Andreas Huyssen and the Genres of Historical Memory

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History, so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power. (Nietzsche)
Memory fatigue has set in. (Huyssen)

1. Twilight's Discipline

The study of memory has only recently matured into a definable academic field. Its widening sphere of influence has led to a number of self-critical reflections, investigating the contributions of memory-related topics within literary and cultural studies over a period of twenty years. Claiming to have a privilege over interpreting present-day concerns, the establishment of memory studies as a transdisciplinary phenomenon has also led to systematic and often aggressive campaigns to canonize its literature. Susannah Radstone for one has questioned this approach in a recent diagnosis of the rhetoric of transdisciplinarity in memory research. Following similar concerns voiced over the years, she argues that "without careful disciplinary embedding and testing," the concepts developed under the umbrella of memory "may appear to explain more than they actually can" (Radstone, "Memory Studies: For and Against" 35). To illustrate her point, Radstone uses the example of so-called "traumaculture," in which pervasive melancholia toward a diminished public sphere becomes fodder for an emphatic discourse that has very little to do with "trauma" at all ("Memory Studies: For and Against" 36). Holocaust testimony, on the other hand, and the forging of therapeutic practices in the clinical sphere *do* have such a claim on the field. Though traumaculture is merely one in a series of traveling concepts linked to memory studies, Radstone is optimistic about finding ways to engage the topics of memory research that move beyond this rhetorical gesture, particularly in her own discipline of film and media studies. She finds that "memory research might currently be most productively practiced *within* the disciplines," serving as a marker for the coherence of its many related themes (Radstone, "Memory Studies: For and Against" 35).

My argument in this paper is that the work of Andreas Huyssen offers a remarkable synthesis of approaches to historical memory, advancing now-commonplace theoretical positions on the problem of memory, intended for a transdisciplinary audience. The inclination among scholars to make off-hand and occasional references to his books, leaving the problematic content of his arguments untouched, points to Huyssen's canonical status. The premises and presuppositions of his work therefore ought to be examined, especially given Radstone's urgent call for disciplinary embedding.

I focus mainly on a close reading of Huyssen's introductory comments, particularly in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. In these discussions, Huyssen provides both a diagnosis and remedy to the oft-repeated notion that contemporary cultural production has been overtaken by a "memory boom," instrumentalizing a host of methodologically oriented assumptions that inform academic research. His theory of amnesia, described below, is a symptomatic reading of the overdetermination of the concept of memory. However, by advancing a parallel discourse on the imagination that runs throughout his texts, Huyssen opts to creatively reconstruct an experiential landscape that remains sensitive to still-unearthed determining conditions that put the future in question as much as the past. Contemporary culture is a culture of amnesia, he says, in which the quickly forgotten past is formulated in terms of a desire to remember. Indeed, amnesia is the creative alloy for reflecting on and imagining community, for thinking politically, as it were, without recourse to a stable past.

My critical stance toward Huyssen's work concerns his tendency to smuggle in a humanist framework by way of historicist argumentation, which I suggest is a complement to expounding the amnesiac imaginary, rather than a mere wayward tendency accompanying his approach. Though historicizing concepts to the *n*th degree risks advancing a relativistic attitude in matters of politics and aesthetics, I argue that relativism is a consequence of Huyssen's attachment to a particular genre. Huyssen follows the genre conventions of historical memory by rejecting philosophical arguments for being historically interesting but no longer relevant, and modifying these arguments to address his short-term methodological needs. This attitude to matters of conceptual rigour and analysis allows Huyssen to remain evasive about epistemological anomalies in his work, which I explore in the second half of this paper. His historicism, for lack of a better word, translates into well-versed commentary on a host of issues thematically tied to memory studies as we know it, from

the all-important question of technology and media in relation to the transmission of forgetting as a cultural phenomenon, and meditations on the work of art through narrative production, to the politics of display in museums. By exploring Huyssen's contributions to these areas, including his re-reading of the tradition and its texts, I hope to arrive at a stronger articulation of this field's propensity towards transdisciplinary dissemination.

More specifically, I distinguish the genres of historical memory from debates within historical methodology, before moving on to explore Huyssen's precise contributions to the former with a comparison between his work and the philosophical reflections of Pierre Nora. I then investigate the connections Huyssen makes between historicism, humanism and medialization, using the work of Friedrich Kittler on the cultural imaginaries of the nineteenth century as a provocative counter-point. I conclude with a meditation on Huyssen's purported modification of Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry.

Throughout the paper I emphasize that proponents of transdisciplinary memory studies, including Huyssen, tend to historicize their founding concepts, serving to embed research in a continuous production that makes sense out of potentially contradictory approaches.[1] However, this process may not be desirable in cases where the topics in question concern matters of politics in an immediate sense. The historical authority conferred on transdisciplinary concepts often creates a standardized discourse, and at best a model of consensus-building liberal pluralism. Indeed, Radstone challenges this tendency in her account of the field. She insists that unlike cultural studies a generation earlier, memory research, so long as it is grounded in particular disciplines, does not arouse any doubts about its capacity for politicization, and for good reason. Radstone explains that memory research is naturally aligned to urgent investigations of "holocaust, apartheid, slavery and sexual abuse" ("Memory Studies: For and Against" 33). She then convincingly argues that memory studies is inherently political given the way it moves beyond matters of identity through an exploration of topics that "exceeds the personal" (35). Memory, in short, is the cultural expression of an ethical turn in philosophy. But this articulation is wholly dependent on the embedding practices she advocates.

[1] Another example is found in the opening remarks in Rossington and Whitehead's collected volume, *Theories of Memory: A Reader.*

By Radstone's own reasoning, the embedding of memory in established fields opens the academy to long-avoided confrontations with real world concerns. But while the active politicization of memory-related topics is laudable, I suggest that the process of embedding must be answerable to the prospect that political agency may be corrupted under the weight of ready-made tradition.[2] Moreover, it should be noted that emerging fields such as memory studies are often defined according to existing cross-disciplinary relationships, not embedding as such. For example, the New School's Department of Sociology has prepared a massive forthcoming volume that very strongly positions memory as a cultural complement to established interactions among the social sciences.[3] Similar, cross-disciplinary initiatives around the world have also been successful, as memory conferences draw international attention, generating anthologies, imprints and a growing network of scholars. These lines of production and immersion suggest that memory has indeed become a worthy contender in the marketing and machinery of academic knowledge. Memory today is a preeminent transdisciplinary subject of considerable force in the university. With the disturbing prospect that this appropriation may yet become an alibi for the status quo, it is all the more necessary to investigate how memory studies operates, including reflections on this expanding phenomenon by its most celebrated proponents.

