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## Overlapping history and space

*Reading Yeats I do not think of Ireland  
but of midsummer New York  
and of myself back then  
reading the copy that I found  
on the Third avenue El*

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

If there is a time when we wish to have all the past revealed before us, either as a will to re-invent narratives or as the justification of actions taken in the future, that time is now. And yet, the knowledge we demand of things past has been mainly supported on historiographic reports which seek to recover events, to represent historical scenes, and to explain a chronological linearity taking us all the way from the past until the moment when the story is described, and into conclusions about chained causalities of events, into demonstrations of the timely continuity of events. In a traditional sense, to know the past implies a sort of time-travel in which the historian tries to detach himself from the setting he inhabits and to be immersed in a total – and ideally unbiased – understanding of the time he is investigating. Perhaps this is not anymore the most reliable perspective, but it still has a strong power over the predominant construction of seductive images of the past. And even as we recognize the impossibility of uprooting an investigator and planting him, hypothetically whole, in a time he does not belong to, one of the most serious mistakes to blame on a historian is if he tries to integrate objects and thoughts from his time into the objects, contexts and past ‘realities’ he investigates. It is therefore peculiar that Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht proposes a new way, if not to write history, at least to understand the theoretical question of how history is written. According to Gumbrecht, it is very clear that traditional history has run out of epistemological possibilities. As such, it becomes urgent to reevaluate its methods, and the reason for that urgency lies in the strong “drive towards past Realities” (418), in the sense that we wish to bring it to live again. The first sign that might indicate an alternative to the exhaustion of the science of history is characterized by a dismissal of the pedagogical purposes of the discipline. If the historian is able to bring his thought away from that blinding target, he might conjecture satisfactory paths devoid of the theoretical crossroads, which obstruct the historiographic way. “After learning from history”<sup>1</sup> is the moment when the historian exists – but it is simultaneously a starting point in the direction of a less problematic and more promising perspective over the discourse about the past. Doubtless it still

presupposes learning from history, but it equally implies the need to overcome the epistemological “growing pains” in order to effectively bring together present and past.

The happiest way to respond to what Gumbrecht calls “irrepressible desire for [the] presence” of the past (424) is, therefore, a deviation from all pedagogical intents, which would take the historian back to the necessity of justifying the report, and give his intention of presenting the past the aspect of an academic argumentation. To Gumbrecht, it is in the textual construction of the present that we can find a possibility of neighboring with the past: the new present “is a frame for the experience of simultaneity” (421), to the extent that it allows for the simultaneous, and textual, existence, of both present and past(s) (for simultaneity necessarily carries the meaning of multiplicity). He can only attain this, in fact, if he sets free from the illusory purpose of teaching for the present through the past.

This conclusion brings to our minds similar arguments presented by Walter Benjamin in his dissertation for the academic career. According to the German philosopher, the impossibility of an approach to truth or to a reliable representation of reality was obvious. Thus, what is left to the desire of experiencing the past is an attempt to find it again through a sort of *patient invocation* of the past (cf. Gumbrecht; “we [...] have to let it [the immediate experience of the past] happen”, 424). This will not be possible unless the historian gives up the academic textual forms, which anticipate the mathematical evidence of conclusions. Benjamin’s historian, himself a haven for the philosopher trying to escape the ungraspability of the present, can only take shelter in the field of essays; because, although essays may be tinged with “didactic colors”, they are mainly characterized by a ‘lack of instructive conclusiveness’ and by the dismissal of the “coercive proof of mathematics” (28)<sup>2</sup>. According to Benjamin, the most characteristic method of the treaty is representation. It is also closer to the art territory that the historian must build his narrative, for his tour in the investigation of the past leads him to street of no return: on the one side, there is the insurmountable wall of the justificatory analysis of the past; on the other, the ferocious growl of the pack demanding him to anticipate the future. It seems important to go back to Benjamin’s words:

If it is the task of the philosopher to practise the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world, then he occupies an elevated position between that of the scientist and the artist. ... [The scientist] shares the philosopher’s interest in the elimination of the merely empirical; while the artist shares with the philosopher the task of representation. There has been a tendency to place the philosopher too close to the scientist, and frequently the lesser kind of scientist; as if representation had nothing to do with the task of the philosopher.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “After Learning from History” is the title of the chapter in which Gumbrecht gives the reader the “key” to what he has previously written on the history of the year 1926 (pp.411-436).

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter, “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, transl. by John Osborne, with an Introduction by George Steiner, New York and London, Verso, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Id, p. 32.

