Prosthetic memory: the ethics and politics of memory in an age of mass culture

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Memory is not commonly imagined as a site of possibility for progressive politics. More often, memory, particularly in the form of nostalgia, is condemned for its solipsistic nature, for its tendency to draw people into the past instead of the present. This is the case, for example, in Kathryn Bigelow's 1995 film *Strange Days*, in which the use of memory – usually another person's memory – is figured as a form of addiction. The film is set in Los Angeles, on New Year's Eve 1999. The Los Angeles of the film is a chaotic, multicultural world of violence, epitomised by the assassination of Jeriko One, an important African-American rapper and a vocal opponent of white oppression. Rather than confront this bleak reality, people buy 'wire trips', which are memories that can be played back again and again. A wire trip, as the 'dealer' Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) explains to a potential buyer, 'is life. It is a piece of someone's life'. On a wire trip, 'You are there – doing it, seeing it, hearing it, feeling it'. A wire trip is analogised to a drug trip, and as with drugs, these 'playbacks' of memories are addictive, a form of escape from the present. Available on the black market, these memories circulate as commodities; consuming them threatens to prevent individuals from acting in the present, from being productive, politically engaged members of society. Indulging in memory 'playback' has the anti-social, apolitical effect of atomising people. This retreat from the 'real world' – especially in the face of urban crisis – makes impossible any form of politics, any strategy for bringing about social change. To be a socially responsible person, Nero must 'kick the habit', turn away from the private prison world of memory in order to live productively in the public world.

This negative depiction of memory is more than just the conceit of a science fiction film. The image of memory as an obstacle to,

rather than a catalyst for, progressive politics and collective action is shared by many scholars as well. Historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, in their important recent book, *The Presence of the Past*, reject the frequently heard criticism that Americans are ignorant about history. Through an ambitious survey project aimed at examining qualitatively and quantitatively how contemporary Americans feel about history, they demonstrate that most are, in fact, fascinated with the past.¹ Yet despite the multiple forms of 'popular history-making' their survey uncovers, Rosenzweig, in particular, remains concerned that the way many Americans remember the past has the effect of atomising them, rather than building collective solidarities. Because many of the Americans surveyed emphasise first-hand experience and the familial, they tend to construct a more privatised version of the past, which might as a negative consequence 'reinforce rather than break down barriers between people, resist rather than promote change'.² The concern here is that these more personal memories are less useful in the task of forging political alliances between different groups of people. In other words, Rosenzweig echoes the critique implied in *Strange Days* that private memory is an obstacle to collective politics. The commodification of memory, as depicted in *Strange Days*, only exacerbates this problem. By purchasing the memories they want, the film's addicts retreat into their own private fantasies rather than participate in the public sphere of social responsibility. Similarly, the commodification of memories through history films, television, museums and the Internet threatens to construct pasts that are privately satisfying rather than publicly useful.

This critique is legitimate, but not necessarily insurmountable. It might be possible to imagine a relationship to memory that facilitates, rather than prevents, the formation of progressive political alliances and solidarities. In fact, the conditions of possibility for such a relationship emerged at the turn of the last century when two developments radically changed the conditions and contours of memory in American culture. Modernisation and industrialisation sparked an unprecedented movement of peoples across the globe, while the birth of the cinema and other technological innovations led to the emergence of a truly mass culture. In the context of mass migrations, memory would be required to play a crucial new role. The US experienced its largest waves of immigration from Europe in the first decades of this century, even as it witnessed the mass

migrations of African Americans to the industrial centres of the North. With these movements of peoples came the rupture of generational ties, rendering the traditional modes for the transmission of cultural, ethnic, and racial memory – both memories passed from parent to child and those disseminated through community life – increasingly inadequate. At the same moment, the cinema and the technologised mass culture that it helped inaugurate transformed memory by making possible an unprecedented circulation of images and narratives about the past. Thanks to these new technologies of memory on the one hand and commodification on the other, the kinds of memories that one has ‘intimate’, even experiential, access to would no longer be limited to the memories of events through which one actually lived. This essay will argue that the effects of capitalist commodification and mass culture are not exclusively privatising and therefore conservative; these forces have also opened up the potential for a progressive, even radical politics of memory: such a politics instrumentalises what I have called ‘prosthetic memory’.³