2. Committing History to Memory

Bearing Radstone's argument in mind, I would like to consider briefly the reception of memory in the discipline of history. Alon Confino has suggested that "the history *of* memory, in fact, has developed into a fragmented field" (1387, emphasis added). But its emergence in this context also suggests a clear divergence or distinction between a considered inclusion of memory in studies of cultural history, and the *genre* of historical memory, the latter being

[2] Alon Confino's discussion about the relation between the study of memory and the politics of identity falls on the other side. He says, "by sanctifying the political while underplaying the social, and by sacrificing the cultural to the political, we transform memory into a 'natural' corollary of political development and interests" (1394).

[3] This publication was announced at the annual NSSR memory conference, in March 2010, entitled "The Limits of Memory," featuring the editors Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy.

developed by polemically oriented historians seeking to challenge the limitations of their field. Historical memory as such appears to have emerged from a "scholarly boom" in the 1980s, where prior to that moment the topics and themes now housed under the umbrella of "memory studies" were often consigned to the category of literary interpretation (Klein 128). The genre then developed out of responses to methodological issues, particularly with the rise of *histoire des mentalités* in France between the 1960s and 1970s.[4] Roger Chartier recounts the debates and controversies that arose as this approach was taken up *en masse*, explaining that the concept of "mentality" refers primarily to the attitudes and assumptions held by individual subjects. Drawing from the quantitative and psychological orientation of the *Annales* tradition, the mentalities approach to historical interpretation avoids focusing exclusively on socioeconomic facts, or the significance of intellectual ideas. It is rather concerned with the unconscious attachments of a single individual, and with capturing "the impersonal content of their thought" (Chartier 22). In an important sense, the study of mentalities has since opened itself to criticism for its apparent reduction of the dynamic interaction between history and memory to vague generalizations about culture.[5] Considerations of memory, then, arose in opposition to a wider field of quantitative approaches to history, emphasizing the practices and pursuits of individuals in relation to "impersonal" collectivities, including the psychology of those relationships.[6] These methodological generalizations are often cited as the reason why memory research became categorized with "antihistorical" perspectives, accompanied by very strong articulations against versions of positivist history (Klein 130). Focusing on the group aspect of memory as an historical phenomenon, the positivist approaches are criticized on the grounds of forestalling matters of historical significance, including the very existence of groups as such.

By widening the gap between "memory research" and "memory culture," described by Radstone, the discourse on memory with its supposedly antihistorical pathos has led to some contradictory developments in the academy

[4] This connection is discussed by Hue-Tam Ho Tai (907). The inaugural text for *histoire des mentalités* is Jacques Le Goff's "Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities," published in French in 1974, and in English in 1985, in a volume entitled *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology.*

[5] This critique is widespread. See Patrick Hutton.

[6] Maurice Halbwachs developed his notion of "collective memory" from interactions with historians of mentalities.

("Memory Studies: For and Against" 31). The ubiquity of memory across diverse fields, its migration to other disciplines, has encouraged the widespread dissemination of highly transferable concepts, as I noted above. Approaching the mainstream of history in due course, Kerwin Lee Klein suggests that memory has since become a kind of "metahistorical category," linking to further ongoing discussions of language, representation, and experience (128). The rapid expansion of memory studies has thus created a need for multiple genealogies of the founding concept, restaging, or, at least attempting to restage the modern European intellectual tradition in the guise of a *desire* for memory. In effect, memory research must now provide an explanation for its emergence historically. The narrative pattern of this now-established genre describes memory as forever attached to an experience of its displacement, producing a "meaning that [is] displaced by the rise of the modern self and the secularization and privatization of memory" (Klein 132). Klein, for his part, rejects the troping of historical experience as a nostalgic longing for authentic pasts, arguing that such a construction confuses archaic and contemporary realities, applying concepts of memory anachronistically. In fact, these are symptomatic readings in which the impossibility of an idyll relationship between individual and collective is fed through a quasi-spiritualist lens, into an academic discourse that is situated between "the therapeutic and the avant-garde" (Klein 137).

Klein brings to our attention the considerable difficulties that arise from making the concept of memory into a transdisciplinary phenomenon. He is among those who seek to reclaim memory for an objective cultural history, and thus to "embed" the concept in established disciplinary conventions as Radstone suggests. His own approach is based on a loosely constructed Hegelian dialectic, in which history and memory logically interact through expressive forms of social organization. Klein seeks to develop "rigorous formulations of … structural memory," situating individual or subjective experiences of the past in a genetic relationship to the emergence of collectivities – quite distinct from the tragic narratives described above (133). Indeed, Klein insists that only an objective approach is able to move beyond the emphatic anachronisms of history memory discourses.

Perhaps a more considered attempt at reclaiming memory for objective cultural history is Jan Assmann's interpretive approach, in which history is determined to be no longer concerned "with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered" (*Moses the Egyptian* 9). The practice of mnemo-

history, he says, "surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past" (ibid.). Assmann strongly develops the notion shared by Klein that memory is not a psychological constant but rather something that operates differently according to historical periods. Richard Terdiman offers a similar approach by casting "the phenomenon of memory as itself *differentiated in time*" (9). However, Assmann's project is unique in that he departs from a long-established approach to memory in which group interactions and lived experience are the primary analytical resources. The latter most clearly resembles the work of Maurice Halbwachs on the matter of "communicative memory," as Assmann says, in which an immediate space of interaction is regarded as the primary route to accessing the contents of memory processes ("Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" 129). Beyond this approach, Assmann takes up the work of Aby Warburg as a way to examine the so-called objectifications of culture, including the imagistic constellations of "festivals, rites, epics, poems" (ibid.). These congealed forms tacitly rely on the fact of lived experience, while moving beyond it conceptually or analytically. Though otherwise known as "history," Assmann suggests that taking such objectifications as "memory" provides the groundwork for an integrated approach to cultural forms.

