Myths ...

7 Roland Barthes, 'That Old Thing, Art ...' (1980), in Post Pop Art, ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989) 23.

8 Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931) 19.

Briony Fer, Introduction, *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art after Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) 1–4.

Ollivier Dyens
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[...] In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, the neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks recounts several stories of men and women who, due to lesions, deformities and other cerebral illnesses, see the world in very strange ways. These patients, of whom Sacks paints a moving picture, are unusual and unique not because of their physical appearance, but because their representation of the world is profoundly different from our own. Sacks' patients are complete but different human beings. Their relationship to humanity is less vertical than horizontal, for they position themselves parallel to the majority.

These men and women do not live in our world of categorized universal representations. Instead, each of them inhabits a real but entirely individual realm, to which no one else has access (one patient suddenly begins to mistrust his sense of smell, another constantly hears childhood songs playing in his head, a third discovers the use of his hands after sixty years, and so on). These human beings, whose brains were somehow damaged by illness or accident, are not prisoners in their worlds any more than we are in our own, but living in our world, one so foreign to them, forces them into withdrawal. These people share their bodies, knowledge and 'souls' with us, but are unable to share the world itself. They are strangers in our universe, cognitive immigrants suffering from a terminal case of homesickness ...

Sacks' book clearly illustrates that the existence of the world is intimately anchored to representations. This is not to say that the physical world does not

exist, a victim of torture is undeniable proof of its materiality. The world definitely exists, but the brain alone gives it its soul, and because we all share a nearly identical brain, we are able to posit universal representations. But if the brain gives the world its 'soul', then it can also pervert it to such a point that the resulting phenomenology is incompatible with that of the majority. A different brain imparts a different taste, structure and colour to the surrounding world. A different brain, a diseased and incomplete one, produces a representation of the world that it cannot share with other brains. This is what has happened to Sacks' patients.

This multiplication and 'personalization' of representations is particularly interesting in light of the entanglement of technologies and human beings. Technologies transform phenomenology. This, I believe, is undeniable. Technologies give access to different, multiple and unknown levels of reality, and by its mere presence, this access alters the encoding of our world. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon (technologies are as old as living beings). However, what is new is the proliferation of technologies and their adaptability to particular and specific needs. New technologies are drawing closer to us. They adapt to us as much as we adapt to them. With current technologies, each of us may choose how to live, die and pray – even how to give birth and create life. New technologies enable each of us to erect a world that responds to our particular perception and understanding. We are turning into Oliver Sacks' patients; explorers of worlds that are ours alone, worlds that have tastes, colours and realities unique to each of us. Sacks' patients are, to some extent, prototypes of the cultural being.

We are moving from a world where human beings diversified themselves according to their absolutes (shared absolutes), to one where human beings diversify absolutes themselves. Like Sacks' patients, we are physically very similar to one another, but are separated by worlds (technologically specific worlds) that are increasingly dissimilar. We are not witnessing the end of great ideological stories but their infinite proliferation, and to such a point that formerly unwavering representations like time, space, life and death are also mutating and multiplying. Like head trauma victims, we are now seeing space, perceiving time, experiencing life and considering death according to 'languages' which are not and cannot be universal. Because of technology, the world has become a series of exclusive and personal realms.

George Steiner has defined the task of this sombre age as 'learning anew to be human'[1] The brain not only reads the surrounding world (leaving traces of itself in it), it also bestows meaning on it, and this meaning originates from memories. Memories are extended emotions that allow us to exist within various levels of time and space. The brain does not create the world, for the world already exists. But the world created by the brain is one whose meaning and richness is produced by memory-laced representations.

'How can one have a memory without memories?', asks Michel Serrault to his secretary as she works on her computer (in Claude Sautet's film *Nelly and Mr Arnaud*). This whimsical reflection conceals an important phenomenon: memory and memories are confused, as we are entrusting our memories, rather than the ability to remember, to our machines. But what will happen once memories, which endow us with conscience and existence, survive only in databases? How will this transform us? Some years ago, Susan Sontag studied the impact of an excessive use of representations where, for example, the photograph of an event became more important than the event itself. This living by proxy, she suggested, profoundly alters our experience of the world.

Today, our memories almost never originate from our own decoding but are almost exclusively machine-recorded events. How will that affect our structuring of both the world and our individual psyche? How will we be remodelled by our multiplying worlds and relinquished memories? Is this what theoreticians of technological culture are talking about? When we examine the entanglement of biology and culture, are we witnessing the offloading of our phenomenology onto technology?

What are we becoming as we empty more of our memories into culture and technology? How will we perceive the world when even our most intimate memories become device-dependent?