In 1913, Max Scheler published *The Nature of Sympathy*, in which he attempts to explore the contours of sympathy, empathy and what he regards most highly of all, ‘fellow-feeling’.⁴ Fellow-feeling, a sense of collective responsibility, is to Scheler a position of high moral value, which he defines in opposition to ‘emotional infection’ and ‘emotional reproduction’: if, for example, when confronted with a drowning man one is stricken with fear for oneself, if one feels a twinge of pain, this is emotional infection and has a lower moral value than the ‘purer and truer’ fellow-feeling.⁵ Scheler rejects the mere reproduction of feelings on the grounds that ‘it entails that our fellow-feeling must necessarily be confined to processes and incidents in other people’s experience such as *we have already met with ourselves*’.⁶ Scheler posits instead that one can easily participate in someone else’s joy or sorrow without having lived through, or ‘sampled that particular quality of experience before’.⁷ Fellow-feeling is possible, according to Scheler, because man has an ‘*innate*’ capacity for comprehending the feelings of others, even though he may never on any occasion have encountered such feelings (or their ingredients) in himself.⁸

What Scheler is describing as fellow-feeling, then, is really what is now defined as empathy. And what Scheler actually articulates here is the distinction between ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’.⁹ Sympathy, a feeling that arises out of simple identification, often takes the form

of wallowing in someone else's pain. In it, there is a presumption of sameness between the sympathiser and her object. Whether or not there is actually a 'sameness' between them, an actual shared experience, matters little, for in the act of sympathising, one projects one's own feelings onto the other. This act can be imperialising and colonising, taking over, rather than making space for, the other's feelings.¹⁰ In the act of sympathising, not only is the victimhood of the other reinforced, but hierarchies are established; sympathy implies condescension, for the sympathiser looks down on his/her object, and in the process reaffirms his/her superiority. The experience of empathy, by contrast, is not purely emotional, but has a crucial cognitive component. It therefore takes work and thought to achieve. The connection one feels when one empathises with another is not simply a feeling of emotional connection, but a feeling of cognitive, intellectual connection – an intellectual coming-to-terms with the other's circumstances. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues, any ethical relationship to the other requires empathy: a recognition of the profound difference and unknowability of the other, and a simultaneous sense of commitment and responsibility toward him/her even in the face of such differences.¹¹

If Scheler's essentialist and universalising argument – that man has an '*innate*' capacity for comprehending the feelings of others' – seems antiquated today, his sense that one can commiserate with another without having shared that person's particular experience opens up the possibility of bridging perceived differences in order to form political alliances. And yet in positing an instinctual basis for fellow-feeling, Scheler neglected to consider the cultural effects of the new forms of mass culture emerging at the time he wrote – in particular the cinema. It is not simply, as he suggests, that humans are intrinsically able to 'comprehend the feelings of others', but rather that technologies of memory have exponentially increased the opportunities for such empathetic understandings.¹² It may very well be the case that humans are unique in their *capacity* for empathy. But empathy is not instinct; it is a faculty whose exercise is more or less likely depending on social and cultural context. The emerging technologies of mass culture had the potential to create the understanding necessary for the formation of political alliances across chasms of difference. In this connection, empathy's emergence into the language in 1904 is suggestive:¹³ like Scheler's discussion of fellow-feeling, the concept of empathy seems to have

become imaginable – distinguishable from sympathy – against the backdrop of a burgeoning mass culture.

Of course, others have reflected on the political potential of technologies of mass culture, notably Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. Writing in the 1930s, Kracauer and Benjamin began to theorise both the experiential nature of the cinema, the power of film to speak to, and move, the human body as well as its ability to influence the way one sees the world. For Kracauer, film actually addresses its viewer as a ‘corporeal-material being’; ‘it seizes the “human being with skin and hair”’ as ‘The material elements that present themselves in film directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*’.¹⁴ The cinematic experience has an individual, bodily component even while its mode of reception is collective. For Kracauer, film quite literally has the capacity to move the spectator. Benjamin, too, argues for the radical political potential of technologies of reproduction. He famously describes the way the camera enables one both to see objects outside of one’s immediate experience and more importantly to recognise new dimensions of commonplace objects: ‘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 film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second.’¹⁵ For Benjamin the camera has the capacity to make visible that which, through repression and reification, remained inaccessible to the naked eye. But what I hope to underscore here is the unique capacity of film and other technologies of reproduction to generate empathy. By revealing perspectives otherwise inaccessible, and by addressing the individual body in the intimate ways that they do, these technologies of reproduction serve as particularly powerful conduits for the generation of empathy.