Confino's argument is similar in that he suggests, "the crucial issue in the history of memory is not how a past is represented but why it was received or rejected" (1390). He maintains that a Warburgian cultural history "is useful in warning us against the danger of assuming that the representation of memory *can* speak for itself" (1392). However, putting these approaches aside, as efforts to reclaim the concept of memory in a way that prevents its trans-disciplinary expansion, I now turn to a more considered inquiry into the genres of historical memory as such.

3. After Nostalgia: Huyssen and Nora

Both Pierre Nora and Andreas Huyssen follow the narrative conventions of the genre of historical memory. However, my assessment of Huyssen's framing of these matters is that he focuses on challenging the particularly *nostalgic* elements that run amok in historical memory narratives. I discuss these elements in my engagement of Pierre Nora's philosophical reflections.

The premise of my argument is that though Huyssen's characterization of modernity as a "memory crisis" strikes a familiar tragic tone, describing communities as ravaged by the disappearing past, he also marks out a space in which to re-imagine politico-aesthetic possibilities, despite his commitment to liberal pluralism. This additional aim sets his work apart from Nora's, especially in regard to the ongoing difficulty of addressing the problem of representation, as noted above.

Huyssen's framework for the so-called memory crisis turns on reading contemporary culture as a fragmented and technologically mediated experience. According to his diagnosis of this contemporary condition, political, scholarly and artistic productions in the present-day exhibit a symptomatic relationship to the past. Drawing from historical-analytical perspectives, Huyssen argues that while Europe in the nineteenth century put forward a sense of hope, optimism and restoration despite remarkable social and political upheavals, that hope, at least in its revolutionary articulation of future-oriented utopian thought, can no longer be defined as an important value in contemporary societies. The principle explanation for this shift is described by associating the ubiquity of "synchronous" media technology with a "fundamental" (Huyssen repeats) distortion or dissonance in human temporality. He says that historical consciousness belongs to a bygone era, such that it is no longer sustainable as our cultural, political and territorial moorings taint with amnesia. Yet Huyssen's response to this amnesia goes beyond simply investigating the compensatory desire for memory. Explicitly challenging the avant-gardist notions that have undeniably accompanied postmodernist critique, he counter-proposes a vision of collectivity.

Huyssen's historical argument is preceded by a widely regarded, canonical work, *Les lieux de mémoire*. Completed under the directorship of Pierre Nora between 1982 and 1994, with a later abridged English translation, this multi-volume project is guided by a forceful rejection of particular developments in the *Annales* tradition of historiography. Its premise is to outline an approach to historiography that is responsive to the alleged disorientation of modern times, suggesting that memory is uniquely placed to embark on a necessary attempt at writing a history of the vanishing present. In his introduction to the English volume, Nora famously laments the purported discursive shift in historical writing from "nation" to "society," arguing that quantitative ap-

proaches to history were instrumental in this regard, particularly the most recent social-scientific modalities of recording.[7]

The strengthening and diversifying of historical *representation* had the unforeseen result of severing a link to tradition, rendering collective experience elusive and intractable. The customs and rituals which "society" has since displaced, according to Nora, encompass *national* association, a remarkably integrated and holistic substratum of memory. My suggestion at this point is that Nora's critique of society's inherent abstractions are very quickly rerouted in his text, effectively converting his seasoned laments and anxieties into problems of *transmission*. Following the accepted premise that a documentary approach to the past is the clearest and most rationally available means of historical accuracy, Nora comes from the other side by besieging the apparent fetishism for chronicled history, accusing it of decomposing otherwise unifying practices hereby considered authentically French. In effect, prosthesis-memory replaces the venerated institutions. As Nora says: "memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, like a snake sheds its skin" (13).

Huyssen's work on the memory crisis continues this argument by emphasizing Nora's implicit connection between the machinery of society and the inherent dissemination of mass media, illustrated by Peter Carrier in his commentary on Nora in terms of a "displacement of the authority of collective consciousness" (44). Nora himself regards mass media with suspicion, pointing to repeated efforts within such media to harness the symbolic power of remembered events through orchestrated simulacra (22). Huyssen, on the other hand, departs from criticizing the mass media as such to rather analyzing the differentiated aspects of its technologies. He also withdraws from Nora's persistent mythologizing of the collective in due course. Indeed, Nora's critique of the surface effects of media technologies facilitates his construction of a highly fetishized version of Halbwachs' more systemic interpretation of collective memory. Halbwachs' notion of collective memory argues for an immediate kinship among members of social groups in relation to their predecessors: between a living and irreducibly collective historical

[7] In this paper I refer to the truncated version of this introduction, in the journal *Representations*.

sense, and generational memory.[8] Nora fetishizes this relationship by describing collective memory in the guise of a harmonic transparency between past, present and future, but a harmony endangered by the rise of an ambivalent modern ethos, which is defined above all in terms of a "break with the past" (7). Notwithstanding the multiple connotations of the notion of a break, I note that Huyssen appears unconcerned with Nora's emphatic description of a break from tradition and its nationalizing rituals, associating those instead with nineteenth century preoccupations. Granted, in a more recent text Huyssen recognizes that a considerable number of memory-based practices, and especially commemorative affairs, remain grounded in national narratives. Yet "national memory debates are always shot through with the effects of the global media and their focus on themes such as genocide and ethnic cleansing, migration and minority rights, victimization and accountability" (*Present Pasts* 16).

These so-called national debates are secondary to Huyssen's concentration on a break with the past that could be more precisely defined as *epistemological*, namely the rise of information technology and its effects in social, cultural, political and aesthetic spheres. The sense of alienation described earlier by Carrier recurs in Huyssen's description of media technology as an intrusion into the public sphere. However, beyond the dislocation of tradition, Huyssen tends to describe forms of mediality in which the disturbances appear at the level of time consciousness, replacing the supposed continuity between past, present and future with an instantaneous and wholly immediate configuration of temporality. For Huyssen, media technology thus produces an affective disorientation and is figured as both the cause and cure of amnesia. This *pharmakon* brings a sense of uncertainty even to Huyssen himself, who eventually asks: "is it the fear of forgetting that triggers the desire to remember, or … the other way around?" (*Present Pasts* 17). Despite having weakened the temporal boundaries of human understanding, this spurious dialectic between the mechanisms of memory in relation to forgetting is also impartial to any committed search for an authentic kernel of experience in the ruins of tradition. Unlike Nora, Huyssen puts forward the simpler wish to slow down the flow of information.

