TECHNOLOGIES OF ROMANCE

– MOVING AND STILL IMAGES, DEATH, AND LOOKING BACK

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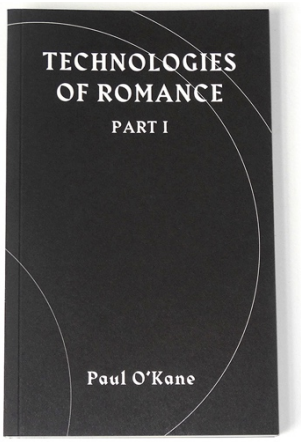
“Our coming was expected on earth”
Walter Benjamin, *Theses on a Philosophy of History*

“We have become impoverished. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another, and have often left it at the pawnbroker’s for a hundredth of its true value, in exchange for the small change of ‘the contemporary’ ”
Walter Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*.

“… the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future”
Walter Benjamin (on Lotze)

“What is romance?”
Jia Zhangke, *Platform* (2000)


TECHNOLOGIES
OF ROMANCE
PART I
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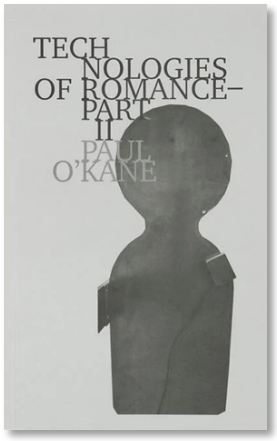
TECH
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OF ROMANCE–
PART
II
PAUL
O'KANE


PAUL O'KANE
HISTORY IN
CONTEMPORARY
ART AND CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

The newest technologies may have us wrapped around them in seemingly intractable ways. But we can search for strategies by means of which to create or keep open some anachronistic, less trending possibilities.

Contending with new technologies that crave and claw at our constant attention, we might need to open a metaphorical 'umbrella' to protect us from the torrent of unsolicited information raining down.

This might already suggest a romantic image, of an isolated persona, contending with the technologized elements; heroic, brave, connected, and yet more isolated than ever before; truly "alone but not lonely"[1].

It is also a Quixotic image, but then all of us are potentially, collectively liberated, unified and equalised by new technologies today, only to each pursue a blinkered folly, reconciled to a highly superficial, individuated life of simple-minded swiping and scrolling. We are thereby denied historical traction, excused slow thought, and denied hard-won knowledge and deeper meaning.

It might therefore be justifiable to behave a little like Luddites, or the mythical ostrich that supposedly buries its head in the sand at the sign of a threat. It may be wise to strategically wait for the latest technological hype to pass over us; or at least wait for it to acquire some humility, that may come, even to the newest technologies, with the passage of time.

We can avert our eyes to thereby see beyond or elsewhere than the direction dictated by the latest technologies. And even if this means critiquing the value of 'the latest', even if it means looking back and looking to the past for something *not new* but nevertheless different, and perhaps more valuable as a result.

We might be guiltlessly justified in performing such retro-manoeuvres, if only because we instinctively know what hurts and what nurtures us; what intimidates and what inspires us.

[1] Reference to *"I'm Alone But Not Lonely"* edited essay by Volker Grassmuck (original 2989) eeodo publication 2017. See also Sherry Turkle's title *Alone Together*.

We might justifiably suspect that the intrusive urgency with which new technologies place demands upon us is primarily for someone else's power, glory and profit. It does not have our own best interests – as rounded and vulnerable, curious and adventuring creatures – in mind.

Thus, the long standing project that I call *Technologies of Romance* might include an aspect of care and well-being capable of taking the harsh and unadorned edge off new technologies and of encouraging a perverse deceleration, suspension, diversion, even a reversed trajectory, or clumsy retreat that goes awkwardly against the contemporary grain.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF *TECHNOLOGIES OF ROMANCE*

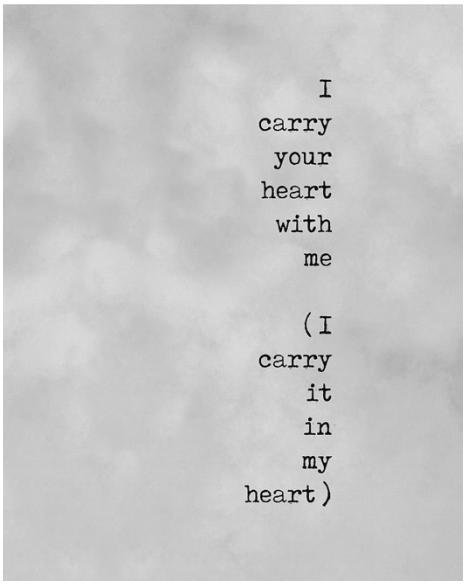
My use of the term *Technologies of Romance* began as a response to undergraduate students' apparent obliviousness to history, as they sat entranced by their attention-seeking smartphones.

To help them avert their eyes, we started looking back in time together and soon found that artists have always faced new waves of technology and ways to adapt art to those new technologies or to reflect them in some effective manner.

To cite an obvious example, the typewriter [2] may have once presented a threat to long-standing traditions of tender poetry and prose, and yet literary emissions of the human 'heart' still came to be rendered by means of these noisy, ugly, apparently heartless machines. Furthermore, those achievements were dependent upon the typewriter's idiosyncratic tendencies.

We might refer to its QWERTY-fication of writing, at first a mechanical restriction, but soon sparking unprecedented methods, and inspiring corresponding forms and aesthetics, e.g. a stream of modern consciousness made on a paper scroll; or a haiku-sized poem struck by individual steel letters hammered onto paper through inked ribbon.

[2] Also discussed by Friedrick Kittler in:
Gramophone, film, typewriter / Friedrich A. Kittler ; translated with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. by:Kittler, Friedrich A; Publisher: Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, [1999]



e.e. cummings

Jack Kerouac

Students of the *Technologies of Romance* seminar began to feel freer and more welcome to explore the cavernous archives of the past, and to treat these as: 'another country' (L.P. Hartley); an 'unexplored continent' (Nicolas Bourriaud); or the 'world of yesterday' (Stefan Zweig).

Seeing the past and history as, not detached, alien and anachronistic; and seeing even the supposedly 'newest' technologies, not as exceptions but as part of a long and continuous story of change, allowed us to escape a spectacularly unprecedented present defined by hypnotised attention to a life online.

ROMANTICISMS

As well as a history of technologies, the *Technologies of Romance* seminar considered the etymology, associations and ramifications of the word 'romance', including Romanticism and the French *roman* as referring to a novel, story or narrative. Brief thoughts of Rome, the city and empire, gave on to wider connotations of romance from Don Quixote to Caspar David Friedrich. Then there was the enduring influence on contemporary thought of the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to consider. We visited Goethe, Wordsworth & Coleridge, enjoyed the modesty of John Claire's poetry, considered kitsch novels and unpacked pop

songs. We also glimpsed the Roma people, and here come to reflect on *Technologies of Romance* in a congress held appropriately in Romania.

