

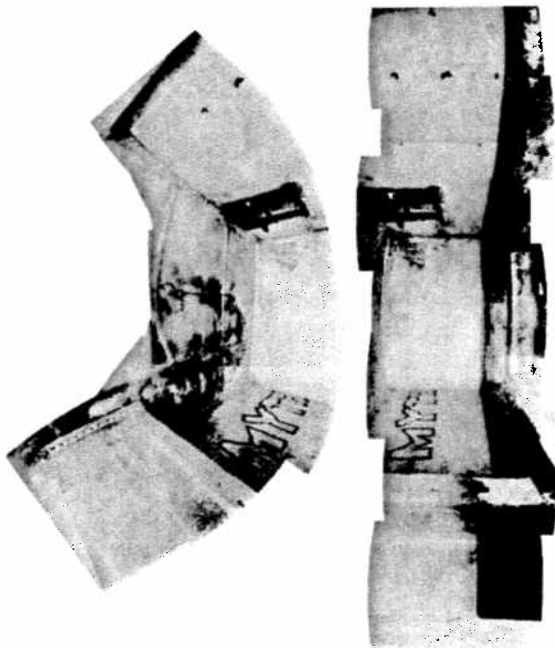
'A Forgetting that Fails to Forget Itself'

An Interview with Peter Krapp

Peter Krapp is an influential cultural theorist whose book, Déjà Vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory (2004), offers insights into the relationship between media and memory. Speaking across the specialities of cultural and literary studies and media and film studies, Krapp focuses on an exegesis of the "already at work" of the cultural past in the technological present. This sense of déjà vu has been prevalent in the writings of theorists since Sigmund Freud's groundbreaking outline of aberrations in the (un)conscious memory. In Krapp's work, déjà vu provides critical understandings of the relationship between media practices and cultural memory and, in relation, of the ethical stakes involved in collective and personal forms of memory. This interview took place via email in December 2006 and was conducted by antHThESIS editors (AE), Amelia Scurry, Beornn McCarthy and Michael Dieter.

AE: *How did you come to the theory of déjà vu and what still motivates you to explore it?*

PK: With hindsight, I would point to two extrinsic prompts that made me engage this topic: one was the over-arching topic of cultural memory in the theoretical humanities. I felt that to contribute to this large-scale discussion was like trying to drink the ocean. So I was looking for an oblique point of entry into that larger field, with a particular emphasis on repetition or repeatability. Another, concurrent motivation was a growing concern with information technology. It was clear that whatever is not currently on your screen is easily forgotten—whether on the computer screen (which, with its graphic user interface, windows, icons, surfaces,



In Ruins #17

Alison Bennett
STITCHED DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH
2005

tends to obscure the "black box" of the actual computer), or in the limitations of the many small displays, mobile and stationary, that foreground whatever is new at the expense of context and history. So, in a sense, my fascination with "screen memories" was literalized by the way in which new technologies complicate cultural memory. Now, once you engage with the way in which *déjà vu* complicates repetition and memory, you may never forget it; I found that most commentators return to *déjà vu* again and again ...

AE: *Your book, Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory, shows that far from being a restricted or undertheorised category, déjà vu has attracted almost every theorist of cultural history and memory since the end of the nineteenth century. While déjà vu as a concept seems tricky to locate, and is often seen as designating a very specific personal experience, you show a much more general interest in déjà vu as the creation of the familiar and as such at the foundations of cultural memory. Yet given that this theory of déjà vu risks capitulating, as you suggest, to the "already said" and already theorised, how does your theory of déjà vu generate a productive space for what you describe as the 'double take' of critique?*