It may be worthwhile to pause here and consider the political implications of these contrary perspectives. Huyssen seems to be putting together

[8] See Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory.*

an argument that will allow him to diagnose the memory crisis in ways that veer away from the ideological positioning he associates with a version of modernity deemed no longer tenable. He says, "within modernity itself, a crisis situation has emerged that undermines the very tenets on which the ideology of modernization was built, with its strong subject, linear and continuous time, and is superiority over the pre-modern" (*Twilight Memories* 28). In fact, it has been observed that Huyssen provides an overly general and simplistic framework of modernity in this regard, giving the sense that memory emerges from heroic opposition to monolithic forces, instead of participating in what are deeply confused and internally ambivalent historical circumstances.[9] Nora, in any case, first appears to challenge the very same ideological positioning as Huyssen, only to immediately adopt a more conservative angle in which memory is re-coded with a sense of irretrievable loss. History, for its part, is once again regarded as materializing a long-standing preoccupation for austere representational forms. As such, after examining the way that representation is taken up in each writer, I claim that Huyssen's very different comportment allows him to introduce concepts of the imagination which are by definition anti-nostalgic.

As Nora says, "our relation to the past is now formed in a subtle play between between its intractability and its disappearance, a question of representation – in the original sense of the word – radically different from the old idea of resurrecting the past" (17). From disappearance to representation and back, Nora provides two supporting arguments before proposing a methodology. He first describes what he calls "modern memory" as an experience of alienation in relation to the past, suggesting that memory as such is an exclusively individual and private concern. Second to this claim is Nora's suggestion that because quantitative approaches to history are now predominant, the sense of national cohesion has been shattered to such an extent that the contents of memory, once self-present to the collective, are now embodied *en lieux*. Comprised of mere traces from the past, these *lieux* are material, symbolic and functional locations of history as it is remembered (22).

Nora's larger project, the formidable multi-volume *Les lieux de mémoire*, is devoted to establishing linkages between incongruous topics along with discussions of familiar monuments, events, books, figures and myths associated with French identity (Carrier 35). Each place was selected for sustaining

[9] This view is held by Radstone and is discussed in her introduction to the volume *Memory and Methodology*.

fragmented but supposedly connected experiences. This unique approach to memory-history invites multiple articulations, openings and crossings. Yet Carrier, for one, has suggested that despite the narrative mutations of the latter and possibilities thereof, Nora himself nowhere presumes to repair the ravaged memory of collective consciousness (Carrier 40). He rather chooses to reverie in its ineffable appearances. Practically speaking, Nora might say that as "real memory" becomes endangered, the possibility of sustaining a substratum of memory based on generational patters that are *not* experienced proves to be more difficult than before. Indeed, Nora focuses exclusively on *lived* experiences in relation to a place, suggesting that a *will* to remember is the sole criterion for developing creative lines of flight.

Carrier argues that it would be misleading to think that Nora's attention to these lived and located dimensions of experience suggests "a force of homogenous political cohesion" (Carrier 42). Nora goes as far as refusing to oppose or even acknowledging the political aspect of the experiences that are anchored in *lieux*, choosing instead to build on a cultural consensus model that is based in "memorial patrimony" (Carrier 42). Nora's underlying claim, according to Carrier, is that memory can be patrimonial without being homogenous. Only lived experience can rescue the alienation of non-homogeneity which is an effect of meditating upon the *defamiliarized* past of historical representation. In turn, his nostalgic reflection on the project annuls the politicization of French identity by suggesting that all residual experiences of it are as equal. Nora and Huyssen therefore part ways on the question of the continuing significance of representation. We have seen that Nora's intention is to develop a practical application of the historical present that departs from representation as such. Nora opposes the representation of historical objects to embodied memories that, as he says, "have no referent in reality" (23). He develops memory-based historical narratives on the grounds of authentic experience, which, in turn is wholly separated from documentary history and therefore "self-referential" in relation to a given site (23). Nora's authentic experiential memory is conceived in locations of time and space *beyond* representation, and refuses to participate in an economy of signs. Rather, it is restricted to concrete, hybrid and material expressions of personal significance.

The strongest point of contrast between these writers is indeed on the matter of representation, which, according to Alon Confino, tends to be overplayed in cultural histories informed by memory. "The crucial issue,"

he says, "is not what is represented but how this representation has been interpreted and perceived" (1392). Huyssen is clearly opposed to this suggestion, demonstrating his faith to the genres of historical memory by grounding most of his arguments on the very mechanics of representational forms that Confino attempts to escape. He suggests that memory is basically indistinguishable from representation. However, Huyssen's claim that "all representation is based on memory" also sets him at odds with Nora's insistent dualism between history and memory (*Twilight Memories* 2). Richard Terdiman has made a similarly provocative claim in his *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, arguing that representations of memory "cannot be conceived (or depreciated) in some derivative or residual form" (59). However, Terdiman does not use this argument as Nora, who determines that representations are superfluous to authentic experience, that they are neither derivative nor substantial in comparison to the real. Instead, Terdiman mirrors Huyssen's argument, suggesting that memory *is* representation, that it is produced from an imaginary that has no necessarily genetic relationship to originary states, conditions or events.

Huyssen adopts this position by registering his skepticism toward the enormous significance given to event-based narratives, but again for entirely different reasons than Nora. My suggestion is that Huyssen is wary of these narratives precisely because he wishes to develop concepts of the *imagination*, anticipating a representative category that may apply to the entire field of memory studies. Indeed, by specifying the shift from history to memory as a break from tradition as much as from authenticity, Huyssen would like to claim the imagination of our remembered past for the sake of invention alone.

4. Medialization, Historicism & Humanism

Huyssen's theory of the imagination makes a notable contribution to historical memory, elaborating on its strategies of remembrance, and on the possibility for collective articulations of politics and aesthetics in the present day. But "imagination," seductive though it is, also rests on the normative ground of epistemological claims that misdiagnose the impact of media and its technologies. I argue that Huyssen's contribution to this area is guided by strongly interconnected themes of medialization, historicism and humanism.

