Michael Newman
Analogue, Chance and Memory//2011

The narrator in J.G. Ballard's story 'Prisoner of the Coral Deep' (1964)[1] finds the fossilized shell of a gastropod in a rock pool near a cave. He becomes aware of being watched by a woman, with skin white 'like ancient pearl'. 'I am not sure why', he remarks to her, 'but fossils fascinate me – they're like time capsules; if only one could unwind this spiral it would probably play back to us a picture of all the landscapes it's ever seen – the great oceans of the Carboniferous, the warm shallow seas of the Trias …' 'Would you like to go back to them?' she asks. To which he replies, 'Hardly. I suppose it's just the nostalgia of one's unconscious memory … The sea is like memory. However lost or forgotten, everything in it exists for ever …'

If 'every wave has left its echo there', the shell has recorded the sounds of all time. However, time does not form a unified whole moving in one direction. Urged by the woman to listen to it, the narrator hears a voice calling for help, 'a mariner from the distant future, marooned millions of years ago in this cave at the edge of the Triassic sea'. This voice comes from much later than the remote past of the fossil. As these two pasts erupt into the present, the time of listening collides with the earlier times when the 'recording' was laid down, when a voice that calls into the unknown future echoes amid the sounds of a remote sea in the helix of the 'listening trumpet'. Analogue is inherently anachronistic, resulting in the non-linear conjunction of different times.

The analogue recording is an index of what it records, a trace that is contingent. Something is an indexical trace when it is produced by contact with that which leaves it, just as an analogue audio recording is made by sound waves touching a membrane, or a film is made by light transforming the chemicals on a strip of celluloid. A state of affairs is contingent when it is subject to chance, when it just happens to be that way and could just as well have been otherwise. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben put forward an interpretation of Herman Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853) – a story about a law-copyist who replies to every request or command with neither a 'no' nor a 'yes', but rather 'I would prefer not to'. Agamben argued that contingency, the condition in which things could just as well have been otherwise, involves potentiality, which, not yet having passed into the actuality of yes and no, must always contain the possibility not only to be or do, but also to not be or do.[2] What, then, is the relation between the trace and contingency?

To listen to an analogue recording, or regard a film or photograph made in

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this way, is to engage in an act of remembrance. Remembering, rather than simply repeating something fixed, yields the contingency of the trace, attributing potentiality to it once again. We don't necessarily have to know the origin of the trace, since memory is also reconstruction. Foley artists create sound effects to be added to films after shooting, wobbling a sheet of metal for thunder, or grinding their feet in a box of pebbles to suggest walking on the beach. The traces may have been left intentionally or unintentionally, or they may just be the result of wear and tear over time, they may be human or non-human. In analogue recording, even if we do not know *what* the source is, we know that there *was* one.

Analogue is finite: in analogue playback the recording is transformed, however slightly each time it is played – it records the traces of its own passage, to the point, at the extreme, of the obliteration of the content. Inherent to the trace is the possibility that it may be erased, not least because it depends upon a material support for its existence. Even if the image or sound is obliterated, that which held the trace may serve as something like a relic, as with the faded photograph of a forebear, or a piece of magnetic tape on which birdsong or the sound of an insect was recorded.

What happens when the analogue technologies of memory are themselves left behind by the forward march of progress? This concerns not only the obsolete object which may harbour an unrealized, even explosive, potential – the chance encounter for which the Surrealists hoped as they wandered the Paris flea markets. It also concerns the very technological medium of memory that is capable of transforming the modality of the past from a bygone actuality to something that has the potential to open up another future in the present. While the relation to the past considered as information is a matter of knowledge, the relation to it as trace is that of witness: it concerns us. While visiting Michael Hamburger's house, the narrator in W.G. Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) perceives the present as that of the revenant of an earlier time:

> And as I looked on these apples which shone through the half-light much as the golden apples likened in Proverbs to a word fitly spoken, the quite outlandish thought crossed my mind that these things, the kindling, the jiffy bags, the fruit preserves, the seashells and the sound of the sea within them had all outlasted me, and that Michael was taking me round a house in which I myself had lived a long time ago.[3]

These words appear with the reproduction of a photograph of what looks like a pile of padded bags and other mailing containers outside a door opening into a room, like shells that have been emptied of their living contents – the word, for instance – and discarded ready for recycling. Here 'evidence' is presented in the

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form of the reproduction of the photograph, itself a kind of fossil or cast of what once was (fossils and plaster casts were for this reason favourite subjects of the early Daguerreotype). The contingency of the photograph – that what was photographed could have been otherwise, that it was just what happened to be in the frame at the time – is freed in its potential through the recounting in a memoir in which different pasts and places come together, analogically, while remaining distinct. Among the ancient Greek senses of logos in 'analogue' are 'word' and 'gathering': just as analogue traces retain their anachronism, the words of the story gather the different layers of time without quite fusing them into one. That of which the traces are retained is brought back into an afterlife in the present, but may also disturb it.

The analogue medium is robust yet vulnerable to change, liable to decay or wear out, as the groove of a vinyl record loses some of its subtle variations with each play, or the surface of a 'celluloid' film accumulates scratches with each run through the projector. In this respect, analogue is, like our mortal bodies, subject to ageing and desuetude. It is here that we can locate a difference between the analogue and the digital. Digital reproduction is always imperfect – it involves compression and loss – but takes place within a horizon of perfectibility: it will get more and more accurate as the technology develops, asymptotically approaching flawlessness so long as the code remains uncorrupted. With analogue reproduction, because it involves a direct relation to its source, of which it is the trace or imprint rather than a translation into zeros and ones, there is an immediacy – which is why audiophiles tend to prefer vinyl – but this is so within a horizon of imperfection and contingency. Analogue always involves chance, and a bit of luck.

1 J.G. Ballard, in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006) 1–7.

2 Giorgio Agamben, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 243–71.

3 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995); trans. Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002) 184–5. Michael Hamburger (1924–2007) was a poet and translator of writers such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Paul Celan.

Michael Newman, 'Analogue, Chance and Memory', in Tacita Dean, *Film*, ed. Nicholas Cullinan (London: Tate Publishing, 2011) 102–3.

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