A Few Complex Images of Present Time: Modernity, the Media and Time

by Guy Bellavance

The world ceaselessly begins and ends; every moment it is at its beginning and at its end; there has never been any other world, and it will never be otherwise. DENIS DIDEROT[1]

I flee from the present by two roads: the road to the past and the road to the future. FÉLICITÉ DE LAMENNAIS[2]

The wording temps présent *is interesting in itself. In what sense can time be present? ... if we have an almost infinite historical past, structured and limited only by our actual interests, as well as an open future, the present tends to become a turning point which switches the process of time from the past into the future.* NIKLAS LUHMANN[3]

Modernity, no doubt, is less a cultural regime than a temporal one. Temporality is at the heart of its definition, both as a central question and as a reality principle. It is thus difficult, given the way we conceive of the world today, to disassociate reality and temporality: our reality is always that of an experienced time, a human time, in which past and future are only truly relevant when they concern us directly, *now*. This being the case, modernity has not only placed time at the centre of its reality; it has, at the same stroke, made *present time* its obligatory site of integration. Present time thus becomes time's new "turning point", its inevitable centre of gravity.

This modern consciousness of time – which should not be confused with its chronology[4] – is expressed in different ways at different moments in modernity: with Diderot's "enlightened" precision in the eighteenth century, through that biting formula not devoid of

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narcissism, that of eternal youth, which points towards an "eternal present," a succession of instantaneous and spontaneous "momentary orders"[5]; or in the (still) Romantic terms of Lamennais in the nineteenth century, through a sort of part "melancholic," part "utopian" dropping out, depending on whether this present escapes towards the past or towards the future[6]; or yet again, in more *modern*, or "hypermodern," terms through Niklas Luhmann's curious system, which is simultaneously phenomenological, functionalist, and cybernetic.[7] In particular, Luhmann defines this new relationship to time – or this modern and Western "time system" – as "the social interpenetration of reality with respect to the difference between past and future."[8] This is a difference for which *present time* serves, neither more nor less, as a "switch." In this light, the *relevance of time* – and in fact *relevance* itself – is inseparable from present time.[9] This new centre of gravity within the "momentary present" remains precarious (for lack of transcendental guarantors) and torn (between the future and the past). There is always the danger that it will escape in one direction or the other, making it a paradoxical site of integration: restraining yet intoxicating, punctual yet continuous, light and yet complex. Diderot and his concept of "punctual order" do not say anything different, even if they say it in a different way: the "punctualisation" of the present makes each of us the point of departure by means of a process involving our "own timing," that is by temporal autoregularisation.[10]

This new conception of time, which is a Western and modern one, has little in common with time in a chronological or linear sense.[11] But it is not completely independent of a certain way of thinking about the chronology of events: one based on the self, on its "present-present." In this way, Luhmann dates this change in the cultural/temporal regime – which is a veritable upsetting of time in the present tense – to the moment when, in the eighteenth century, the use of our present-day "retro-progressive" calendar finally became widespread. This calendar makes it possible to calculate time before and after Jesus Christ from a single zero point, a new point of infinity. Not only was the past thus rid of the need to be founded upon an initial event, but the future was also freed of any search for final ends. If there is no longer any fixed date when time began, there is also no longer any final date when everything will come to an end. In so far as the future opens up, but always from a starting point in the present, and that it closes up as soon as it occurs, it can therefore never begin. And the same is true for the past which, for its part, no longer ever finishes *finishing*.[12]

In this way, the idea of present time overflows the horizon of the moment to an equal degree. Indeed we must view it as a system of meaning, endowed with a degree of permanence and bearing a requirement: that it perpetuate itself not as the past, nor as the future, but as the present. The problem becomes one of a "temporal integration," in the present, of the past and the future. This perspective on modernity is not entirely consistent. On the one hand, it contradicts numerous common depictions of it, particularly those that place its centre of gravity in the future (or in progress or revolution); if there is indeed a change, this change takes place only in the present. On the other hand, it appears from the outset to be *implausible*. For how can present time endure in time? Luhmann, for his part, would say that it is precisely by means of this implausibility that modernity was established.