Ironically, the best, most rewarding use we make of the newest technologies might be as tools with which to explore, revisit and redeploy the past. We might even invite new technologies to redefine our established ideas of romance and Romanticism, perhaps rejuvenating our approach to feeling, sense, affect, narrative and story, and even updating and expanding our repertoire of emotions [3] .

The students and I began to see that technology, and all the humanity we associate with romance might interrelate in an overlapping zone where new feelings, and perhaps what Charles Baudelaire called "new emotions" could perhaps coincide with new technologies , (Baudelaire.C.).

Despite, or alongside Baudelaire's revolutionary call for a more realistic attention to modern life, his aesthetics remained partly immersed in Romanticism. This led him to claim that the value of art, even of modern art, was *always* emotional – something that cool-headed modernists, cerebral conceptualists or ironic postmodernists might dispute, and yet, given a recent upsurge of interest in affect, we might be ready to re-embrace (Baudelaire, C.).

By raising the possibility of finding "new emotions" to suit a modern world, Baudelaire may have also opened the prospect of ever-renewed Romanticisms [4], such that we could claim that a new Romanticism and attendant new emotions emerges along with every new wave of technology – like an immune response released by a body to protect it from harmful invaders.

SURREALISM/STILL/MOVING AND FREEZE-FRAME IMAGES

Surrealism adapted aspects of Romanticism to its otherwise *avant-garde*, modern and Freudian ends. It produced an unprecedentedly erotic and oneiric vision of art that immersed the modern, the ordinary, and the everyday in an imaginative, dream-like state, perhaps as a

[3] to include e.g. what has come to be known as the 'face journey'.

[4] This might remind us that J.F. Lyotard once claimed that: "every post-modernism *precedes* a modernism"

way of anaesthetising and mitigating the shocking effects of modernity and its attendant new technologies.

Surrealism used the new technologies of its time in ways that we might refer to as emotional, affective, and in this way neo-Romantic. Walter Benjamin, who wrote substantially on Romanticism, here writes under Surrealist influence, becoming enraptured by the technology of cinematic slow motion:

> "… Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods …" (Benjamin, W.)

We might hope to locate a similar sense of wonder regarding our own age and its very own wave of new technologies. Following in Benjamin's footsteps, Jean Baudrillard later wrote that cinema: "reserves slow motion for moments of highest drama" (Baudrillard, J.). But this doesn't fully explain our fascination, and possibly romantic interpretation of the value and quality of slow motion as a quintessentially modern and ubiquitous special effect; a 20th century aesthetic which also implicates the dramatic phenomenon of 'freeze-frame' [5].

In 1950, Francois Truffaut innovated a new and newly appropriate ending for a movie (Troufaut, F.) At the conclusion of his biopic *The 400 Blows*, after an unusually long tracking and dolly shot, of a boy fleeing an institution; running across country and across the screen; accompanied by the romantic music of Jean Constantin, Truffaut has the young protagonist, on reaching the ocean, turn to stare at us, i.e. into the camera, which zooms in while the image is simultaneously transformed into a still photograph, accompanied by the unequivocal graphic '*FIN'* (Truffaut, F.)

[5] See '400 Blows' concluding shot, and ditto 'Thelma & Louise'

In that complex cinematic moment Truffaut unravelled a history of technologies, jumping from the moving image into to the still, using the still emphatically, as an ending that must suggest a death, and simultaneously, we might say ‘romantically’, compressing the narrative of a young life as if it is already shaped by its past and future, its inevitable end in stillness and death, staring at us, the people of the future, people who, according to Benjamin, are always “ expected on earth” (Benjamin, W).

The boy gazes through the prison-bar like, hand-drawn graphic ‘FIN’, as we stare back into the past and into the child’s eyes, which seem to raise a statement, that is also a question, making a silent visual appeal. Having escaped family life and institutional incarceration, the sea romantically promises a kind of infinite space of escape but is simultaneously a limit, its promised freedom is revealed to be another limit and conclusion, albeit a ragged edged, tidally shifting limit.

The child is thus sandwiched and trapped within an ambiguity, and seems to appeal to us, looking through and beyond the film’s ending (to him read in reverse thus: ‘N I F’) into what

lies beyond it, not able to see us returning his gaze, but somehow sensing that we, the people of the future, are there, are here, here in the future, both when the film was first completed and released and now as our eyes still appear to meet, thanks to the technologies of photography and film, technologies that I call ‘Romantic’ because of the special, human, emotive qualities that they combine with their modern, mechanical and technological basis.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4jGNoag_1g

This newly technologized modern image of death also featured as a plot resolution for Ridley Scott’s 1991 film ‘*Thelma & Louise’.* By freezing frame and immediately fading to white, aided by the ethereal music of Hans Zimmer, Scott produced a fatalistic and yet quasi-spiritual image to satisfy the audience’s investment in this passionately rollicking road movie with its then innovative female focus.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66CP-pq7Cx0

Meanwhile, in *La Jetée* (1962), Chris Marker made a 28-minute 'movie' almost entirely out of still images, excepting a few seconds of mysterious moving image smuggled into the heart of the film. Somehow, this unusual format was appropriate to a short story that resolved its own narrative in a disorienting image of circular time and in which a human subject shuttles between past, present and future – all accompanied by an unarguably romantic score composed by Trevor Duncan.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kee2WnBVxsY

Romantic music, this time provided by Ola Fløttum, also accompanies a key scene in Joachim Trier's 2021, Oslo-based movie '*The Worst Person in the World*'. Here, a modern urban centre – according to the subjectivity of the two main protagonists – comes to a stand-still.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyT2jpyu3VY

Today, the legacy of the recent pandemic leaves us haunted by an image of a world in which modernity, despite all its novelty, invention, mobility and speed, can be arrested and thereby wrested from us. In fear of a deadly virus, time in our cities stood funereally still, shops were shuttered, aeroplanes grounded, traffic banished, and streets and skies silenced, as we queued, standing far apart, in fear of each other, or took compulsory walks in neighbourhoods rendered strange and morbid by a deathly threat.