One of the most dramatic instances of how the mass media generate empathy is through the production and dissemination of memory. Such memories bridge the temporal chasms that separate individuals from the meaningful and potentially interpellative events of the past. It has become possible to have an intimate relationship to memories of events through which one did not live: these are the memories I call prosthetic. ‘Prosthetic memories’ are indeed ‘personal’ memories, as they derive from engaged and experientially-oriented encounters with the mass media’s various technologies of

memory. But because prosthetic memories are not natural, not the possession of a single individual, let alone a particular family or ethnic group, they conjure up a more public past, a past that is not at all privatised. The pasts that prosthetic memory open up are available to individuals across racial and ethnic lines. This form of memory is historically specific and quite distinct from the various forms of collective memory, which are usually circumscribed by a particular community or group. In contrast to collective memories, which tend to be geographically specific and which serve to reinforce and naturalise a group's identity, prosthetic memories are not the property of a single group. Rather, they open up the possibility for collective horizons of experience and pave the way for unexpected political alliances.

I call these memories 'prosthetic memories' for four reasons. First, they are not 'authentic' or natural, but rather are derived from engagement with mediated representations (seeing a film, visiting a museum, watching a television show, using a CD-ROM). Second, like an artificial limb, these memories are actually worn on the body; these are sensuous memories produced by an *experience* of mass mediated representations. And like an artificial limb, these memories often mark a trauma. Third, calling them 'prosthetic' signals their interchangeability and exchangeability and underscores their commodified form. In this sense, I agree with those who have rejected the 'culture industry' model in which mass culture is seen solely as a site of domination and deception. I argue that commodification, which is at the heart of mass cultural representations, is precisely what makes images and narratives widely available, available to people who live in different places, come from different backgrounds, from different races and from different classes. Furthermore, reception is more complicated than such critics allow, as spectators have greater intelligence and agency than the 'brainwashing' model permits; commodities, and commodified images, are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow whole, but rather the grounds upon which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed. Finally, I call these memories prosthetic to underscore their usefulness; because they feel real they help to condition how an individual thinks about the world, and might be instrumental in generating empathy and articulating an ethical relation to the other. A sensuous engagement with the past, which prosthetic memory enables, is the foundation for more than simply

individual subjectivity; it becomes the basis for mediated collective identification and for the production of potentially counterhegemonic public spheres.

In beginning to theorise their political potential, two elements of prosthetic memory are particularly relevant: their indebtedness to commodification and mass culture on the one hand, and on the other, their unique ability to generate empathy, a crucial step in the formation of political alliances and solidarities. Perhaps in a perfect world there would be some alternative to commodity culture, but for those living in the early hours of the new millennium, a commodity-saturated capitalism prevails. And yet it is the very pervasiveness of commodification – reaching as it does into the realm of mass cultural representation – that makes images and narratives about the past available on an unprecedented scale. Prosthetic memory, as I have been arguing, is quite literally made possible by the advanced state of capitalism and its ensuing commodity culture. It is through buying a movie ticket, paying the entrance fee to a museum, or acquiring access to the Internet, that one gains access to these images and narratives about the past. So instead of simply condemning commodity culture, as many cultural critics have done, I will argue that the only way to bring about social transformation is by working within the capitalist system.¹⁶ There is not, I am afraid, some pristine world of politics apart from the world of consumption. In what follows, I will highlight particular instances where commodified prosthetic memories work towards politically progressive ends.