PK: As I realized, revisiting the history of *déjà vu* means having to resist a double temptation: faced with a plausible theory of *déjà vu*, one may indeed soon feel that one always already thought so - a fallacy of the type that I wanted to investigate. And the fact that it is hard to reconstruct any theory that precedes Freud's influential intervention is perhaps no more than a variation on that problem. As for opening it up to thought: it was precisely the realization that instead of being always already new, the technical media - going back not just to computer, television, cinema, photography, but all the way to writing - have had to tangle with the fundamental and inevitable question of representation: memory is anamnesis, truth is that which resembles being closely enough to become its double. I am still amused by how I had to make the last words of my book 'incomplete, unfinished' - it had to be the two words together, in collusion against any conclusion. What of the comma that cleaves this pair? It might mark the way in which critique is never arrested, the way

in which difference will set adrift, and defer, the coming-to-itself of a final meaning. Of course my proclivity to point this out ruins all the interviews I was doing after the new Denzel Washington romantic action movie came out ... Not to mention the new TV show, "Daybreak", which extends and remixes the exact same trajectory of revisiting and repeating phenomena of *déjà vu* in the media. In short, as long as the technical (mass) media are quintessentially about manipulations of time and space, this will also be one of their quintessential topics, and yet this self-observation is not without its peculiar blind spots, in media history and onwards.

AE: *While you raise the problematic of memory and motivation in your book, you also use the notion of déjà vu to distinguish between personal memory and collective memory. How does déjà vu enable you to theorise the difference between these practices of memory, and what is the significance of their amalgamation or separation in contemporary memory and culture?*

PK: Collective memory, as theorized by Halbwachs, is the shared construction, in the present, of what is called (but not always individually experienced as) the past. In this way, it is independent of the unreliability of personal recollection; indeed, he asserts that gaps in one's own memory are filled with someone else's memories. However, this basically means that collective memory, although it was supposed to shore us up against forgetting, is in fact a form of paramnesia. The construct of collective memory excludes any acknowledgement of the necessity and significance of forgetting. In addition, it should be noted that the experience of *déjà vu* is never a collective one: nor can it be generated or repeated at will. My contribution to what is called collective or cultural memory is perhaps summarized most succinctly by pointing to these two conceptual observations: that as a construct, it necessarily wards off any potential forgetting, and that, in so doing, it can in fact introduce false memories on the mere basis of their social currency. This is particularly evident in the popularity of urban legends and conspiracy theories, especially online where many "remember" that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that the Internet was invented to serve as a post-nuclear command structure, and that Hitler

survived WWII and escaped to South America or Antarctica - although such assertions are demonstrably nonsense. Particularly under the conditions of the so-called attention economy, we need to be careful about the way nations and parties, corporations and media package cultural memories.

AE: *You also claim that déjà vu disrupts commemorative memory and can enable what you call an 'ethics of forgetting' for cultural history. What are the dangers for memory and forgetting and how can déjà vu be used to recognise them?*

PK: Unlike popular culture, both our legal systems and our educational systems are essentially predicated on memory; religion even more so, which makes most attempts at reconciliation bound up with one flavor of monotheism or another. By the same token, clearly one can see in the 19th century what happens when society gets stuck on the past; regurgitating history and memory is not productive. Ethics would have to strike a balance. I doubt that I can summarize effectively in the space of an interview what the stakes are here. In the book I raise a related question, which I have pursued elsewhere since then: What is the conceptual difference between pardon and amnesty? It has to do with the difference between an individual and a collective conception of memory, surely. And neither would be imaginable without a notion of forgetting. Suffice to say that in *déjà vu*, we face a forgetting that fails to forget itself, a kind of recollection that fails to recall itself. It is a repetition, but in itself unrepeatable. In addition, the logic of *déjà vu* allows me to discuss kitsch as a flavor of nostalgia for something irreversibly past, but it also evokes the continuous returns of popular culture, where nothing ages because there is no distance from the past. This line of thinking, however, severs ethics and aesthetics, and that is in itself a problem with a long and often forgotten history ...

AE: *Your ethical distinction between personal and collective forms of memory raises the problem of motivation in cultural production. How does this play out in your book*

where you move into an analysis of a number of different cultural and media forms, including literature, poetry, theatre, visual art and cinema?