Comparing this productive intersection to the controversial media theory of Friedrich Kittler, I outline two very different perspectives on the modern Western tradition, particularly on the continuing significance of the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. I suggest that Huyssen's historicist and humanist appropriation of mediality, describing nineteenth-century European societies and beyond, tends to inform his attempted modification of later thinkers, including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the culture industry. These modifications refer back to previous discussions in the current paper, specifically on the narrative aspects of spectacular displays in contemporary museums.

Before moving on, it is important to recall that Huyssen casts present-day sociality as possessing an imagination that has ostensibly come of age: he says that today there are "memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is" (*Present Pasts* 7). Earlier I showed that Huyssen takes up the widely received idea that memory operates in and concerns the present alone; indeed, "the temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naïve epistemology might have it, the past itself" (*Twilight Memories* 3). However, this claim tends to be linked repeatedly to speculation concerning a media explosion that has supposedly altered our temporal grounding, creating an eternal present that affects the structures of human understanding and the possibility of sociality. Huyssen describes a contemporary situation in which hyper-mediated environments produce an all-consuming desire to remember, but a desire that must also desire to eliminate the forgetting that is omnipresent in this sphere. Huyssen describes this immediate and unstoppable forgetting as a support for his argument that memory is "given in the very structures of representation," suggesting that our experience of the present is completely enhanced by technology – a total subsumption (*Twilight Memories* 3).[10] But to what extent do these considerations of the *form* of media, i.e. the structures of representation, alter or change approaches to historical memory?

I note that many of Huyssen's arguments on the topic of medialization carry an explicitly *humanist* orientation. Much of his commentary in fact is heavily informed by the assumption that media technology *interferes* with a prior harmony between past, present and future, leaving the impression that

[10] Despite the vague similarities in his argument to that of Walter Benjamin's in his essay on the work of art, Huyssen considers Benjamin to be among the utopian modernists that he wishes to move beyond.

while medialization intrudes upon collective or social organization and is a force to be reckoned with, it does in the final instance *determine* the course of history, temporality, and so forth. I have suggested that Huyssen very strongly believes that there has occurred "a fundamental crisis of an earlier structure of temporality that marked the age of high modernity with its trust in progress and development, with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and irreducibly other, and with its unshaken belief in some telos of history" (*Present Pasts* 27). Granted, the amnesia that emerges from this crisis, under the auspices of "imagination," does not herald a return to nostalgia. Yet Huyssen's account of media technology, as the very machinery of the imagination, fails to account for the *constitutive* role of media in human understanding, experience and sociality.

Though Huyssen's humanist anxieties are perhaps characteristic of historical memory narratives, I suggest that such anxiety should also be compared to a breadth of research exploring concepts of mediality.[11] Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* is a decisive counter-point in this regard, attempting to challenge humanistic attitudes through an otherwise comparable historicism of media. That is, Kittler's *anti*-humanism services a determinist outlook in which mediality is not considered an intrusion into consciousness *per se,* but is rather the driving force of historicity, unfolded by discourse networks encompassing systems of practices, norms, values and the like. Kittler's approach to the discursive form of media thus departs from Huyssen's and is undoubtedly materialist, analyzing media in terms of how it shapes and indeed changes complex social, political and literary conventions. In the following section I compare Kittler and Huyssen's reading of nineteenth-century responses to modernization, concluding with their diametrically opposed but equally historicist interpretations of Nietzsche's *Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*.

For now, it is enough to say that Friedrich Kittler is affiliated with a small group of German theorists who in the 1980s began introducing contemporary French philosophy to an otherwise conservative academic audience. On the radical fringes of an already radicalized group, Kittler took the opportunity to ground his foundational claims on hyperbolic modifications of concepts associated with poststructuralism.[12] His direct appropriations of Derridean notions, such as *arche*-writing, are literalized into the building

[11] An overview of these debates can be found in Erll and Rigney's *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory.*

blocks of media technologies, taking shape in actual transmission lines or channels. Kittler, in effect, literalizes the claim that all language is a kind of writing. He suggests that language is no longer a domicile of subjective truths or ecstatic meaning, and is therefore no longer answerable to states of inwardness, as hermeneutics in the tradition of Gadamer and Heidegger might suggest. Tilottama Rajan for one describes these emphatic constructions in terms of Kittler's "exteriorization of writing as a mechanical prosthesis," seeking to render all suspected humanist forms of inquiry – concerning the nature of ideology, or the contents of the imagination – hereby inadmissible (xxi). In other words, Kittler redirects language "from memory and temporality into a countable, spatialized supply" (Rajan 51). Literature is therefore one particular writing system among others, a series of institutional and disciplinary practices that are historically situated.

Huyssen makes no comparable remarks about theories or problems of language, and in fact his occasional and suggestive commentary about the so-called imperialism of the signifier only emphasizes his abiding humanist outlook. I would point to Huyssen's later use of the term "urban palimpsests" as an illustrative example. He says, "the trope of the palimpsest is inherently literary and tied to writing, but it can also be fruitfully used to discuss configurations of urban spaces and their unfolding in time without making architecture and the city simply into a text" (*Present Pasts* 7). This culturally oriented methodology gives near-exclusive priority to human environments as materialized in objects, including cities and their architectures, with very little consideration to language. The temporal stability that Huyssen's reading assumes is unaddressed throughout his work. As such, his literary-analytical concepts may be complementary to historical memory studies and its genres, but are incongruous with his epistemological claims regarding media technology, i.e. that *medium* is a disturbance. For Huyssen, literature and culture are connected only by a practical homology.