Scholars in a variety of fields have long challenged the notion of the passive consumer. According to Daniel Miller, the reception or use of a commodity ‘is the start of a long and complex process, by which the consumer works upon the object purchased and recontextualizes it, until it is often no longer recognizable as having any relation to the world of the abstract and becomes its very negation, something which could be neither bought nor given’.¹⁷ While the kinds of commodities disseminated by the mass media are different in form from more traditional commodities, they require a similar kind of analysis. Stuart Hall, John Fiske and others have emphasised the point that meaning-making occurs at two moments in the mass communication process – both at production and reception, at moments of ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’.¹⁸ Hall, in particular, emphasises that there are always several possible readings of a given cultural text; some reinforce the existing power structures and status

quo while other, more oppositional ones, challenge it.¹⁹ Even in the complicated case of mass cultural commodities, reception is conditioned by and mediated through the cultural, political and social worlds of the consumers.

It is important here to underscore the fact that there is indeed a limit to the number of possible readings of any mass cultural commodity. While these commodities might be multivocal, they are not infinitely so; the commodity itself imposes certain constraints on its interpretation as does the social world, or system of signs, in which it gets decoded. The mass cultural texts in which I am most interested are those that attempt to make possible progressive, or counterhegemonic readings; but because of the multivocality of commodities, even those cannot predetermine the meanings ultimately negotiated by individuals.

Nevertheless, because these mass cultural commodities, these images and narratives about the past, are mediated through the cultural, political and social worlds of individuals, they have the capacity to affect profoundly an individual's subjectivity. The radical potential of prosthetic memory derives from the fact that the subjectivities they produce are not 'natural', not premised on some count of authenticity. Furthermore, prosthetic memories cannot be owned exclusively. Despite the fact that these memories are made possible by a commodity culture, and circulate like commodities, they can never be owned as private property, and as a result they occupy a unique position within and yet implicitly opposed to capitalism. In fact, one might even say that they function as what Etienne Balibar has called 'universal property'. In reflecting on property, Balibar wonders 'whether the principle of total possession brings with it intrinsic limits, that is, whether there are "objects" that, by nature, cannot be appropriated, or more precisely that can be appropriated but not totally possessed'.²⁰ I would argue that mass cultural commodities, and in particular the prosthetic memories that I am describing, pose a powerful challenge to the concept of private property; at the dawn of the twenty-first century, this challenge is lodged even more strongly by the Internet, with its capacity to disseminate freely texts, information, music and so forth. As memories that no individual can own, that individuals can only *share* with others, and whose meanings can never be completely stabilised, prosthetic memories themselves become a challenge to the 'total possession' of private property.

Perhaps more than in any other realm, the political potential of prosthetic memory has been explored in science fiction film. In Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, a film with a much more sanguine attitude towards memory than *Strange Days*, Quade (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the protagonist, has a life-long dream of visiting Mars. The world he inhabits is both technologically advanced and commodity-saturated, and he is therefore able to buy memories of just such a trip. The political conditions on Mars are dire, for there is a class of people, the Mutants, whose fate lies in the hands of the evil capitalist Cohagen: he alone controls their access to oxygen through an elaborate venting mechanism. Quade later learns that even before he had opted to purchase his 'memory trip', he had already received implanted memories and that Quade, the identity constructed on the basis of those memories, is actually 'inauthentic'. Quade, then, has to choose which identity to inhabit: the identity of Quade, or the identity of 'Hauser', whom he is told was his authentic identity. Capitalism has thus given Quade some choices about who to be. However, the mere fact that both options are in some ways made possible by capitalism does not mean that they are both equally reactionary or equally progressive. One of the identities, that of Quade, is motivated by a social conscience, a desire to save the oppressed underclass on Mars. In other words, the prosthetic memories he has taken on enable him to think ethically; on the basis of those memories – and in particular, the memories of the oppression and ghettoisation of the Mutants – he experiences empathy. Quade acts in a socially responsible way by turning on the oxygen mines and freeing the Mutants from the tyrannical grip of Cohagen. *Total Recall* illustrates Hall's point that capitalist commodities offer choices – not unlimited choices, but choices nevertheless – some of which have the potential to challenge the status quo and subvert social norms and hierarchies. Commodified memories might be used in unexpected ways, in ways that actively challenge the exploitative drive of capitalism.