Time is undoubtedly one of the most difficult questions modern thought has encountered on its path. Neither science nor philosophy has yet succeeded in providing a satisfactory answer. It is an open question we all have to confront, which is why it remains closely tied to the development of individuality in the modern sense, to the "individualisation of the individual" we might say, which is an endless and bottomless process. Once raised, this question involves writing one's personal biography as much as it involves writing collective history. This new writing of history, whether individual or collective, is no longer a matter of writing the past as the past in the traditional sense (similar to the minutes of a board meeting and somewhat like a *c.v.*),[13] as something unalterable once it occurs. The writing of history is also a matter of writing the present and the future. In this

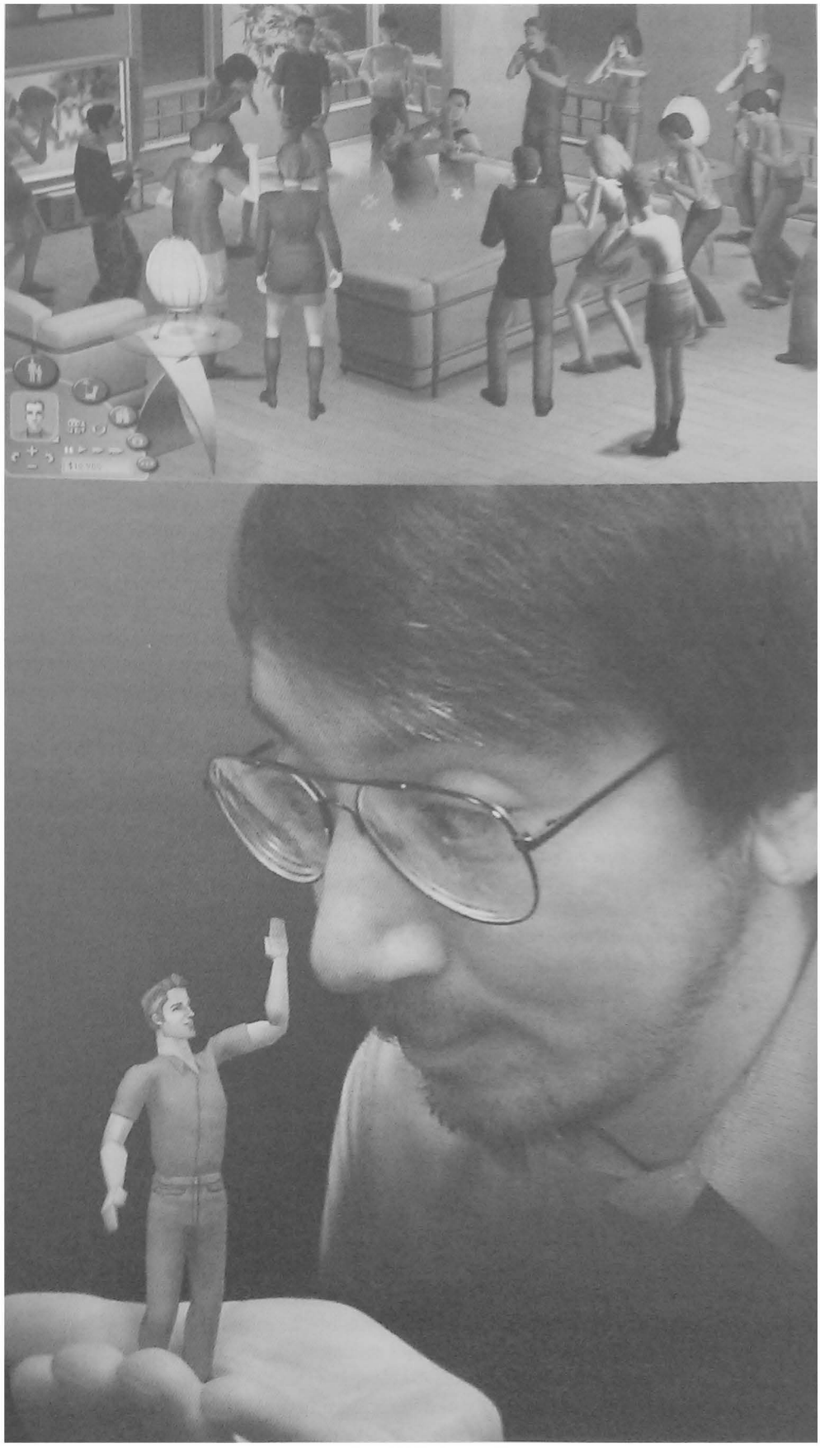
sense, futuristic or political utopias and the arsenal of techniques for strategic anticipation (planning, forecasting, futurology, probability theory) have become bound up with this writing (the way divination and premonitions were in an earlier age). As for the present, it tends to write itself and insert itself between these two temporal poles – the past and the future – like a kind of mediatised or communicative bubble that overlaps with that of the "life-world." These two bubbles can be viewed, in luhmannian terms, as "non-temporal extensions of time": as a way of "gaining time" in order to resolve, using strictly temporal means (and not metaphysical ones), *the problems of our time* (and of time). In this sense, the idea of present time, inseparable from the modern subjective personality, also appears structurally tied to the emergence of communication and the socio-technical system which supports it. We enter into the era of *communication as consciousness*, in opposition to *the thought of being*. This is less a postmodern condition than it is a hypermodern one, affecting the individual and the group in equal measure. Present time is this "achronological" world of communication as consciousness. But this world does not escape time. Its principal function, on the contrary, is precisely to "internalise" (in the present) these two increasingly divergent temporal horizons which consist, in modernity, of the road to the past and the road to the future. Its task is to succeed in making these two horizons switch.