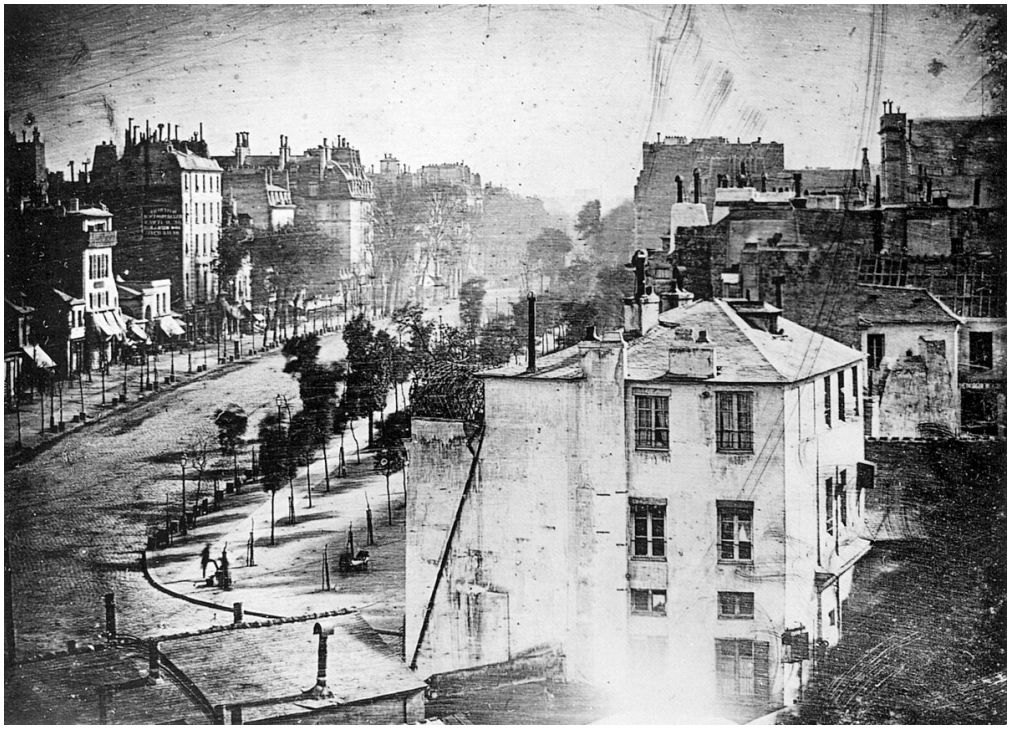
This is not an unfamiliar idea. In Italo Calvino's collection of ancient Italian folk tales, at least one of many imagined worlds is afflicted by a comprehensive stasis, and we will probably find something similar in '*1001 Arabian Nights*'. Meanwhile a 1951 Sci-Fi movie is titled '*The Day the Earth Stood Still*', further leading us to suspect that this image of a stilled world is an ancient and common trope, even a cliché, something both ancient and modern that plays on archetypal images of life and death, individual and society, motion and stillness, life and art.

In invoking this image, Trier is not then seeking to innovate, but rather deploying an idea that we know well, and which has long been important to us. In Trier's scene, the general stillness and corresponding isolation of the two mobile protagonists eventually creates a Romantic crescendo and translates a sense in which, in the throes of passion, and despite reason and

rationality, romance can still single us out from our surroundings and invite us to occupy a unique sense of being, as we are brought together in a special kind of private time.

This transgressive passion might lead us to break habitual trusts, orders and routines and spend unnoticed hours, an entire night, with a relative stranger. And as a reward for surrendering ourselves to nature in this way, we may witness sunset and dawn, thereby gaining a reminder of the profundity of non-utilitarian time and our most beguiling questions.

But what draws our attention in Trier's scene is not so much nature as the technologies involved in the contrivance of the image. Juxtaposing still and moving figures in one scene or film alerts us to 'moving image' as a historical development of still photographic images. Trier's enchanted world, in which only two people move while all others are stilled, is one within which a history of technologies are juxtaposed or nested. It implicates a whole history of theatre, performance, dance, *tableaux vivant* and ultimately the most ancient concerns of art.
Trier's image also inevitably invokes what might be its antithesis, the celebrated '*Boulevard Du Temple*' made by Louis Daguerre in 1838, supposedly the first still photographic image of a human being, determined by their unique stasis. Now the bustling urban crowd is rendered invisible by their movement, and thus by their transgression of a fundamental law of still photography: STAY STILL!'. Meanwhile, by coincidentally standing still during the several minutes it took for Daguerre's image to be registered on his device, one anonymous individual was supposedly recorded for posterity, becoming the first human to be fixed by the newly emerging medium of photography.



But maybe modernity, despite its dynamic reputation, has also, and always had a slower, even static corollary, modernity's shadow perhaps, the corresponding death to its celebrated vitality. Even modern painting, excited by its progressive surge, celebrates its heyday in an iconic image of a frozen scream.

And perhaps in still photography, blurred figures, slow motion, looped 'action replays', and freeze-frame we find illustrations of a need to rein-in a hubristic age of otherwise headlong speed and motion, discovering a romantic tension there, between life and death, art and life, stillness and motion, even between black and white.

These modern forms of stasis might be cautions, warnings, signs of a decelerated equivalent to modernity's hectic, blinkered, and at worst frightening and fascistic forward thrust. The Surrealists, like Benjamin, sensed that modernity is an immanent crisis from which we constantly and necessarily need to create imaginative ways of escape. It might appear to be something we rush to keep up with, but can equally be described as a captive, frozen, desperately urgent state, a place and time in which, as Benjamin said – ending his essay on Surrealism – we: "… exchange … the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds" [6].

ROMANTICISM/MODERNITY/ STILLNESS, MOTION & DEATH

Modernity produced and over-produced much that it had not accounted for. It heartily and positively championed the new while seemingly unaware that this would inevitably produce so much that is so soon old. Consequently, it surrounds us with the dead, the redundant, the pre-loved and used; the wrinkly rock star, vintage dress and retro-themed cafe. Fashion falls faster and faster out of fashion, leapfrogging seasonal rhythms to become either a timeless monochrome uniform or a regularly renewed raid made on a ceaseless parade of the past.

In a book chapter titled '*A Selfie-Stick in the Charity Shop'* I described the inevitable entropic decline of trending objects and events; of the inescapable, fatal destination that ultimately awaits all modern progress and novelty. Thus, today the humble, well-meaning charity shop might suggest, among its anodyne skeins of abandoned wool; its seemingly innocuous bric-a-brac and nick-nacks, a modernity which has for long vaingloriously failed to anticipate and account for its enthusiastic overproduction of the old.

[6] While Marcel Duchamp invented the rule of thumb "Escape Forward", today, we are perhaps recommending a reversal of that trajectory.

As Benjamin was aware, the Surrealists were not convinced by, and caught up in the crass drive to simply be more modern or most new, rather they felt that the most peculiar, discomforting and disruptive forces in the modern world are found in unexpected ramifications of the rapid passing-over of the tidal new, and the subsequently anachronistic silt, the formless mass of flotsam and jetsam that modernity leaves in its wake.

A certain modern tendency may have also set aside as redundant (according to a form of quasi-Darwinian evolution) all kinds of unresolved possibilities that come to rest inert on the banks of fast flowing modernity. But we can enter and re-cultivate this arena; take on the challenge of each new technology as it presents itself; and do our best to divert its myopic trajectory, broadening and pluralising its one-way street. We might thereby humanise it, expanding and exploring its sensual potential, however remote that might initially seem to be.

In the novella *Mad Love*, Andre Breton and Alberto Giacometti tour a flea market in search of, not 'contemporary art' but *objet d'art*; abandoned objects of debatable value still smelling uncannily of death; debris gleaned unceremoniously from house clearances, but which, given some Surrealist attention might take on a special meaning and even gain an afterlife.