To underscore this point, I would like to turn to a mass cultural text that aims to produce prosthetic memories: John Singleton's 1996 film *Rosewood*. *Rosewood* raises the question of whether white children – and by extension, a white audience – can take on memories of racial oppression and in the process develop empathy for African Americans. Singleton's film documents the events that transpire over the course of five days in a small Florida town called Rosewood. Because the film is first and foremost an attempt to put into

history that which has been left out, Singleton situates his story *in* history: the narrative begins on Thursday, 31 December 1922. This film dramatises a moment in the history of two neighboring Florida towns, Rosewood and Sumner – the former is primarily black, the latter primarily white. Despite the presence of much racism, the two towns manage to coexist until a white woman in Sumner, after receiving a beating at the hands of her white lover, cries rape and blames it on an unknown black man. Her allegation ignites the town of Sumner and violent lynch mobs decimate Rosewood. By ‘remembering’ cinematically the lynch mobs that lived on long after the abolition of institutional slavery, Singleton makes visible a history of racial oppression that has been radically underrepresented.

But Singleton is doing more than making oppression visible. He reconstructs a radiant image of Rosewood and its citizens. In an inversion of stereotypes, Rosewood, not Sumner, is the thriving town. In Rosewood, black families own the land and all but one of the businesses. Tranquil scenes of family and community life in Rosewood are juxtaposed against scenes of the coarser, more chaotic and unkempt life in Sumner. The hard-working African Americans he depicts in Rosewood are living the American dream. Significantly, in this film, African American characters are privileged with point-of-view shots. To watch *Rosewood* the spectator must, in effect, look at the world through black eyes. Singleton is thus directing cinematic technology toward the task of producing empathy in his spectators.

Children play a crucial role in the film’s vision. Not only is the narrative driven by the harrowing escape of the black children of Rosewood, but the importance of saving the children is underscored at the end by a textual epilogue which informs the viewers that the film was made possible by the sworn testimony of the children of Rosewood. It was their words which make visible this under-represented history.

But this film also foregrounds a white child. In one of its first scenes, a white man in Sumner – one who subsequently is revealed as the most virulently and violently racist of the bunch – teaches his son Emmett to hunt. This scene initiates what becomes a veritable obsession of the film: the teaching of children. When Emmett and Arnett, the African American boy from Rosewood, are playing together at the beginning of the film, Emmett’s father warns, ‘I don’t want you around that nigger boy – You’ll be a man soon. I’ll get ya there’. Racial prejudice, the film suggests, is not natural but learned.

Emmett is brought along with the lynch mob and experiences a series of pedagogical events; in one instance his father teaches him to make a noose. Later his father forces him to look into a mass grave. Emmett shakes his head and walks away with tears in his eyes. When his father asks him why he is crying he says, 'There's babies in there.' 'Nigger is nigger, boy', his father responds. The lesson here, the fundamental premise of racial prejudice, is that blacks are black before they are human.

At the end of the film, many of the children of Rosewood do successfully escape, but at great cost: the once thriving town is smoldering ash, destroyed by racial hatred. But the film does not end there. It ends in the white town of Sumner. In the final scene Emmett is standing outside his father's cabin with all of his worldly possessions tied to a stick. 'Where you going boy?' his father asks. 'I hate you', Emmett responds, 'You ain't no man.' And then he walks away. The film's vision here is intimately tied to children's 'vision': that of both the children of Rosewood who have testified to this past and Emmett, the white child, who has the capacity to see differently. By looking as if through black eyes he is able to see through the reified, naturalised structures of societal and institutional racism. The price of this vision, though, is high for it requires him to disinherit himself. In some ways, then, Emmett becomes the model for the white spectator. It is the white spectator, like Emmett, who needs to learn to see as if through black eyes, and this is achieved cinematically. This kind of vision, Singleton suggests, generates empathy, and it is the only way to prevent the structures of oppression from reproducing themselves. Through the character of Emmett, Singleton's film stages a process whereby white viewers can come to recognise and reject racism. Seeing through black eyes in *Rosewood* means seeing 'through' the reified ideologies of white supremacy.