PK: To the extent our cultural production often seems to pivot on continuity, tradition, collective memory, it is easy to overlook and forget that these artifacts and expressions never spring into being fully formed. They are the remnants of complicated and controversial processes, and there are of course accidents and slips and aberrations, from the very beginning. Whether one looks to the mythical invention of writing, to the poetic legend of how mnemotechnics was invented, or to any other foundational tale of imparting meaning in a given cultural and social situation, it is quite clear, I hope, that the basis for understanding is not just hindsight or conjecture. Yet these traces require some effort in decoding, reading, understanding; culture is not simply always already taking place, it also is always something of an unforeseeable event that demands attention, responses, acts, gestures. What my invocations of Agamben, Metz, Freud, Benjamin, or Derrida point to, in the various texts and contexts I pull together in my book, is that reading is writing, that reception of meaning is the production of meaning, and vice versa - they cannot be isolated from one another.

AE: *In your chapter on Derrida and hypertext in Déjà Vu, you write: 'Just as cultural history has much to learn from the genealogy of media technology, media studies would do well to be grounded in cultural and intellectual history in order to avoid the fickle winds of zeitgeist and hype.' While your own book develops an interdisciplinary space for research in moving between cultural history and media studies, what do you think needs to be done, practised or theorised in order to connect these two critical fields and to make them communicate with each other?*

PK: This juxtaposition is increasingly common, I see it as unavoidable in serious media studies and in the theoretical humanities. Whether you call it media archaeology or something else altogether, it seems that without reference to the genealogy of media technologies of repetition (of repeatability), we cannot reconstruct what the conceptual frame for memory and forgetting might have been

before the mid-19th century. This shift fundamentally affects all of cultural history, but as long as the interpretation of culture remains in a hermeneutic mode, it can easily overlook the pivotal conditions of possibility for the ways in which meaning arises. Meanwhile, throwing out the theoretical humanities for some kind of empiricism, materialism or historicism is clearly an over-correction; surely it's not just all about data carriers and the penal code either. Interestingly, many of the most thought-provoking and productive engagements with culture and media seems to come from fields such as Egyptology or Classics, and I guess this has been true since Harold Innis, but I am excited to see Assmann, Zielinski, and others translated into English.

AE: *You claim Walter Benjamin as having a pivotal role in both cultural history and media studies. To what extent is your critical project in Déjà vu informed by Benjamin's historical materialism?*

PK: Although I read all across the corpus of his texts published in German, I emphasized his reception of philosophical and psychological trajectories. I notice, in passing, that none of your questions address Nietzsche, or Freud, or the French experimental debate. However, these issues were very much part of Benjamin's intellectual culture, and of course still are vital. The common (mis)reading of Benjamin as a patron saint of academic materialism is a mainstay of the Benjamin industry, aided and abetted by vested interests in cultural studies who would rid his texts of their more complex theological, epistemological, and psychological movements and reduce his heritage to something easily assimilated into an agenda. This was also one of the reasons for me to foreground Heiner Mueller's reading of Benjamin, which is far from the sanctimonious assimilation the portion of his work thus far translated into English has met.

AE: *In your chapter on interiors you focus on Benjamin's "Berlin Childhood around 1900" and on the almost fairytale-like experience of the child. Why this text and not*

others which seem more normally associated with Benjamin's practice of cultural memory and history?

PK: I was concerned, on the one hand, with showing how the wide range of texts and topics I string together in the book follow from each other: in this case, Benjamin's productive resistance to Freudian assumptions on childhood and memory as the transition from the previous chapter into the Benjamin chapter. On the other hand, the Berlin Childhood is one of two texts where Benjamin explicitly addresses *déjà vu*. I cite and read many other canonical and lesser-known texts by Benjamin in detail, but I found it logical to begin with this inroad into his thought.