Further on, Benjamin describes the task of the philosopher as “to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the world” (36). To do so, the ideal method is not “one of intention and knowledge, but rather a *total immersion*” in the truth (36, my italics). This implies an even closer approach to the concept of philosophical history as the “sum total of all possible meaningful juxtapositions of [...] opposites” (47), which is not far from the notion of simultaneity as proposed by Gumbrecht.

The feasibility of history demands, therefore, the creation of narratives more adequately described as artistic than as faithful scientific portraits of a certain time, event, or historical figure. The knowledge of the past is beyond the limits of chronological or causal lines, beyond the organicist explanations according to which a historical fact is justified by another that, in turn, engendered it and will engender yet another, in a sequence. Just as literature is broken up into mirror-like fragments with the Surrealism in Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*, so the writing of history is affected by the character of what escapes the systematic logic of cause/effect. In Aragon’s text, post stamps are the epitome of historical record – “a thousand mystery links attach them to universal history” (90)<sup>4</sup>. To intend to tell of history through a collection of stamps would be an effort immediately condemned to frustration, mainly if what one wants is to tell the *real* history. The “mysterious links”, in thousands, are the logical threads, which multiply and entangle, making it impossible to reconstruct the ball of yarn (which, according to Gumbrecht, should not even be attempted). What is left to the historian may take the shape of three vaguely distinguished figures: Aragon’s historian is willingly a collector; Benjamin’s will wish to be an artist but the circumstances will force him to become a collector; Gumbrecht’s historian will be an illusionist who will conjure his settings – but his success (which Gumbrecht admits he does not strive to obtain, cf. p.xv) depends on the way he sets the conjured elements, i.e., in a way he lends from the collector the sense of the relevance of the show. Gumbrecht even states that “the suspension of sequencibility arises from the choice of a specific angle of historical representation” (428), and that the arbitrariness of that decision is inevitable (cf.429). In the lack of a “theory of the present” which, even if necessary, is not yet available (cf. 428), Gumbrecht calls the prestidigitator of past scenes a “historian of simultaneity” (428), someone who operates a sort of freezing of the times and brings to the synchronicity of the present texts and artifacts from the past, aligning them in a way as to conceal even the inescapable sequencibility of the text. History as Gumbrecht describes it brings to the same plane apparently contradictory elements whose combination is hardly expected – and he transforms that difficulty into one of the most alluring aspects of the experience of the past.

Calling opposites into cohabitation reminds us of some of Benjamin’s notes on his experiences with hashish. This is how the author describes similitude (it is also remarkable how

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<sup>4</sup> History is in the details, in the apparently meaningless objects, but also in the lives of individuals: Sysonby, one of race horses Lewis Mumford favored and remembered from his childhood days, was included in the collection of the New York Museum of Natural History – Mumford’s individual memory extends to the collective memory, to natural history (cf. Mumford, *Sidewalk Critic*, p. 35).

the last sentence places us before the problem of history, the writing of history and its interpretation):

The appearances of superposition, of overlap, which come with hashish may be grasped through the concept of similitude. When we say that one face is similar to another, we mean that certain features of this second face appear to us in the first, without the latter's ceasing to be what it has been. Nevertheless, the possibilities of entering into appearance in this way are not subject to any criterion and are therefore boundless. [...] every truth points manifestly to its opposite, and this state of affairs explains the existence of doubt. Truth becomes something living: it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other.<sup>5</sup>

From 1978 to 1979, David Wojnarowicz produced a photograph series called "Arthur Rimbaud in New York". It was one of his earliest and most serious works, and it remains one of the most coherent. In each one of the twenty-four photos, a man impersonates Jean-Arthur Rimbaud, using a cardboard mask with the image of the poet's face. The nineteenth century poet appears in different places of New York City, his ghostly expression unchanged. The body is that of a young man<sup>6</sup>. The setting is almost always New York: the decadence of Coney Island; a peep show on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street; a diner in the downtown area; the subway headed for Brooklyn; a poorly looking hotel room. These are places at the same time recognizable and undistinguished, past and present, 'New-yorkian' and Parisian – converging into one single frame.

The following image shows different levels, both in direct and indirect reference. At least six historical levels are present: Leonardo (in the draft of the human anatomy on the wall and reversibly represented by the body of the poet-impersonated), the Mexican dream (almost disappearing over the capita lettering in the *graffiti*), Marcel Duchamp, art criticism, Rimbaud (and with him the whole group of New York spaces generated in the series) and David Wojnarowicz. It is not so much a will to inscribe history in the photograph, but rather to 'let it happen', before and through the creation of the photographic art; to let the simultaneous existence of different times occur and to allow, with that, the satisfaction of the necessity of contact with the past identified by Gumbrecht.