Singleton uses cinematic identification to create the conditions under which audience members can take on prosthetic memories. The film deploys specific cinematic techniques intended to elicit identification both with the African American characters, but also, at the end, with the little white boy, Emmett. This kind of cinematic identification has pedagogical value because it forces identification across racial lines; it positions white people to look at the world through black eyes. Similarly, cinematic identification can enable viewers to acquire prosthetic memories. Emmett's ability to turn away from his father and to reject his father's white supremacist

beliefs is enabled by his memories: his memory of his father calling his friend Arnett a nigger, his memory of being forced to make a noose, his memory of the mass grave filled with black bodies – and babies. And in identifying with Emmett, we too take on those memories. They are not memories of events we lived through, as they are for Emmett, yet through an act of prosthesis enabled by cinematic identification, they become part of our archive of memory. The point here is not that we forget who we are as we watch the film, but rather that we are enabled, for a short period of time, to see through different eyes, and think beyond our own social position. Prosthetic memories enable us to ‘remember’ the specific event, the Rosewood massacre, but also the broader historical terrain – the vitality of organised racism that persisted well into the twentieth century. In other words, the past that the film makes visible is one that has social relevance in the present and might be instrumental in enabling a white individual to experience empathy for African Americans, as Emmett does for the residents of Rosewood.

To help white audiences see through black eyes, and to force white viewers to interrogate the prejudices which are the legacy of whiteness, is certainly the intention of this film. And yet, as post-structuralism has taught us, texts are polysemic. There is no way to assure a particular reading of a text, no way to completely stabilise meaning. For some viewers, the vulgarity of the white characters will be read as an exaggeration, making it easier to dismiss the film as anti-white propaganda. For others, the circumstances and specificities of their own lives might radically alter what they take from the film. Non-African American viewers might well see *Rosewood* as a reflection of their own experience; in other words, instead of working to generate empathy for African Americans, the film might actually reproduce an individual’s sense of his or her own victimisation, foreclosing the possibility of learning about difference. There is ultimately no guarantee of how any text will be read.

But if the active engagement of individuals with mass cultural texts means that the meanings of prosthetic memories cannot be predetermined, this engagement is also precisely what gives prosthetic memories their special power. As memories taken on and experienced sensuously, even viscerally, they become powerful tools in shaping one’s subjectivity. At the same time, though, these memories are not essential, not simply an individual’s birthright – one can imagine, for example, a white person ‘remembering’ racism and

racial persecution in this country. Because prosthetic memories enable individuals to have a personal connection to an event they did not live through, to see through another's eyes, they have the capacity to make possible alliances across racial, class and other chasms of difference. As *Total Recall* demonstrates, the political potential of prosthetic memory lies in its capacity to enable ethical thinking. Technologies such as the camera and the cinema enable people to take on memories of difficult pasts and thereby facilitate the experience of empathy. In so doing, they open up new doors for consciousness raising and progressive political alliance formation.

The idea that mass cultural technologies are inherently atomising and apolitical has re-emerged in the debates surrounding the latest such technology: the Internet. Like both the cinema and television before it, the Internet has generated a great deal of discussion, both among academics and in the popular press, about its potential and its dangers. In addition to celebrating its ability to grant easy access to vast amounts of information, champions of the Internet, such as Howard Rheingold, have tended to celebrate its capacity to generate 'virtual communities', which he defines as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'.²¹ Critical of precisely those claims, its detractors have challenged the idea that a virtual community looks anything like a 'real' community.²² Kevin Robins, for one, has argued that cyberspace is often imagined as a utopia divorced from the social, material and political landscapes of the 'real world'.²³ For Robins, communities in cyberspace are fundamentally anti-political.²⁴ And he is by no means alone in this position. Cyberspace, Michele Willson argues, sanctions 'a withdrawal from the active political sphere of real space'.²⁵ But she is equally concerned with the ethical ramifications of 'virtual communities', claiming that such disembodied interactions, the immaterial and transient connections people share in virtual communities, render an ethical or political concern for the Other 'impotent and unrealizable'.²⁶

These critiques, it seems, bring us back to the world of *Strange Days*, to anxieties about the ways in which new technologies might atomise, rather than politicise individuals. Like the memory playbacks to which Lenny Nero is addicted, cyberchats seem to limit an individual's ability to engage in meaningful politics. But while it might be the case that virtual communities differ in quality and depth from