AE: *How do you negotiate cultural memory and the experience of "the new" in what you call a 'Benjaminian inversion of déjà vu'? Can you explain this notion of an inversion of a perception of the return of the past, particularly in the way it is played out in your reading of Benjamin's allegorical figures such as the angel of history or angelus novus, the Lumpensammler or ragpicker, the child and especially the imp/hunchback which you discuss in detail in your chapter on interiors.*

PK: This figure of inversion is concomitant with the one of a spatio-temporal envelope. As observant Jews, Scholem had reminded Benjamin, they were not supposed to speculate about the future. But if I feel as if I had seen or felt or heard something before, then I might also feel as if I knew what should happen next. In this way, the sense of *déjà vu* as something directed exclusively towards an imaginary or real past is turned into a possible opening towards the future. This is of course also a crucial difference between Proust and Benjamin, between nostalgia and the messianic.

AE: *With the emergence of an age of the Internet and the new social organisations and networks of affection which it sponsors, what do you make of the future for universities and, in particular, the arts and humanities?*

PK: Medieval universities, as Kittler reminds us, had their ways of processing, storage, and transmission, and neither Gutenberg nor Turing do away with the importance of these three modes. The disciplines keep changing, but what they carry with them in terms of cultural memory is as important as what lies buried between the disciplines, what they and their divisions inter, as it were. I suspect it would prove impossible to answer this question without laying out at least an entire book, if not a library, shot through with everything we have forgotten about the history of education before Humboldt's redefinition of higher education, certainly about ideas regarding the social (economic, national) uses of information, and about the differences material support can make (papyrus or paper, archive or library, transcript or paraphrase, state funds or private sponsorship, etc. ...). Maybe one abbreviated answer is that the arts are less in need of a good pitch than the humanities. The arts can argue that they are engaged in innovation, and that they provide training in and exposure to the beautiful and the entertaining; already it is easy to see that this pitch appeals to corporate and private donors. The humanities, if they are to remain clearly distinct from the social sciences and from the arts, must go beyond claiming languages and critical methods of interpretation and reading of textual or audio-visual cultural representation; as long as they translate cultural memory and media history convincingly as ongoing questions rather than as a basic skills, the humanities will play an important role.

AE: *In your book you suggest that in interaction the Internet can be used to disrupt collective memory—to step out of the loop of a memory that destroys any positive experience of forgetting. How is your reading of the Internet different from your reading of the archive? And what opportunities for alternative practices, like the one you designate as 'motivated forgetting', do you see arising through technology and media like the Internet?*

PK: Every year, I teach a class on the origins of the Internet, and on its extended remix that has become a pivot for contemporary cultural production. It is not a generalized footnote, nor an omniscient archive, no Hegelian repository of the world

spirit, no emanation of collective soul, not a totalitarian big brother, nor a big machine for forgetting ... From Interface Message Processors to Web2.0, from web art to YouTube, from Tennis for Two and Space War to disposable flash games, from HTML to CSS, or what have you, the Internet allows a consignment of collective and individual experience to cycles of interpretation and recall. Now there are a number of fascinating attempts to archive the recent history of the Internet and of the Web. What emerges from them is that it is important that we stop expecting, from any archive, a regulatory or corrective force that is backed by completion, plénitude. Instead, we see that a faithful archive will faithfully reproduce the tensions and scissions in interpretation that adhere to any question or any issue. My biggest issue with the current paradigms of user-generated content and social web applications is that they cannot distinguish between flavors of popularity (most viewed, most highly ranked, most linked to, most commented on). But, by the same token, whatever is not cited and circulated is condemned to a special kind of oblivion. On the one hand, this selection is akin to the Nietzschean erasure, on the other hand it can lead to the artificial obsolescence of information, opinion, art, thought that might have proven helpful and important given a longer shelf-life. Nonetheless, it is probably preferable to the auto-cannibalism of endless late-night reruns on television. Online, version control remains a bigger issue than copyright.