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, p. 418.

<sup>6</sup> Ainda que se saiba que, na maioria das fotografias, trata-se de Brian Butterick, amigo e colaborador de Wojnarowicz no grupo punk "3 Teens Kill 4 – No Reason".



Figure 1 Arthur Rimbaud in New York (Duchamp, Pier), 1978-79  
From a series of twenty-four expositions, 10x8" each.  
Private collection.

Choosing Rimbaud carries the obvious meaning of an association between that “poète maudit” and Wojnarowicz<sup>7</sup>. The latter had admired Rimbaud since his teenage years, and he identified himself with the way he understood not just his image as a poet but also the modern context of the city he inhabited. In the photographic series, the figure of the French poet travels through New York, while Wojnarowicz completes his “memory landscape” with strange images of contexts, which, for him, are familiar. In all the photos the mask grants the character something of an anti-expression, as if the gaze of the past looked not into the present time of the surroundings, but into the future, into the eyes of the reader – or, into a timeless era when the poet abandoned himself to his primordial desires:

My journey is complete; I leave Europe. The morning will burn my lungs; far-off climates shall tan me. To swim, to bite the grass, to hunt, above all to smoke; to drink very liquor as strong as burning metal, - like our dear ancestors used to do around the fire.

[...]

We cannot leave. – Let us return to the paths from here, loaded with my vice, the vice, which has planted its roots of pain in me since the age of reason.<sup>8</sup>

Rimbaud’s non-European corresponds to some African, or even Oriental, exotic. But Wojnarowicz places it in the American sites where the sweet dreams of the individual become the collective nightmare. The attitudes portrayed in the photographs are distant from the behavior expected in a free and natural environment (as opposed to the “European” civilized constraints) and are rather related to the areas of New York decadence identified with the homosexual experiences of the artist. Wojnarowicz’s admiration for Rimbaud is actually mixed with a kind of ritual among the gay community that idolizes a number of “damned writers”, among which are Rimbaud and Jean Genet (whose image is used in other paintings by

<sup>7</sup> This was analyzed by Donald Kuspit in his article “David Wojnarowicz: The Last Rimbaud”, 1988 ([http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/DavidW/DW\\_Kuspit.html](http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/DavidW/DW_Kuspit.html), active on 23.02.2002).

<sup>8</sup> My translation from : “Ma journée est faite; je quitte l’Europe. L’air marin brûlera mes poumons; les climats perdus me tanneront. Nager, broyer l’herbe, chasser, fumer surtout; boir des liqueurs fortes comme métal brillant, – comme faisaient ces chers ancêtres autour des feux. [...] On ne part pas. – Reprenons les chemins d’ici, chargé de mon vice, le vice qui a poussé ses racines de souffrance à mon côté, dès l’âge de raison –” (Rimbaud, Jean-Arthur, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed Lattès, Paris, 1995, pp. 195-196.)

Wojnarowicz<sup>9</sup>). Just like Rimbaud outside Europe, in New York Wojnarowicz would be able to fulfill his dream of separating “into ten different people; ten versions of myself in order to give each person I loved a part of myself forever, and also have some left over to drift across landscapes”<sup>10</sup>. Through this ‘left over’, Wojnarowicz was trying to go back to new places, new times, and different personae. One of the ways he managed to accomplish this was to manifest his own biography in each one of his works. The artistic drive becomes historical: different settings overlap and new works are created the processes of which illustrate the strong dispersion of the individual through space and his way of perceiving the organization of that space, which belongs to and precedes him. The face of a French poet, with whom he shared a kind of *persona*, records the image of a rebel youth, of a healthy rebellion and of exotic yet desired expectations, sought for because they will please. The non-European (i.e., non-Western) nature where Wojnarowicz could seek haven from the horror of marginalization in his own society is not associated with any new land where it is possible to find the comfort or the plenitude he longs for. Rather, he writes in his diary on September 4, 1971 (after having spent three days alone on a small islet at a summer camp):

There is an incredible amount of freedom in the city. [...] I just can't wait to get back to it all. I will enjoy every speck of dirt on the streets and buildings. I will be happy to see the old bums again. The pimps, prostitutes, and whores. I will be extra happy to see the Broadway Game Room.<sup>11</sup>

The Western city, thus, is the artist's most natural home. If Rimbaud still had an idea about a place to escape, this idea is not present in Wojnarowicz, since the natural counterpart of the cityscape is strange to him and totally inhospitable.