In his essay on Surrealism, while referring to the special value of "the outmoded", Benjamin noted the worth of: "the dresses of five years ago"; of "fashionable restaurants once the vogue has begun to ebb from them". He also spoke of trains that were (already in 1929) "beginning to age" and which therefore promised "mournful railway journeys" – an image far removed from that of the train as a prime example of speedy and effective modern dynamism.

Given the regular fluctuations of a modern environment, and the casino-like chaos of unregulated capitalist and consumerist economies, current technologies and contemporary consumer objects rise into the prominent hype of a celebrated new, only to crash down through the same value system.

They fall from the heights of illuminated display, flattered by shining glass and proudly brandishing a high price tag, only to fall to the ignominy of 'SALE' status, then they fall to the 'off-price retailer', down, down to flimsy flea market table, then further, to the abject floor, remaining, without purpose when the market ends and the merchants have gone home;

persisting as meaningless cultural artefacts, failed propositions, useless objects that have lost their context and with it their value.

Here lies a broken and unseasonable stocking-filler; there a faded family snap with indecipherable writing on the reverse. Then there is an abandoned shoe, bereft of its partner. All await the dumper truck to crush them back into formless matter, ready to recycle, to go once again around the block of changing form and values.

This bleak, nihilistic image, and general indictment of modern, capitalist and consumerist teleology might cause us to recall that previous Romanticisms have helped us confront death in a secular scenario scientifically stripped of religious assurances, and to have also enabled us to maintain a space of human wonder in an age dominated by cold-hearted capital, inhuman technology and rigorous reasoning.

The visible archive that the early modern world bequeaths us may be largely made of B&W media, drawn from photographs, films, black shellack and black vinyl, featuring scenes crowded with black carriages, top hats and frock coats, all amounting to a grand *grisaille* that brings to mind Baudelaire's observation, made in 1846, that, despite all our modernity "… we are all of us celebrating some funeral".

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ag5DxAadYY
from 1 minute

In fact, we do not usually 'celebrate' funerals, however, in the 1924 movie *Entr'acte* by René Clair, incorporating music by Erik Satie, a cortege gradually accelerates, leaving well-dressed mourners to rush and eventually run as fast as they can to keep up with it.

Clair's surprising image of accelerating death might be inspired by the, then new technology of cinema itself; its novel ability to create the illusion of speeding up and slowing down time, using its very own fast-moving procession of still images, each hurrying to pass, first through the gate of the cine camera, then through the gate of the cine projector, and thereby into history [7] .

Perhaps Clair is suggesting that, unless we find some way to rein-in our headlong modern trajectory, by slowing, freezing or reversing, we are (at least in 1924) still destined – both as individuals, and as a society – to reach the grave all too early, and despite the arsenal of modern technologies we have evolved to reduce pain, lengthen life and cheat death.

The absurd appeal and strange meaning of Clair's image might also arise from associating sublime, inexorable and untimely death with the modern hubris and pride we take in our ability, aided by technology, to choose, control and determine our lives and our environment, which in turn becomes not only technologized but itself a kind of technology.

Surrealism, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan, all insisted upon and warned us to acknowledge a haunting and untimely real that the modern world would prefer to deny, defeat, repress or disguise. But death of course remains an ineffable challenge even to a modernity that would like to know and to see all, and which sees itself, allied to technologies, as insuperable – albeit Promethean or akin to Mary Shelley's image of modern man as a mad manufacturer of murderous and melancholic monsters.

[7] Recalling that Jean Luc-Godard called cinema '... truth, 24 x a second', which later morphed into Laura Mulvey's title 'Death 24 x a Second'

Walter Benjamin noted in his *Storyteller* essay that modernity had attempted to sanitise and institutionalise death, taking it out of domestic rooms and houses and placing it in technologised, professional and scientific spaces.

> " … Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual, and a most exemplary one … In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living.
> There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died … Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death … and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs ... "

Provoked by Clair's film, we might recognise a shared plight and perhaps complain that we have been cheated by a modernity that runs away with itself, and which has run away from us. Modernity moved faster than expected, quickly slipped out of our control, accumulated so much and so many kinds of new that these all-too-quickly became so many olds.

Thus, there may be no point in debating today whether e.g. Artificial Intelligence could or should grow beyond our mastery of it, after all this is the primary characteristic of all technologies, to only and always be what Marshall Mcluhan once called 'extensions of man'. The primary characteristic of all technologies must be to go beyond ourselves and beyond our control, as their *raison d'être*; to extend our current capabilities at any moment[8].

In every case, once we have set a new technology in motion, we should not be surprised if we are soon reduced to its ragged followers and obedient servants, hurrying to catch up with its assured and superior stride; anxious to accommodate, please, improve and repair it. As Professor Howard Caygill wrote in a preface to the book *Technologies of Romance Part 1':*

> " … what if we were, not just a by-product, but a *romance* of technology, a toy contrived to amuse and comfort itself during its slow gestation?"

[8] In fact, A.I.'s greatest claim to fame is its ability to 'scrape' and remake our collective past, to give current form to a mass of data that is our collective memory, an enormous burial site or tomb, repeatedly raided to make up the present and the future from the dust left by all of our aging activity.

And yet, to find and situate ourselves amid a wide range and a long history of technologies, we need to gain a perspective on them, to be able to choose, to be unharnessed from, and no longer led by any trending technology – e.g. the digital, or A.I. – that would have us swept up in its powers, beyond our own powers and will.

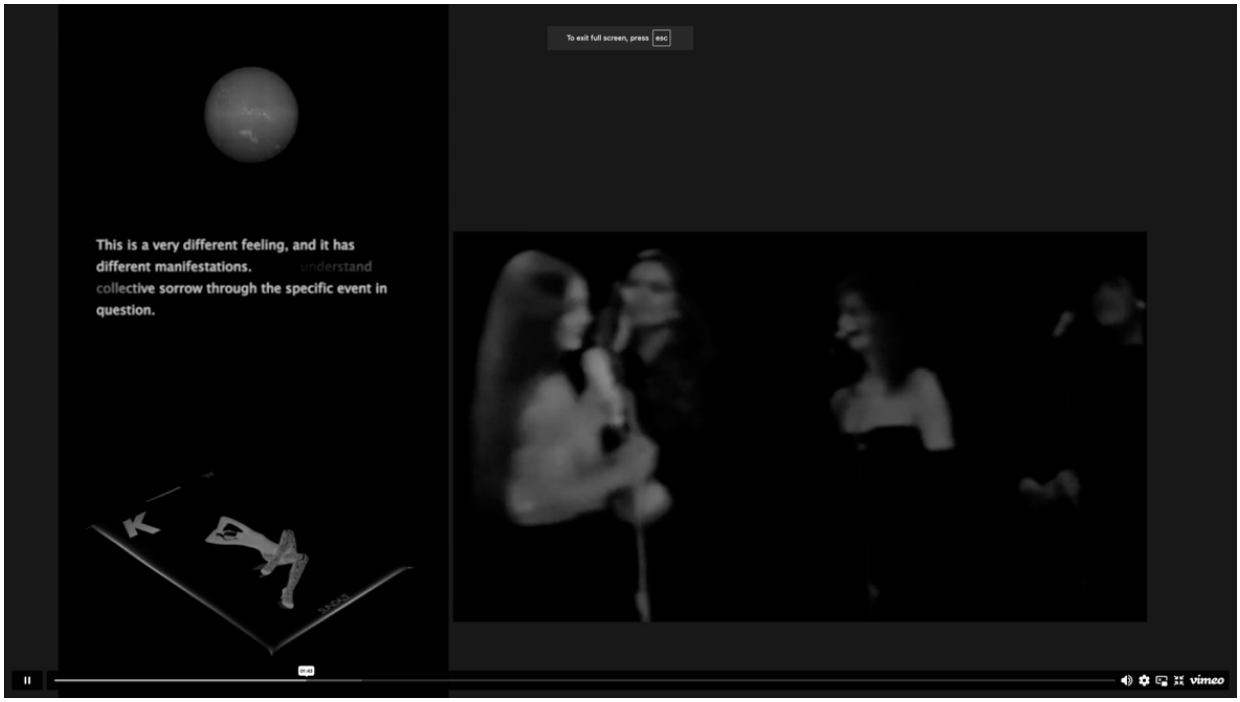
Rather, we might today wish and deserve to be newly freed and newly pleased to use the newest technologies to venture through the widest and deepest history of technologies, enjoying and affirming their difference and celebrating their anachronism, bringing to attention, and into the present, their temporal alterity, perhaps finding ways in which they had not been used or perceived in their own heyday. In this way, we might reclaim some cultural dignity and maintain the primacy of our most human abilities.