AE: *How does your own use of the Internet (for example in www.krapp.org and [Derrida Online](http://DerridaOnline.com)) inform your theory of déjà vu?*

PK: Where I started my studies, the university library still relied on a card catalog, and gave students no access to stacks. So to retrieve a book you had to know the right number, fill a request form, drop it off, and return a week later to retrieve the book. There was no easy way to browse related volumes; the only way to keep up with current scholarship was via correspondence with a lot of people. I began organizing chatrooms, mailing lists, and later websites (including some theory sites still extant) due to a lack of such academic content on the Internet, and then on the web. I began to use the Internet as my library, my card catalog, my seminar. Yet

what was amazing to me is how often the sheer speed of exchange in computer-mediated communication can lead to oblivion of the crucial context and preconditions of possibility of the current situation. Often what is hailed as revolutionary, disruptive, or simply new will turn out to be a more or less direct consequence of a rather well-documented historical and conceptual derivation. This is the case, for instance, in web-based knowledge management systems that rely on centuries of refining excerpts and annotations, from Locke and Hegel to Levi-Strauss and Barthes, and from HG Wells and Paul Otlet to Vannevar Bush and Ted Nelson. It is rarely discussed how the relational database is derived from what was bound as books and has recently begun to fall apart again.

AE: *In terms of your own writing process, have you followed Georges Perec and yielded to the temptation of an individual bureaucracy—what are your own systems of note-taking and self-archivalisation?*

PK: Notes and quotes are still crucial to knowledge management in academia, but I am increasingly concerned also with a way of handling, archiving, and retrieving images and charts. Since screening times for film classes are restricted, I have been accumulating a huge amount of film stills and screen caps. I am partial to a Java-based application called "Synapsen"—it is a great bi-lingual (German and English) software that allows for associative indexing of quotes, notes, and now also of images. Basically it is a MySQL-based card system for references that can access data from OPACs, and I like it much better than any other biblio-software I know. Of course it also outputs bibliographies, footnotes, etc. (and it contains an interface for LaTeX / BibTeX). At the same time, I will admit to using Spotlight, a search feature of Mac OS X, and I look forward to the next version of that OS, which will try to address the problem of version control. I have kept all emails sent and received since the late 80s, and of course all the things I had on my computers. However, with all the backups and different versions, there is sometimes no easy way to discern what is worth returning to, and what should be 'saved' and forgotten (archived) only in its final, printed, externalized version.

AE: *Who is DJ Vu? This persona seems to be a gesture to those theories surrounding remixology as a cultural practice, those elaborated by commentators such as DJ Spooky, Kodwo Eshun and Kode 9, for instance. Do you have a particular interest in DJ culture, from the perspective of cultural memory or otherwise?*

PK: Indeed I harbor an interest in DJ and VJ culture, but I suspect that juxtaposition and remixing are currently overestimated in their creative role and cultural prestige. Some art historians point to Andy Warhol's sampling as a way to reconstruct a past that did not exist. In one of the footnotes of my chapter on Warhol and recording, I cited DJ Spooky, but I had planned to go into a whole subsection on music and (serial, generative) structures of repetition and looping samples (hip hop certainly, but also trip hop, ambient dub, glitch). Of course, recombinatory aesthetics are not so new to sound art or art history. Radio plays have experimented with sound collages and narrative forms since at least the 1920s, and it is not hard to trace this in experimental music from the 1930s onwards, searching the entire acoustic landscape for sources and sounds to structure playful, improvisational, aleatory operations in the pre-digital era. In other words, again the advent of digital tools allows for a certain return of (or to) historical avant-gardes, and by the same token it can obscure the conditions of possibility (technical as well as conceptual) for this kind of oblivious return. In terms of remix culture, I am now most interested in machinima, or digital animation with the aid of computer games. Although this has been around for over a decade, and is often used for music video clips, its creative potential is perhaps only recently being discovered.

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