David Wojnarowicz splits himself into many different characters using the image of the French poet, but he equally uses other resources to distribute himself as diverse personae through as many different places: in his paintings he would frequently use clippings from world maps as drawing material for the images he creates. One of the installations he showed at Gracie Mansion Gallery, in November 1984, is a great shark covered with political maps; the points of the compass lie right underneath the upper fin:



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<sup>9</sup> Such as in *Untitled (Genet)* 1979, Xeroxed collage, 8 ½" x 11".

<sup>10</sup> Wojnarowicz, David, *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, p. 67.

Figure 2 *Untitled [Shark]*, 1984.  
Acrylic and map collage on fibreglass, 51x22x26".  
Collection of Eileen and Richard Ekstract, New York.

The mouth is open, and the menacing teeth of the shark seem to want to swallow the world or the viewer. Possible guidance in space lies underwater, under the element, which marks the presence of the animal. Yet, getting nearer will not do for orientation. At the same exhibition, under the suspended shark, Wojnarowicz placed another of the works in which maps cover a three-dimensional figure: "Untitled [Burning Child]" is a child's puppet colored with the lines and tones of a geographic plan:



Figure 3 *Burning Child*, 1985  
Mixed media on doll.  
Collection of Robert Mnuchin, New York.

This time, the menace is not only suggested: the child is burning, flames coming out of his back, arms, and legs. In other, two-dimensional, works, such as "Untitled [Burning Man]"<sup>12</sup> (1984), the theme of a man in flames is repeated. The map of the world appears in splitting fragments and it is part of the scene which envelopes the burning man, surrounded by squarely drawn frontiers that suggest city blocks and streets. Closer to the man, the fragments of the map are more scattered, as if the world were breaking up – though it is not clear whether the dispersion results from the conflagration of the man or it represents the proximity of space as an intensifier of the pain. Maps come up in Wojnarowicz's work almost always associated with menacing situations, suffocation, and inescapable power over human beings. In "Something From Sleep II"<sup>13</sup> (1987-88), a man is lying asleep, in the lower part of the painting. Above the man, as a dream, the blue sky is torn by pieces of dollar bills, heads of machine-men, man-like beasts, an armless watch, a human heart and an African mask. The map is used as a background, which defines the bed and the body of the man. It would seem that reading the map here would be related to the peace of sleep; however, its interpretation still suggests the human powerlessness before man's unconscious – the expression on the man's face is tense, which stresses this

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<sup>11</sup> Wojnarowicz, David, *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> See *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*, p. 18.

perspective. The composition of the sleeping man is a quotation from a former painting<sup>14</sup> in which the menace beyond sleep is even more obvious: the man dreams of another man who is pointing a gun at him. In this painting, the map falls out of the scene of sleep and arises from the left of the canvas, up to two thirds of the frame. The sleeping man and the running burning child are both made of maps: they are no longer individuals, but gain a quasi-universal dimension; they are everybody every time, everywhere. In 1989, Wojnarowicz said in an interview to Barry Blinderman:

the concept of map is contingent on people accepting that this [is] what landmasses look like from some point in outer space. [...] You can think of the map as a metaphor for government – that this is what the world looks like, this [is] who you are, this is your job, this is how things have to run [...]. So I use a map as a metaphor. By ripping the map into pieces I've suddenly erased all these borders and I've completely joined opposing governments. It's a metaphor for a sense of groundlessness and anarchy.<sup>15</sup>

This was how Wojnarowicz brought together the different landscapes, which filled his thought: imaginarily destroying those physical, geographical, or political borders. Yet, in that same movement he ended up adding extra meaning to the strategy of overlapping he had initiated with the Rimbaud series: time and space are clashed and cause the limits between different ages and locations to disappear. A dead French poet may reappear in a city he has never visited, in a time which is not his. This transposition, which suggests a breach of chronological linearity, underlines the illusory character that Gumbrecht associated with the task of thinking history. Rimbaud *transforms* into someone else, and recovers the living dimension in a changed place. Rimbaud in New York offers the viewer the immediate experience of the past through the overlapping of inconsistencies. Collage, juxtapositions, overlapping – these are all techniques of gathering and exhibiting artifacts, profoundly implied in the feasibility of new historical perspectives.

The individual experience is not just a starting point for montage, for the association of disparate elements: it constitutes, at the same time, the point from which a certain angle of the past is perceived. The individual is related to the visuality of what fills the urban space and becomes the vortex from which everything is viewed. The accumulation of spatial elements leads to their confusion, and to a general blurred image the outlines of which are losing sharpness.

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<sup>13</sup> Id, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Wojnarowicz, David, "History Keeps Me Awake at Night (For Rilo Chmielorz)", 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Wojnarowicz, David, *Tongues of Flame*, p. 61.

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