Ultimately, it is the artists' role, as a servant and servicer of the senses[9], to neither flinch nor flee in fear of the new, but to rise to its occasion in artful ways. Benjamin wrote that, as children, figures in fairy tales prepare us to negotiate the many difficulties of life by using "cunning and high spirits".

Nietzsche, another great champion of the child (whose '*Thus Spake Zarathustra*' sometimes resembles a gauche school pantomime) would have approved of this strategy. Today, as artists, writers and thinkers, we might accept Benjamin's advice and take a strategically naive stance in our encounters with new technologies that far exceed us in their own form of intricate sophistication. Now, by way of an interlude, we can share some examples of some contemporary artists who might use still and moving images, tableaux vivant, and a dialogue with history with the 'cunning and high spirits' suggested by Benjamin.

ELIZABETH PRICE

[9] and as a 'scientist of exceptions – Alfred Jarry.



https://vimeo.com/130197064
(from 1.30 to 3.30 minutes.)

Artist Elizabeth Price provides a useful example of how, what we are calling '*Technologies of Romance*' can be effectively deployed. Her sophisticated sonic and visual montages default to a dense blackness as she features morbid reminders of loss; lost singers and lost songs, exhumed from history, along with their style, moves and looks. These images were first made with 20th century technologies but are now reborn by the artist using digital archiving and 21st century research methods.

Price's '*K*' (2015) features spooky, fuzzy, B&W images of 1960s singers doing a ritualistic dance, swishing waist-length hair, performing rock and roll rituals. In an accompanying text, read by a robotic voice, the artist equates the pop singers' role with that of professional mourners. Hence, blues, soul, pop and rock, for Price, all account for a general sense of modern mourning.

OLIVIA PLENDER

https://vimeo.com/539123662

https://vimeo.com/539129030
0 to 1.40 mins

Artist and historian of feminism Olivia Plender has recently toyed with the apparently anachronistic technique of *tableaux vivant*. It is easy to see how and why this tradition (vividly recorded both in Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities'* and in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre) was* swept aside by the mid-19th century advent of photography.

The precocious mechanical newcomer of photography must have readily satisfied the thirst that, strangely to today's audience, made an entertainment out of *tableaux vivant*'s enthusiasm for dressing and posing as well-known works of art. The photographic camera, with its ability to fix a miniature image and thereby appear to gain control over an increasingly mobile modern world, may well have rendered the *tableaux vivant* tradition absurd and redundant.

In Plender's work *'Hold, Hold, Fire'* (2023) the artist partially reconstructs a found Edwardian image of a group of suffragettes rehearsing defensive military manoeuvres in an East London park. In Plender's version, staged as a *tableaux vivant*, then recorded on video, the women rehearse a defensive strategy using mock weapons (real in the original photograph) to hold a territorial position [10].

As part of the same event, the participants in Plender's tableau underwent a training workshop that taught the skill of causing an obstruction by linking multiple mobile bodies together into one relatively *immobile* body – a body of resistance, protest and mutual defence. As such, the anachronistic art form of *tableaux vivant* is effectively revived and pressed into the service of making a contemporary image, one that falls between the still and the moving

[10] The original photo was probably taken by a suffragette called Norah Smyth around 1914, although it is not credited. There are also men in the photo, but it is the group of women to the right of the image that I have focussed on. The men were those sympathetic to the cause of votes for women. The group are called The People's Army and were part of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes.

image. Meanwhile it uses this uncomfortable, liminal status to addresses a contemporary political goal from an oblique angle.

PABLO BRONSTEIN

Pablo Bronstein can confront the audience with a certain power invested in the architecture and design of a pre-modernist era [i] [ii]. This is an architectural and design 'power' (Bronstein sometimes refers to it as 'pomp') that modernism relinquished only in order to promote a language and power of its own. Should we call Bronstein a post-modernist then? It's such an unfashionable term that today it is almost starting to sound provocative. Then again, his work wryly never lets us know whether he likes or loathes the materials and references with which he plays.

The artist, and some commentators on his work seem to stress certain ironic and absurd qualities. The works might be jokes that you may or may not 'get'. And while you are trying to work this out you can admire the skill that goes into their creation. This includes an acquired, well- honed illustrative drawing style and the purposeful fashioning of images and objects that necessarily live in a kind of limbo, somewhere between present and past.

Bronstein seems to suggest that history waits to be read, mis-read, re-read, inscribed and re-inscribed on the city's streets, as a living museum. Those streets, and even (on annual 'Open House' days) some of its most interesting buildings, are free to enter [iii] .

Just as when we listen to pop music and its own popular history on the radio, we do not need to be wealthy, nor obtain a reader's ticket to tend to architecture's archive, its language, stories and voices surround, contextualise and shape us. One of the few remaining benefits of living, in the 21st century, as an artist or student, in an impossibly expensive historic city, is that, no matter how little we might have left in our pocket or bank account we are still allowed and able to peruse the city and read its story, interwoven with our own, in the brick and stone, glass and steel, concrete and tarmac of its buildings and roads.

SIGRID HOLMWOOD
https://sigridholmwood.co.uk/

The artist Sigrid Holmwood pushes a meticulously researched feminist revisionism to new and adventurous limits by utilising handmade versions of ancient tools, medieval processes and techniques that open-up, provocatively, seriously and yet also sometimes comically, unearthed tales that are yet to be told of the oppressed and repressed powers of women.