Clearly, we already share a great number of memories that are recorded, interpreted and archived by machines alone. Memory banks are already easily accessible. Memory withdrawal from those banks is something we already often do to structure our understanding not only of world history, but more ominously, of our own personal history. The images of the Chinese student facing a tank during the Tiannamen Square crisis or those of the Kennedy assassination and, of course, the live images of the World Trade Center terror are good examples of machine-recorded events with deep global and personal meaning. The recorded voices and images of Neil Armstrong and of Martin Luther King are yet other examples of the same phenomenon. Such memories have been extracted from the minds of individual men and women and have become universal, permanently frozen in their recording, and protected from the ravages of time, history and human forgetfulness. They now belong to a collective human memory, available to all in a sort of supermarket of memories, where (as Sontag said) it is the recording of the event that becomes the memory, where memory (in the computer sense) becomes memories. We have fewer and fewer individual memories, and most of the ones we now have are shared with an ever-increasing number of men and women. But memories are the colours and material of our human universe.

What will happen as more and more representations of the surrounding

world are produced, while the cultural springs from which we draw these representations become weaker and weaker?

Memories and their emotions are not only that which gives us our essence. They are also a universal language. One of the most interesting elements of Oliver Sacks' book is his patients' extreme responsiveness to the emotions embodied in art. Whether a poem, music, play, song or dance, all of Sacks' patients are transformed, even reborn (almost literally), when they come into contact with works of art. Suddenly, each is rid of his or her handicap(s), and seems to dive into a different and universal realm to which all humans have access. [...]

Born of human memories and emotions, art is a universal current. Melancholy, sadness, joy, terror, anger and the like constitute an esperanto that every human being can read, understand and share. But emotion and art are nothing other than memories. Living beings remember, and this is how they are able consciously to exist in time and space. Memory is fundamental to the emergence of both order and complexity. Without memories, a being cannot learn and adapt to the demands of the environment. Without memories, a being cannot evaluate the condition of his or her body (since this evaluation depends upon an interaction between before and now), and is thereby unable to emerge as a conscious being. Memories of pleasure, pain, sadness and joy, are the common thread that unites all human beings. Memories are our existence, and art is their system of replication.

When I listen to a symphony, when I read a poem or watch a film, I do not only see, hear or read specific words, images or sounds. What I also (and I would suggest mostly) perceive is a sort of universal human 'memory' that unites beings to one another. Memory is a matrix; it is a moving, unstable and ephemeral language that is continually renewed but eternally recognized and decoded.

Memories are at the core of most of today's fundamental changes. We live in a world that is riddled, inundated and infested with memories of both men and machines. We live in a world where memories no longer belong exclusively to us. The memories that we now have are ahuman, created and manipulated events, preserved outside ourselves. Our current memories, those that give us form and identity, are fabricated productions; their recording, storage, recall and modification are all operations performed by machines. We live in a world of mostly inhuman memories. If there is a memory of the world today, it is a memory of machines. Without them, I do not exist, for without them, I, personally, have no memories. Our existence, in its most intimately human structure, now belongs to machines. Machines create my past. Machines create my melancholy. Relationships among human beings are now inseparable from machines and technology, and contemporary works of art reflect that. Worlds multiply, and in the most fundamental paths of human presence, machines find their place.

When I am nostalgic about a remembered event of my life, I can only be so through a machine's recording and filtering of it.

We fall in love with our technologies, not simply because machines possess augmented and multiplied senses (they see and hear 'better', they run faster, are stronger, etc.), but because they control our memories and emotions. Human identity now dwells within machines and machine-made memories. The hunger to become machine, a fantasy so prevalent today, illustrates a thirst, not to locate, but to rediscover memories. Machines control our memories, they own the fundamental materials that shape us, and they manage the structures that generate human meaning and perspective. We long for our humanity.

This longing is, I believe, one of the foundations of postmodernism. In its multiplicity, in its infinite exploration of surfaces, meanings and contradictions, postmodernity searches for human emotions. It is not only a cognitive map that needs to be redrawn (as Fredric Jameson suggests), but also a map of memories; a map whose trails pass resolutely through the territory of machines. When theoreticians of technological culture explore the phenomenon of the post-human and of post-biology, when they explore the concepts of life and artificial intelligences, they not only examine the emergence of a new being that is half-organic and half-machine; they also point to a new ontology defined by the common memories of men and machines.

The representations of postmodernity referred to as Panic Bodies, Retrofuture, or Inverted Millennarism illustrate a need to find emotions and memories that each can call his own. This need for human emotional and mnemonic specificity is found in art as well as in commerce, in war and in fashion, in history and in poverty. Machines, technologies, institutions and commercial phenomena are so fertile with memories and emotions (and human beings have offloaded unto machines so many of them) that sociological meaning must come from their interplay. That is what postmodernity illustrates. Like so many of Oliver Sacks' patients, we are devoid of memories. Like them, we move in and out of countless worlds and experiences in the hope of finding memories, any memory at all. But only in the machine-made realm are those memories now available. [...]

Humanity is flowing away from humans and toward machines. Marvin Minsky and Hans Moravec suggest that today's robots are our cognitive children. Let's be more specific here and speak of machines, robots and technologies, not as cognitive children, but as emotion children, representational children and memory children.

1 George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 4.

Ollivier Dyens, extracts from 'The Sadness of the Machine', *ctheory* (2001) (www.ctheory.net)