the real thing, we should hesitate before embracing an unqualified celebration of real communities. At least in the US, patterns of racial and economic segregation have meant that most communities that exist in real space are distressingly homogeneous and exclusive. The Internet, like the cinema, has the capacity to speak to a wide range of people who hail from radically different backgrounds, and to foster the formation not necessarily of communities, but of political alliances across those differences. Cyberspace offers an arena in which large-scale, strategic alliances can be mobilised quickly and efficiently to enable political activism. For example, the Internet was crucial in coordinating the public demonstrations that interrupted the IMF and World Bank meetings in Seattle in December of 1999. In that case, too, a diverse public came together not to form a permanent community, but to combine forces on the basis of shared political interests. By enabling farmers, union workers, college students and environmentalists, among others, to recognise, in previously unimaginable ways, a shared set of political concerns, the Internet enabled these disparate groups to take collective action. By focusing on communities as the grounds for politics in cyberspace, the critics might have overlooked other kinds of associations and networks in cyberspace where individuals actively engage real world politics.

My aim here is not to be an apologist for the Internet, particularly given its marriage to unbridled capitalism. But as with capitalism itself, the Internet has made available texts and archives that were accessible only to the privileged few. Many critics, for example, overlook the great strides that have been taken to make the Internet a legitimate tool in both the dissemination and archiving of history: the work of some historians has shown the capacity of the Internet to be educational, not just commercial.²⁷ Furthermore, as an increasingly experiential medium, the Internet has the potential to generate prosthetic memories. Because of its fundamental interactivity, it engages the individual body. As its mode of address becomes more complex both visually and aurally, the Internet might be another mass cultural mechanism capable of generating empathy and ethical politics. While I share Willson's concern about the ethical ramifications of virtual communities, I am more sanguine about the possibilities the Internet opens up for disseminating prosthetic memories that might enable grassroots political activism and consciousness-raising.

I do not mean for even a moment to suggest that there is anything *inherently* positive or progressive about this new form of memory.

What I mean instead to underscore is the unique power of prosthetic memory to affect people in profound ways – both intellectually and emotionally – in ways that might ultimately change the way they think, and how they act, in the world. My call, therefore, is to take seriously both the desire individuals feel to be part of history and the potential of prosthetic memory to bring about social justice. The mass cultural technologies that enable the production and dissemination of prosthetic memories are incredibly powerful; rather than disdain and turn our backs on these technologies, we must instead recognise their power and political potential. As surfing the Internet reveals, hate groups and Holocaust deniers have embraced these powerful technologies; and so must progressively-minded individuals. The taking on of memories, particularly traumatic memories, and the disenfranchisement and loss of privilege that the experience often necessitates, can have a profound effect on one's politics and one's understanding of who one's allies might be.

What I am describing here is a utopian dream, a dream where ethics and politics converge. My dream is the antithesis of the nightmare in *Strange Days*. And it is a dream that has not yet materialised. As we embark on this next century, where inevitably we will find that capitalism continues to permeate all aspects of life and culture, we must resist the temptation to throw up our arms in resignation. Commodification does not necessarily mean atomisation. Paradoxically, it can help overcome the atomising effect of private memory that Rosenzweig identifies by making memory more radically public. There will be new technologies and the further development of old ones – museums, the cinema, the Internet – and they will continue to disseminate stories and images about the past. The utopian dream that I have named prosthetic memory is a call to take seriously these technologies, these sites for the production of prosthetic memories, as they might well serve as the ground on which to construct new political alliances, based not on blood, or family or kinship, but on collective social responsibility.

Notes

- 1 Using standard survey practice, and random-digit dialing, they completed 808 national interviews; as a pool, the interviewees reflected the varied demographics of America. Because they were also interested in the way that minority groups articulate their relationship to the past