Holmwood simultaneously widens and deepens our notion of both history and technologies, finding the past, the ancient, the medieval to be just as ‘technologised’ as today, but in its very own way. The artist thus tackles feminist history with a unique sense of depth, making and using costumes and props to create, not just her works but her practice, her process and herself, as an artist seemingly suspended between the present and a medieval realm in which art, the artist, and her audience become affirmatively reacquainted with witchery, spell-making and alchemy, all of which, under patriarchal oppression have been slanderously tainted as derogatory terms.

Holmwood’s unique and radical use of history challenges the smooth, illuminated screens and brightly lit consumer facades of the contemporary, all of which are often exemplified in and by contemporary art. She thereby challenges the blinkered positivity and myopic enthusiasm with which new technologies prioritise the present at the expense of the past. Holmwood contrarily suggests that much of the potential richness and depth that is available to us lies in an imaginative, committed and creative engagement with the past.

TAVARES STRACHAN

Tavares Strachan, *Black Star*, 2024, installation view in ‘Tavares Strachan: There Is Light Somewhere’, Hayward Gallery, London, 18 June – 1 September 2024, photo by Mark Blower, courtesy of the artist and the Hayward Gallery

At London’s Hayward Gallery in summer 2024, one of that brutalist museum’s flat concrete roofs was flooded by the artist Tavares Strachan to create a convincing, *tableau* of a twentieth-century steamship, as if floating on a sea. When a real outdoor breeze gently ruffled the surface of the water it gave more life to the illusion. Meanwhile a few manufactured bubbles added a sense of motion and direction.

That direction turned out to be South and East, or ‘towards Africa’ as the accompanying information told us. This emotive piece, titled *Black Star* (2024), represents twentieth-century activist and leader Marcus Garvey’s one-time vision of ‘The Black Star Line’. This was to be a black-owned and run shipping company, which would, or could, develop ethically profitable business and cultural trade between Africa and its U.S. diaspora.

Though Garvey’s ambitious venture did not prevail (it was probably sabotaged); and while his many audacious contributions to twentieth-century debates remain controversial, Strachan rescues this episode from the shadows of history and offers an affirmative representation of Garvey’s vision, thereby providing the present with a charming rendition of an otherwise failed and forgotten twentieth-century dream.

YESTERDAY ONCE MORE

Pipilotti Rist video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aif-aCSSgjw

While writing this paper, an uninvited, so-called ‘earworm’ inexplicably entered my head and refused to leave. It was the song *Yesterday Once More*, a 1973 worldwide pop hit for mainstream North American family singing duo The Carpenters. I later realised I had probably heard the song the previous day while shopping in my local supermarket.

I feel slightly ashamed that, while attending to the important task of choosing fruit or evaluating fish, I can still choke up a little at the enduring and affective impact of old pop songs, against which, and despite my critical faculties, I have little or no emotional defence. But then, pop music is a passion and songwriting a hobby of mine, and I admit that the lachrymose affect these piped hits and classic songs produce in me are only partly those intended by the songwriter. They are also signs of remorse that I know I will never write a song as celebrated and successful as them.

Middle-aged members of the readership of this paper, from almost anywhere in the world, might know this song, released in 1973. But strangely enough I suspect that my millennial fine art students in London will also know it. Their ability to know all their own current and contemporary culture, as well as most of my own, makes me suspect that today we absorb all of this, not so much by teaching and learning, and not by the familiar aural tradition of passing on knowledge; nor by reading and writing but by means of a kind of osmosis.

I.e. we absorb culture semi-consciously, immanently, like our everyday architectural environment, or perhaps like muzak – not just in the womb, but here and there throughout our life, aided by the various technologies of radio, TV, advertising, social media, newspapers, movies and supermarket speakers. But only as much as we might once have absorbed the messages of religion through the church and its hymns, prayers, postures, gestures and genuflections, along with its narratives rendered in stained glass.

Part of The Carpenters' song's 'hook' lies in its title's contradiction or anomaly. We could call the idea of 'it' being 'yesterday once more' a romantic exception or imaginative impossibility at the song's heart. But that anomaly is also the song's resolution, the point to which it all leads and must return.

Other parts of the song, including its introduction, 'bridge', and so-called 'middle eight', might playfully seem to lead us away from the song's ultimate destination, but only to eventually reward us with the satisfying return to the song's chorus and title, which provides a sense of Homeric, wholesome and homely arrival.

According to the song's narrative, the singer looks back through their lyrics, to recall an earlier cultural terrain where songs on the radio once made her cry tears provoked with the aid of certain, now (i.e. in 1973) anachronistic or outmoded musical devices, i.e. those seductive, sweet-sounding backing vocal patterns consisting of Ooh Oohs, Aah Aahs, La La-s, Shing-a-Ling-a-Lings, Doobi Doobi Doo Lang Langs, and Woh Oh Woh Ohs.

Meaningless as these sounds might appear, they may be distant echoes (as Elizabeth Price implies in her work '*K*') of the original 'chorus' of ancient theatre. The chorus, after all, is not only the repetitive advisors or directors of the narrative on stage, but also the hook that operates as the synopsis we take away with us and which through repetition, remains with us.

In pop songs, the chorus becomes a place to return to, where the song is recognised and resolved the chorus is something to be repeated as much as possible, even faded out while being repeated at the end of a mix that gives the false impression that the song's chorus goes on forever. It is another example of all that is Romantic, all that is sublime, all that has gravity and profundity, eternally returning, also invoking ancient rites and chants, albeit assisted by modern technologies.

Sound-effect designers enable these recordings to be soaked in fake large-room sounds, i.e. various reverbs and echoes which again trigger and signal something endless, cavernous, and which touch our hearts with affection for an idea of all that goes on forever and ever, all that is beyond us, beyond human – extra-technological we might say – beyond our ability to grasp its form or scale (see my recent book chapter, *Reverb: A Passion for the Past in Popular Music*).

Those effects-drenched backing vocals and choruses might equally be reminders of the underlying, sub-linguistic bodily sounds with which we began our very lives, where the curlicued ear was formed and where parent and child initiated their internal sonic exchange, before the moment of birth (see my article, *Thought Is Made in The Mouth*), before structured language.

The Carpenters song was penned, performed, produced and released in 1973 and can now be seen to have marked the turn away from a reputedly more optimistic 1960s into the more pessimistic, wary and cynical early 1970s. It also implies a reflective perspective that was creeping into popular culture at that time, as evidence, not only of the singers' or songwriter's increasing maturity, but also of the ageing of a youth-oriented 1960s subculture, an unprecedented adolescent force that had not anticipated the possibility of its own ageing.

However, the 1973 song interests me anew today as it has invaded my ear and occupied my mind, drawing attention to its tricky title, which begs a question – what *is Yesterday Once More*?

Deep in my cultural archive, among hundreds of thousands of other pop songs, I find that I know most of the words of this apparently crass and calculatedly commercial composition. But setting such tasteful and cultural perspectival judgements aside, how would you explain the title to someone who doesn't know the song?