A similar but more elaborate principle for the construction of literary narratives in relation to cultural objects is found in Peter McIsaac's *Museums of the Mind: German Modernity and the Dynamics of Collecting*. With oblique reference to Huyssen's reduction of the archive to a storage unit, designed to repudiate the epistemic insistence of event-based narratives, McIsaac says, "the notion of the archive is problematically overdetermined, serving as a

[12] Robert C. Holub has written one of very few intellectual histories on this subject in English.

repository for any theory using the name" (16). Archival discourses do not account for the "particularity of the museum," which he claims is homologous with literature as well as other forms of multimedialized narratives (16). Revisiting Hermann Lübbe's concept of "musealization," the incorporation of museum-related practices into everyday life, McIsaac suggests that the interrelationship between collecting, distributing and displaying carries broad implications for the writing of literature.[13] He says that "the forces that lead curators, artists and politicians in a given culture to produce museums lead authors to produce certain kinds of literary writing" (5). As such, the modern historical imagination that is often associated with nineteenth-century museum culture is in fact "based on the literary medium of narrative" (11). Reciprocally, the materiality of recording, categorizing, storing and displaying – within the *literary* text – is generated from a "museum function." As such, McIsaac attempts to show that narrative is not eliminated by the recent explosion of interest in museums, with its revised mandates, curatorial conventions and architectural designs. McIsaac refers instead to Mieke Bal's claim, in *Double Exposures: The Practice of Cultural Analysis*, that non-linguistic productions of narrative are integrated into display environments. He says, "the multimedialized grammar of display acts on the imagination in much the same way as literary discourse" (15).[14]

Another example of these discussions veers away from Huyssen's practical homology, toward a more explicit anti-humanist mediality that I associate with Kittler's work. The media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst frames this problem in terms of memory's museographical articulations after 1800. He describes the emergent forms of digestive remembrance and its vast reorganization of museum space in terms of the rational ordering of artworks as monuments of history. At the turn of the nineteenth century, he says, "the aesthetics of invention became separated from the infrastructure of museum inventories," creating a division of labour between the administration of the institution, or the storing of objects, and the opposing (or rather *imposing*) literary-historical narratives (19). Though such institutional reorganizations eliminated the arbitrariness of museal collections and served to give a strong foundation to nationalizing discourses, particularly in Europe, it also disallowed the immersion of historical imagination in the archaeo-

[13] As McIsaac shows in his interpretation of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*.

[14] A departure from Alison Landsberg, who suggests, with Walter Benjamin, that particular media and especially film calls for approaches specific to the medium.

logical objects being displayed, and narratively "exposed" by the prevailing discourses (Bal 1–57). Ernst says, "the act of incorporating the archaeological fragment into the museums means metonymically making it part of a heritage called 'history'" (Ernst 23). The irreconcilable conflict between the informational and documentary spheres leads Ernst to make a different set of claims about the possibilities of multimedialized discursive registers. He says that the onset of electronic media, in which the past is recorded as *image*, restages the division between information and narrative on a topographical rather than temporal horizon. In other words, the contemporary museum avails itself of archival modes of presentation and thereby challenges "the aesthetic absolutism of chrono-linear musealization" (29). Ernst's interpretation of the semiological aporias of language in relation to objects therefore participates in the *undoing* of history.

5. Rewriting Tradition: Kittler and Huyssen

Like Ernst, Kittler's framework of media technology rejects the constructions of "language" and "culture" on their own terms, suggesting, through a method of periodization, that these are merely effects of mediality. The language-culture relationship is in fact instrumental to the formation of historical periods, the so-called "discourse networks" that Kittler refers to in the title of his major work. Kittler's historiography necessitates epistemological breaks, detailing the emergence of totalizing networks that are defined by their absolute difference in comparison to others. These breaks may appear similar to Huyssen's distinction between modernity and postmodernity. Yet Kittler's engagement with modernity in particular, as figured by the Romantic humanism that was predominant in much of Europe circa 1800, finds a prior determination in the emerging media interface between voice and text, signified and signifier. This largely causal framework, outlined below, allows Kittler to suggest that "1800" in fact marks a break from biblical exegesis and the practice of rote translation.

Engaging a media-literary analysis of Goethe's *Faust*, Kittler notes that new strategies of interpretation arose in opposition to the translation conventions of Luther and the so-called Republic of Scholars. Emphasizing Faust's conversion of God's sonorous word into the nebulous interpretive space of textual mediation, Kittler says that the regime of "free translation"

effectively inaugurated a figure of Man (*Discourse Networks* 18). He says that "Faust translates according to the spirit and not the letter," creating a fracture in the discursive continuum, placing Man in the center of a hermeneutic practice that is indeed acted upon by the *readers* of spirit (19). On the basis of this departure, Kittler proceeds to typify the entire episteme of Romantic humanism in Faust's name, describing his miraculous break from the institution of rote translation, and connecting it to later attempts at developing new concepts through a series of meditations on *human* understanding. Describing 1800 according to these systematic features alone, Kittler encompasses the entire regime of Romanticism in a single discursive operation. He says, "instead of the word, the act enters, and instead of the Bible, Poetry" (20).

Kittler's approach has aroused suspicion for its apparently simplistic interpretations of complex historical periods, and for its wilfully anachronistic misreading of theorists such as Derrida and Foucault.[15] Yet his interpretation of 1800 as a network of discursive possibilities offers forceful insights into the productive crossings between emerging literary and interpretive practices, state and bureaucratic institutions, and the national imaginary. Noting that "free translation" was instrumental in developing notions of academic freedom and the movement for university reform, Kittler connects this phenomenon in multiple places to a more general indoctrination of national languages, which he describes as a process of "alphabetization" (*Discourse Networks* 65). He then suggestively creates linkages between the private language instruction of children by mothers, and the push by state authorities towards creating a learned population. Describing the multiple implications of advancing humanistic and interpretive forms of knowledge, Kittler is able to further connect the gendered campaign against dialects, to the movement for silent reading as a promotion of subjective inwardness, and the rise of phonetic systems as a concerted effort to prohibit nonsense. In this sense, a *discursive* reading of the period is valuable.