- and to American history, they also developed three minority samples: African American, Mexican American and American Indian. For a detailed discussion of how the survey was conducted see 'Appendix 1'. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 209–31.
- 2 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 186. The kind of memories of the past most people favour are private ones, memories that have some personal component to them: a 71-year-old woman reflecting on World War Two does not focus on the 'patriotic narrative of the nation-state', but instead remembers that 'she learned self reliance from the war: "My husband was in that. It was a lot of heart-ache with both of us being young and him being away in his early twenties. I learned how to be independent and how to take care of myself."' (p. 115).
 - 3 For more on 'prosthetic memory', see Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: Blade Runner and Total Recall', *Body and Society* 1: 3–4 (November 1995). Also collected in Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (eds), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 175–89, and most recently in David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (eds), *The Cybercultures Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 190–201; Alison Landsberg, 'America, the Holocaust and the Mass Culture of Memory: Towards a Radical Politics of Empathy', *New German Critique* 71 (Spring–Summer 1997), 63–86; Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Logics and Politics of Memory in Modern American Culture' (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1996).
 - 4 Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath, ed. W. Stark (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1970) [published 1913 (1923 was the second edn)].
 - 5 Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, p. 47.
 - 6 *Ibid.*
 - 7 *Ibid.*
 - 8 Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, p. 48.
 - 9 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word sympathy first appeared in 1567 and was understood to mean 'agreement in qualities, likeness, conformity, correspondence'. In 1596, its usage reflected a new shade of meaning, not just a conformity, but a 'conformity of feelings, inclinations, or temperament, which makes persons agreeable to each other'. This sense of conformity, of adapting oneself to be like the other, or more commonly reimagining the other to conform to oneself, has for centuries been central to the meaning of sympathy.
 - 10 The ideological problem of 'speaking for' the other has been widely

- theorised in the field of subaltern studies. See, for example, Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
- 11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987). This text, originally delivered as four lectures in 1946/47, was first published in 1948.
 - 12 It should be noted that Scheler rejects empathy, but the 'empathy' he rejects sounds more like what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as sympathy. He writes, 'When all is said, the theory of empathy offers no grounds for assuming the existence of other selves, let alone other individuals. For it can only serve to confirm the belief that it is *my* self which is present 'all over again', and never that this self is other and different from my own' (p. 242). My working definition of empathy seems more akin to what he calls 'fellow-feeling'.
 - 13 'Empathy', *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn.
 - 14 Miriam Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair": Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseilles 1940', *Critical Inquiry* 19.3 (Spring 1993), 458.
 - 15 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 236–7.
 - 16 In her powerful critique of the ideological grip of the 'heterosexual matrix' Judith Butler famously argues that there is no outside to the symbolic economy. In order to bring about change, one must work not outside of, but within, the existing sign system. Change is possible by changing how certain things signify, through what she calls redeployment – attaching new meanings to existing concepts. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990). I am indebted also to Daniel Miller's claim that the possibilities for social change are 'clearly immanent within the consumption activities of mass populations today'. See Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1987), p. 6.
 - 17 Miller, *Material Culture*, p. 190.
 - 18 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding, Decoding', in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 90–103.
 - 19 Importantly, for Hall, there are three identifiable decoding positions: the 'dominant hegemonic position' which takes the meaning at face value and operates hegemonically within the dominant code, the 'negotiated code or position' which draws on both hegemonic and oppositional elements and tends to focus on situational or local meanings, and the 'oppositional code' in which the viewer decodes the message in an oppositional or 'globally contrary' way, rejecting the cultural/political framework in which the message was encoded, in favor of an 'alternative framework of reference'. See Hall, 'Encoding, Decoding', pp. 90–103.

- 20 Etienne Balibar, 'What Is a Politics of the Rights of Man?', in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 205–20.
- 21 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerised World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 5.
- 22 See, for example, Kevin Robins, 'Cyberspace and the World We Live In', in David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (eds), *The Cybercultures Reader* (New York: Rotledge, 2000), pp. 77–95; Michele Willson, 'Community in the Abstract: A Political and Ethical Dilemma?', in Bell and Kennedy (eds), *The Cybercultures Reader*, pp. 644–57; and Ziauddin Sardar, 'ALT.CIVILIZATIONS.FAQ: Cyberspace as the Darker Side of the West', in Bell and Kennedy (eds), *The Cybercultures Reader*, pp. 732–52.
- 23 Robins, 'Cyberspace and the World We Live In', p. 86.
- 24 Robins, 'Cyberspace and the World We Live In', p. 90.
- 25 Willson, 'Community in the Abstract', p. 655.
- 26 Willson, 'Community in the Abstract', p. 645. Similarly, Ziauddin Sardar condemns the Internet as yet another Western apparatus involved in the project of colonising 'Others'; cyberspace, a space charted and created firmly in the West, is inevitably inflected by the 'subconscious perceptions and prejudices, conscious fantasies and fears' (Sardar 750) of its architects.
- 27 The Center for History and New Media, at George Mason University, for example, is dedicated to the furthering of historical knowledge online. See <http://chnm.gmu.edu>.