The 'it' of the lyrics, (an 'it' which seems to stand for 'now', for present reality) cannot ever really be 'yesterday' and this fact is precisely what makes the song and its title into art, and thus perhaps the reason that the songwriter persisted with their hunch that this was a lyric and title worth pursuing.

So, ‘It's’ *Yesterday Once More*? But where, when? The ‘It’ seems to stand for a kind of presence. ‘It’ is here and now, it is in the supermarket, in every mental repetition of the ‘earworm’, every rendition of the classic song, here, now, and there and then, on every other classics-led radio station and supermarket muzak speaker system.

While we, here, in 2025, look back to 1973, at which point the Carpenters’ lyricist, songwriter and singer all look back together at their own earlier life in the 60s, and thus at their own historical dialogue with pop music, we are able to transport ourselves to a past that is not simply out of fashion and devalued as a result, but one that swells in value as we revisit it.

Any kind of ‘classic’, once established as such, only becomes ever more so. It cheats death and shrugs off signs of degradation and decay. It is designed for, and withstands apparently endless repetition, turning over and over the same pleasurable experience that draws past into present and present into past, ultimately conjuring a particular timelessness from which our supermarkets, with their piped pop music, clearly create profit while juggling their mix of dried, bottled, frozen and preserved products, with long sell-by dates, with fresher foods for whom a fast sell-by date delineates their pending purposelessness.

Today, the pop group Spandau Ballet, whom I once professed to despise, might just as well be singing, but now, in middle age, the enduring qualities of their undeniably successful music, allows me to forgive them and accept their claim to a deserved place in the pop pantheon where millions still love to hear them.

Then there are artists who contribute, then and now, to the mapping out of my own cultural position and whom I am happier to admire and revere, e.g. Dionne Warwick, Bob Marley or Nina Simone. They too might appear while I am cruising dreamily around the supermarket with my capacious wheeled trolley, feeling that, with a debit card in my wallet, this world is my oyster, if only because I can choose between fifty kinds of breakfast cereal.

Now I am middle-aged, I feel willing and able to join my young students in recognising and embracing the relative value of all these songs and singers. On reflection, apparently cheap, throwaway global kitsch, or ‘bubble-gum’ hit *The Rivers of Babylon* by Boney M was in fact

an original and effective mini masterpiece of popular art, conveying ancient cultural and religious messages into teenage ears where they had never been heard before.

Meanwhile '*Rock On'* is a song by 1970s British teen-idol David Essex, who's contrived teenybop image and popularity made it easy to dismiss and overlook the fact that he made one of the strangest hit singles in pop music history, a mysterious, sparse, ironic, postmodern, self-reflective deconstruction of rock itself, using unusually stark minimalism, strange timings, and excessive dark echo and reverb effects.

ETERNAL RETURN & THE TRANSVALUATION OF VALUES

Thus, while once I was a more proud and more barbaric young man, who could write off many such songs as variously cool or crass (sometimes classic or even 'crassic'), mark them out as clearly good or bad, but now, in middle-age, I tolerate far more broadly, give more and more of them, more and more respect, not least for achieving their status in the pop pantheon, the canon of classics, occupying the eternity of their apparently eternal return – to use a concept drawn from Romantic philosopher Friedreich Nietzsche. Taste and judgement might be annihilated by consciousness of eternity, and values, it seems, are transvalued by the effects of an awareness of 'eternal return'.

'Eternal return' is one of the Romantic philosopher Nietzsche's most enduring concepts. This is commonly interpreted as a kind of unending circularity, a ring, producing a temporal and spatial infinity. But contra to this popular interpretation – one that doesn't seem to justify the exhilaration with which Nietzsche celebrated its discovery in his thoughts and writings – a simplistic notion of a circular, ring-like infinity is something other than, and other to a very, *very* long time. Eternal return in fact may have no form, not even that of the circle.

I thus take the liberty, in my own recent thoughts and writings, of interpreting eternal return rather as a special trajectory, not a place, a thing or a form; not a circle, cycle, ring or loop, but a sense or sensation of endlessly returning, of a going that is always also a coming, a more Homeric trajectory (though without arrival) and *telos*, one that is *never* fooled into living in a present and pursuing a future, if only because our sublime sense of eternity is found, not in extensive, spatial or temporal forms, nor according to the geometrical form of the circle, cycle or loop, but in the affective and intense sensation of constantly and eternally

returning. Our experience of time thus becomes a kind of yearning, an emotional state rather than a reasoned understanding.

The magnanimity that results from this understanding of eternal return can be found elsewhere in the thought of Nietzsche, for example in his concept of the 'transvaluation of all values' which won't allow for relatively petty, perspectival judgements of mere, local, cultural, taste etc. (We might also find it in Walt Whitman's extraordinarily generous holistic and poetic *largesse.*)

As part of Nietzsche's wider system, the 'transvaluation of all values' is also contingent upon the possibility of eternal return, and vice versa. What is the appeal of old pop songs? They are evidence of our truly emotional experience of time, our trajectory as an eternal returning which, as an intense rather than extensive experience, does not allow for values to be anything other than transvalued.

Nietzsche, a fan of Wagnerian aesthetics, might be happy to see these transvaluing effects as evidence of eternal return, which I here precociously re-interpret as a never-ending sense of a returning, one that never arrives but proceeds in a state of apprehension.

RETURN TO BENJAMIN / LOOKING BACK

Returning now to Benjamin, we note in his reference to the German philosopher Lotze, "the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future". Basing our ideas of happiness on known experience, on experiences we *have* encountered, we consequently remain unprepared for the fact that our lives are always truly unprecedented, unknown and unknowable, as we are always leaning-in to a mysterious future and making experience coherent as we proceed, though we can perhaps choose to do this either with our eyes facing forwards, averted obliquely, or facing backwards.

All that is left over from the productive recent past is the result of a kind of overproduction that, far from evaporating to make way for the next new, remains unexpectedly lodged in exponentially accumulating archives, the modern past's graveyard, modernism's graveyard, where no bad word can be said about the dead, and thus a judgement-free heterotopia reigns.

In Paris we can visit in one morning the graves of Beckett, Baudelaire, Wilde, Tzara and Jim Morrison as proof that modernism's time has come and gone is over and out, and yet, for all their inspired and conscientious striving, these cultural producers helped produce unintended futures that we inhabit and which they could never have imagined.

Both Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg, along with Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno, all noted, in the early to mid-20th century, accumulations of abandoned kitsch culture that were never part of the modern plan or project but were a kind of unanticipated detritus of dynamic modernity.

It is like watching a car's wheels filmed and replayed in an early movie, seeming to turn backwards as they actually turn forwards; or like watching an Archimedes drill turning, confusing our perceptions concerning what is going up and down, back and forth. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archimedes%27_screw#/media/File:Archimedes-screw_one-screw-threads_with-ball_3D-view_animated_small.gif

This might again confirm the reference made by Benjamin to the German philosopher Lotze who spoke of: "the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future". If I go in search of love, happiness, fulfilment, and even if I go in search of myself, I cannot be guided by the future, but only by the past. I can only do so by *returning to* and *recognising,* by reclaiming and redeeming the familiar, the who, and the what that I already am and already have been.

