two, but since the latter share the same (iconic) substance, to what extent have we the right to separate them? It is certain that the distinction between the two iconic messages is not made spontaneously in ordinary reading: the viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message, and it will be seen later that this confusion in reading corresponds to the function of the mass image (our concern here). The distinction, however, has an operational validity, analogous to that which allows the distinction in the linguistic sign of a signifier and a signified (even though in reality no one is able to separate the ‘word’ from its meaning except by recourse to the metalanguage of a definition). If the distinction permits us to describe the structure of the image in a simple and coherent fashion and if this description paves the way for an explanation of the role of the image in society, we will take it to be justified. The task now is thus to reconsider each type of message so as to explore it in its generality, without losing sight of our aim of understanding the overall structure of the image, the final inter-relationship of the three messages. Given that what is in question is not a ‘naive’ analysis but a structural description, the order of the messages will be modified a little by the inversion of the cultural message and the literal message; of the two iconic messages, the first is in some sort imprinted on the second: the literal message appears as the support of the ‘symbolic’ message. Hence, knowing that a system which takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers is a system of connotation, we may say immediately that the literal image is denoted and the symbolic image connoted.