Nothing could appear further from Huyssen's *humanist* interpretation of this period's cultural imaginaries, though as I have argued, both writers share a common historicism. Huyssen follows canonical trajectories that describe literary and philosophical reactions to a political history of Revolution. Focusing on the German situation in particular, he sketches an outline of the

[15] Rajan situates Kittler's interpretations against an intellectual history of deconstruction aligned to phenomenology and the so-called persistence of the negative (271).

institutional and social reorganizations that define the period, yet positions these changes as exclusively responsive to collective anxieties about the loss of tradition. Huyssen focuses on the museum as such a place of reconstitution, as presiding over the elevation of folk cultures to higher and more prestigious echelons, to becoming markers of national distinction.[16] Huyssen takes the opportunity at this point to suggest that the underlying fear of losing such traditions amid rapid modernization has never provided just cause for a nostalgic restaging of the past. He says that the German Romantics and idealists were exceptional for their unrelenting rethinking of the past as continuous with the future, thus creating a continually productive negotiation "between tradition and anticipation" (*Twilight Memories* 19).

Huyssen's description of this period extends to further discussions of later philosophical movements and thinkers in the nineteenth century. I argue that these discussions include *historicist* readings of critical thinkers. For example, Huyssen's remarks on Friedrich Nietzsche appear to historicize his oeuvre by focusing exclusively on his apparent and undoubtedly sloganistic demand for "creative forgetting" as an antidote to modernity (*Present Pasts* 2).[17] Huyssen forcefully connects this demand to Nietzsche's position on the production of imaginaries mentioned above. The concept of "forgetting" appears in Nietzsche's work as the necessary outcome of his polemical disengagement from the mania of historicizing traditions and customs, which he argues has no other purpose than to facilitate the banal redistribution of accepted ideas. Huyssen, for his part, determines that Nietzsche's call to forgetting is valuable in the latter's restricted context alone, suggesting that historical reconstruction in his time involved turning *away* as much as *toward* the past. On one assessment, Huyssen's understanding of Nietzsche is far from controversial. It is very common to read Nietzsche against the grain of his own tradition, and to claim that he was a philosopher deeply invested in rooting out the presuppositions of nineteenth century thought.[18] In *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, Nietzsche seeks to uncover the ongoing preoccupation with Athenian philosophy through a restaging of current debates on the work of art, describing a dramatic conflict between the Dionysian and Apollonian.

[16] The literature on this subject is vast, though compactly presented by Didier Maleuvre.
[17] Nietzsche himself, at least in translation, never uses this term.
[18] Nietzsche repeatedly comments on Goethe's phrase, "The man of action is always without conscience; no one has a conscience except the observer" (qtd. in "Advantages and Disadvantages" 12).

Huyssen, for his part, takes Nietzsche's diagnostic and polemical engagements as proof that his philosophical attitude is valuable only as part of the history of ideas, claiming that they are irrelevant given today's anxieties about memory in relation to temporality and historical consciousness. Huyssen argues that forgetting, far from being a political mandate, is the condition of our times. Memory and forgetting are no longer contrastable terms, as they were in the nineteenth century, because today's media-induced amnesia is inseparable from the *pursuit* of remembrance.

Huyssen's specification of Nietzsche's philosophical insignificance points to ongoing methodological aporias between historicism and attempts at theoretical rigour. Nietzsche may indeed have been responding to the "historical fever" that is irreducible and particular to the German state of affairs in the nineteenth century, including efforts in that period to develop a so-called science of history (*Advantages and Disadvantages* 8; *Present Pasts* 27). Yet Nietzsche's claims are also meant to describe an equally irreducible and particular conflict between history as representation and unhistorical action, which can be applied generally. He says, "without forgetting it is quite impossible to *live* at all" (*Advantages and Disadvantages* 10). For, characterizing a given culture by the recorded knowledge *about* itself tends to overwhelm the living being, privileging an economy of total knowledge that effaces the necessary partiality of all action. Nietzsche describes the general concepts he refers to throughout his work, such as "life" or "will to power," as participating in a dialectical relationship with the practices and institutions of historical narration. This relationship points to a necessary conflict between the concept and its materialization, such that history, in this anti-Platonist and anti-Hegelian frame, materializes unhistorical action, where action, in the guise of forgetting is an "eternal" or "negative" precept. As Nietzsche says, "the unhistorical resembles an enveloping atmosphere in which alone life is generated only to disappear again with the destruction of this atmosphere" (11). The "life" or the "will" that is written and recorded by history is already dead. For, "only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present may you interpret the past" (36).

In these quotations, Nietzsche appears to comment directly on the emerging science of historical interpretation and the monumentalizing of the past in relation to the present. Indeed, his position wreaks havoc on the construction of totalizing historical periods, and on the reductive, de-politicized historicizing of concepts. Whereas Huyssen locates Nietzsche's work along

a continuum that distills his reflections on history as historically situated, Nietzsche's own diagnostic of this very attitude may be considered important background for an astute commentary on the present-day situation of cultural amnesia. Nietzsche describes three approaches to history – from monumental to antiquarian and critical forms – each with specific approaches to the past, though all fundamentally similar (*Advantages and Disadvantages* 14–22). That is, each form of historical interpretation appears to reclaim the past for the relief of present-day uncertainties, rendering historical action significant merely because it happens, and thereby submitting to a relativism that fails to strike at the status quo. Given Nietzsche's hyperbolic statement that we are robbed of the creative instinct if "the systematic torture of historical criticism" prevails, it might be useful to ask if Huyssen's theory of the creative imagination offers something different (*Advantages and Disadvantages* 39).

Kittler enters this debate by historicizing Nietzsche's work, but from an opposite angle in terms of the latter's relevance for a projected future, which is a sticking point for Huyssen. Kittler's mobilization of the discourse network of "1900" charts the reduction of all literature to a medium among others, especially where German poetry is concerned. The invention of the typewriter is Kittler's moment of choice for illustrating the rise of technological forms that come to predominate in the twentieth century.[19] He suggests that the typewriter single-handedly throws into question the prior bridging of the acoustic and the optical spheres of human understanding, a bridge that once connected the signified to multiple signifiers just as Faust materialized God's sonorous word. The typewriter, he says, introduces spacing between signifiers instead of the wash of continuous time, making the ecstatic homology between word and thing into a "countable, spatialized supply" (*Discourse Networks* 194). The signifier becomes a mode of inscription that is truer to its uninterpretable nature. Nietzsche's work is therefore a literary complement of this break from hermeneutics, as Kittler attributes this break with successfully taking the practice of writing to its unholy extreme. Nietzsche, according to Kittler, suggests that interpretation and its spiritual pretensions are merely ruses against a prior physiological chaos, as demonstrated by the concept of life as unhistorical action: forgetting. Like Dionysus who "stabs but does not speak," Nietzsche marks an opening toward a kind