And, hopefully, it can be seen here that Benjamin's, Lotze's and Nietzsche's ideas converge and perhaps confirm one another, as my admittedly precocious re-jigging of one of Nietzsche's grandest concepts allows us to claim that we are never and neither just being, nor only becoming, but rather 'backoming' (*sic*) – to coin a convenient neologism – always coming back, always going back, always coming and going, but always 'back' [11]. Hence our modernist tendency to presume to prioritise futurity and forwardness is thoroughly undermined by this promotion of its antithesis.

[11] See the Korean expression 'katawa' pronounced to family or friends who are leaving the house and translates roughly as 'go and come back'.

I started this article reminiscing and reflecting upon my ‘Technologies of Romance’ publishing and teaching project and having progressed through a wide number of examples and ideas, would like to think that I have newly underlined and underpinned it with some philosophical depth that it heretofore lacked.

Looking back now, I am pleased to see that I have met many fellow travellers in the form of artists and thinkers whom I have been able to weave into a local and personal ‘canon’, aiming to present a kind of cultural thesis, a suggestion of a way to move, to live, to operate and to create at a time of cultural impasse surrounded by fears.

Central to those fears is the current technophobia relating to the very latest accelerations in new technology, and this fear, of this acceleration, does seem to inform all other, social, militaristic, terroristic and ant-democratic tendencies.

Though I conceded, at the outset to this reflective piece, that I did not mind being thought of as a ‘luddite’, I hope I have been able to flesh out this crude term with a variety of ideas and possibilities that show alternative ‘ways’, ‘directions’ and possibilities to be gleaned by – however embarrassingly – taking a backward-looking stance and feeling free to revisit and explore the oceanic archive that is the past.

In doing so I am seeking some genuine surprises, as well as the best of human creativity and imaginative reasoning, thereby ‘Romanticising technology as a narrative agent or agency; as a kind of historical protagonist whose story is always ours to tell and to retell; always taking on board Walter Benjamin’s reminder that storytelling is, at best, an oral and aural tradition in which no story is fixed and pinned by the technology of writing, but is always poorly recalled, creatively re-told and passed on y every teller who contributes to its ancient status as a feat of memory; memory, as an aspect of my ‘Technologies of Romance’ that I have thus-far overlooked and might wish to pursue in further research.

Looking back might do something to the that which we look back at, and to the way we look when we look back. Perhaps we are more generous and lenient when looking back? Our memoir writing often seems happy to enhance and embellish memories that we would quickly concede are unreliable and not exactly factual. They grace a good memory and make it sweeter while numbing and healing the pain of bad memories, as if memory itself were

laced with a kind of anaesthetic. There is also a kind of implied fictitiousness to all retroactivity of this kind.

Marcel Proust, and his relative Henri Bergson, as well as Friedrich Nietzsche, as we have seen, were all interested in this, but Walter Benjamin perhaps most convincingly described it when hi-jacking his contemporary Paul Klee's little drawing, 'Angelus novus' and pouring his very own art critical sauce over it in such a way that no-one else would be able to write about it differently for at least a century.

As we know, Klee's / Benjamin's 'angel of history' can *only* look back, even while moving into the future with its back turned. Its fixed gaze sees nothing but a deindividuated legacy of destruction. But the looking back that we have entered here, rather than seeing nothing but destruction might also be more Proustian, seeing nothing but cultural phenomena and events flattered and enhanced by the generous medium of memory, or simply observed dispassionately due to our reversed perspective.

The human perspective and perception of temporal sequence and progress might be determined by the human limits and abilities of our human eyes, set at the front and top of our body. Certain birds and mammals have differently mounted, or swivelling eyes – as in the case of some hawks which have a field of vision of about 278 degrees, compared to about 180 in humans; or chameleons which have 360-degree vision in 2 eyes mounted on 2 sides of their head and which can swap attention from one eye to the other every second.

So, might these creatures experience the same demarcation and passage of past, present and future as we humans do, or perhaps suggest a different understanding of time's passage created by this physiological difference? How might a chameleon look at a painting, an exhibition, or watch a movie? What would they make of the metaphorical concept of 'looking back'?

In Romantic paintings we see figures looking away from us, as in works by Caspar David Friedrich, or in the Danish painter (though not usually referred to as Romantic) Hammershoi. Some sense of the doppelganger emerges from our consciousness of looking back at the back of a figure; one who also looks away from us as if unable to register our own gaze, making us wonder, uncomfortably, if someone might also be looking at our own back, while we look at

the back of one who looks back, thus forming the suggestion of a layered and infinite regression of looking.

Perhaps it is this sense of implied infinity, as we experience when in an enclosed space surrounded by mirrors, that accounts for the 'Romanticism' of these images. The attraction and satisfaction of this effect (see Kusama) is perhaps then to lose ourselves, to relinquish perspective, point-of-view, humanism and presence.

We might prefer to approximate the condition of a vignette, an unframed experience with uncertain edges and limits that is ultimately truer than any falsely framed and perspectival interpretation of experience. Tus the vignette can join the early photography and tableaux vivant and other examples in the foregoing, of technologies that challenge, oppose or rescue us from the overwhelming logic of a certain technology, digital technology, with its numerical basis.

My '*Technologies of Romance'* project might enable us to embrace and revisit a long and comprehensive history of aged, and thereby humanised and mellowed technologies, while shrugging off an insistent emphasis on the present and the new. There are, and always have been, other technologies than the digital, built upon different sensual and material bases, different materialities and chemistries. And this is what I have been seeking to champion and articulate in my *Technologies of Romance* project, calling for a holistic relativisation of technologies in general, all made available to us according to pre-modernist romantic ways of understanding the dialogue between art and life.

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[i] See https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/pablo-bronstein-sketches-regency-living

[ii] This is perhaps an appropriate place to mention another architectural intervention at the ICA buildings, by the artist Cameron Rowland titled: *3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London
29 January to 19 April, 2020.
See: http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/cameron-rowland-3-4-will.-iv-c.73
from which:
' ... in the upstairs galleries ... comparisons are made between the practice of branding slaves as chattel and the current programme of tagging and monitoring used by the U.S. parole service'
and:
'The caption for 'Encumbrance' (2020) outlines the history of 12 Carlton House (the site of the ICA) and its transfer under George IV from a royal household to rental accommodation that continues to provide revenue to the Crown Estate. Rowland stresses that in general the Crown Estate provides 75% of its revenue to the Treasury and 25% to the

monarch. The artist then rolls into this exposition references to the trading of mahogany (synonymous with the slave trade) and five mahogany features within the interior of the ICA - four doors and a handrail. By assigning these features to a mortgage investment that is exempt from the historic contract, Rowland is able to disrupt the flow of profit to the Crown Estate, effectively and selectively diminishing the value of the property.'

[iii] See https://open-city.org.uk/how-to-take-part-in-open-house-festival