[19] Kittler takes this point up in further detail in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.*

of formlessness of writing that goes beyond the institutionalization of poetry (*Discourse Networks* 197). His name becomes attached in Kittler's work to a long series of literary innovations in the twentieth century, from autonomous writing to free style poetry, all of which are impossible to translate according to the specific practices engineered in the previous discourse network. Kittler thus avoids Huyssen's suggestion that Nietzsche's work is historically interesting but no longer relevant, claiming instead that it represents a paradigmatic shift toward a new orientation of thought: a shift in writing, and in discursive registers.[20]

6. Conclusion: The Spectacular Imaginary

On the other hand, Huyssen clearly wishes to imagine a mnemonic practice in contemporary societies that is explicitly turned *away* from the future, supposing that such utopian attitudes are no longer available after the twentieth century period of absolute destruction, that indicates, at least, a total failure to imagine collective possibilities. (*Twilight Memories* 85–91). At the same time, Huyssen focuses on institutions of remembrance such as museums, suggesting that since their immense popularity has provoked countless efforts to revive such spaces in recent years, museums are a *symptom* of cultural amnesia. Departing from the well-known conventions of museal analysis, and the narrative aspects of display environments, which I note above, Huyssen enters the debate by arguing that new media forms have altered the latter and are therefore analytically significant. Understanding the spectacular *mise-en-scene* of museal displays, as he repeatedly puts it, is crucial to exploring the echoes and reverberations of the memory boom. In conclusion, I briefly explore Huyssen's projected "imagination" in these spheres and consider its political, or, at the very least, cultural articulations.

Huyssen provides a considered opinion on the vast topic of museums with a purported modification of the critical school of Theodor Adorno, among others. Huyssen's claim to *modify* the so-called "cultural industry reproach" in particular, not only attends to his historicism, but also allows him to make strong claims especially in regard to abiding concerns about

[20] Nietzsche is hereby cast in the role of heroic visionary, a paragon for "affirmative poststructuralism," which is a largely disparaging term that Rajan uses to characterize Kittler's epistemology (Rajan 36).

medialization in the museum, and the use of new media in conjunction with classical narrative description (*Twilight Memories* 24). Above all, Huyssen wishes to counter the Adornian notion that "commodification equals forgetting," arguing that the "slow but palpable transformation of temporality in our lives" needs to be addressed as a cultural phenomenon (*Present Pasts* 21). His argument is that Adorno's largely implicit connection between memory discourse and a critical position with regard to mass society is no longer relevant now that museums and the cultures of remembrance are subsumed under the commodity-form. Related to this argument is the suggestion that consumer capitalism is no longer homogenous but rather fragmented, unevenly distributed and far more complicated than Adorno and others had thought. Most importantly, however, Huyssen is at odds with Adorno's unambiguous modernism, attacking the latter's beloved avant-garde.

Adorno's discussion on the culture industry with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is framed by Huyssen's initial claim that such critical theory problematically opposes memory to the vectors of forgetting by attaching the latter to the predominance of the commodity: for example, entertainment, in which "amusement becomes an ideal" (115). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the regime of technical rationality is a rationality of domination, suppression and totalization, in which the commodity rules over the superstructural realm in order to neutralize dissent. Their acerbic reflections have become commonplace in the academy as essential reading for understanding the "classification, organization, and identification of consumers," illustrated by the proliferation of overwhelming sameness in the entertainment sectors, eliminating cultural differences by a process of saturation, and reducing novelty to manifestations of pleasure (97). "The relentless unity of the culture industry bears witness to the emerging unity of politics," supposing that political organizing and indeed the imagination itself become erased by the machinery of technical knowledge (96).

Huyssen's position is unambiguous. He says that Adorno's critique of the culture industry can no longer be accompanied by any critical possibility with regard to the future on the basis of memory, for "the aesthetic dimension is inherently utopian" (*Twilight Memories* 92). Memory continues to be the object, but forgetting has become the means. It is therefore impossible to separate the ongoing regime of "instant entertainment" from the struggle for "aesthetic illumination," especially in environments where remembrance is now mainstream, seeking to accommodate a *need* to remember

(*Twilight Memories* 27). On the other hand, I argue that Huyssen's approach does not modify the critique of the culture industry so much as it attempts to negotiate a positive spin that will imaginatively construct the cosmetic enjoyments that reflect presentist desires. As Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, "entertainment fosters the resignation that seeks to forget itself in entertainment" (113). This statement in particular exposes Huyssen's attempted modification as nothing more than a shift in perspective.

"In its reductive collapsing of the commodity form and psychic structure," Huyssen responds, Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis "fails to give us the tools to explain mnemonic desires and practices that pervade our culture" (*Twilight Memories* 7). Huyssen seems to be arguing that the ability to articulate something new in the world is no longer at our fingertips, and indeed he very strongly downplays avant-garde revivals, suggesting that these movements, given their particular historical contexts, are utterly dead. Describing the avant-garde's strong antipathy for established forms of representation, Huyssen finds their wholesale rejection of museum culture to be inconsistent with the empirics of the contemporary situation. He says, "the structure of temporality that underwrote the historical avant-garde's futurist claims is no longer the same" (*Twilight Memories* 96). Huyssen appeals to the creative vectors of the imagination for both producing and reflecting upon the spectacular turn in museal display. He implies that new media can be engaged in a way that successfully acts upon today's overpowering amnesia, to slow the flow of information, and find peace in our accelerated histories. I conclude that this position departs radically from Adorno and Horkheimer's engagement with stylistic concerns as the "negative truth" of art, questioning the "questionable unity" that claims affirmation in places where there should be admissions of failure as such: "the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity" (103). Huyssen thus confirms his liberal pluralistic attitude in choosing to engage the harmonies of style. Indeed, his de-politicization of aesthetic enjoyments in the museum gives newfound impetus to Radstone's call for embedding memory research in the disciplines. Huyssen's complicity with the culture industry that is raging just outside the academy's doors, effectively endorses those transdisciplinary, and indeed "metahistorical" commentaries on the pleasures of cultural production, *as* knowledge.

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