Photography and the Image of Present Time

It is thus not by chance that *news* plays such a dominant role in our societies, to the point that it has taken the place formerly occupied by other means of depicting reality. For modernity, news is not just one means of conveying information among others: it is *information par excellence*, the essential component in the functioning of the *present-time system*. It is also in this light that we should address the question of images. The present time factor accounts for the success not only of photojournalism but also, in a more general way, of the mass media, in opposition to the great *history painting* and the traditional hierarchies of art history. This, no doubt, is also the reason why photography was able to "take hold" so easily in modern societies in order to develop in them – take hold both in the sense of extracting from them what it desires and in the sense of completely melting into them. Photography, a system of recording in real time, is charged with time that is greater than real time. It appears more real than other kinds of images only because, precisely, it appears to be more charged with time.[14] In this way, it will have contributed to introducing temporality into modernity much more than "reality." This temporalisation of the image, which can be seen first of all as a way of desacralising the image, corresponds less to reinforcing historical consciousness and to making the meaning of history more precise than it does to opening the turbulent and contingent horizon of time. The recent intrusion of photography into contemporary art, in this sense, indicates less a return to mimetic representation, after abstraction, than it does to an in-depth examination of these paradoxes and of this complexity of the relationship to time, and to present time. In this way, artists visually observe the problem, not of the transparency of reality, but of the opacity of time; it is an observation of the problematic *form* of the present.

All this makes it possible to better understand as well what is meant by the expression "images of present time." These photographic views offer us just as many takes and picks on time. They are not simply the expression of an immediate and instantaneous present, nor are they the simple punctuation of time in a chronological and quantified sense. On the contrary, they introduce into the continuity of time a paradoxical discontinuity which, moreover, is irreversible precisely by way of "switching" between the past and the future. These images, which only take on meaning as a present connected to a past and a future, touch us or overwhelm us while they inform us temporally about our own temporal and historic moment. In this sense, they point to us, and are "historical," not because they show us the meaning of history, but, on the contrary, because they leave us with the question of a history that cannot be deciphered, of a history "grown cold," which no longer tells us how things will turn out or which way we should turn. In this sense, these images are not simply "instantaneous," at least not in the chronological sense of the term. They are always displaced and fractured in relation to the continuity of time, becoming "non-temporal extensions" of time.

These images of present time thus also overflow the horizon of the moment. They internalise both dated presents, or "past presents", and anticipated presents, or "future presents". Herein, for example, lies the force of certain kinds of war images, or images of crimes and crises, which continue to (re)present well after the fact, or to anticipate well before the fact, all the crimes and crises of "our times," occurring both in *past presents* and in *future presents*. This is the case with many images: the decapitated heads of Marx and Lenin, stored in the stockroom of history; stock market frenzy (before, during or after the crash); the looting of the archaeological museum in Baghdad during the most recent post-colonial war – the ultimate predatory act upon the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Mesopotamian times: a looting internalised in the veins of our globalised cultural markets. There are billions of these kinds of images, like so many pixels flashing on the screen of present time. If our time retains one image over another, it is first and foremost because it has a relevance that no longer derives from a (traditional) art history but rather from (contemporary) "hard news." Here, the photograph is not simply a "means" of depicting events, in the documentary sense of the term. These images look at us as much as we look at them. They are not at our service; rather, we are "engaged" by them. Some of them, no doubt, will have succeeded more than others in "fixing" a "change," a "turning point in time," or a "passage of time." This sort of observation is not limited, strictly speaking, to official *political* history. It also applies to small-scale historical narratives (stories). Whether these are biographical, *auto*biographical, or *inter*biographical, I'm not so sure: the *repetitive* image (like repetitive minimalist music) that the photographer Nicholas Dixon has taken of his wife and sisters every year for



From top to bottom: Screenshot of *The Sims™ 11* to be released in 2004 (work in progress).
Will Wright, creator of The Sims™. Originals in colour. © Courtesy of Electronic Arts Inc.

decades, in the same place, represents just as well this sort of reflexive observation of time, its quivering.

Image-time in Cyberspace

Photography has long been a privileged mediator for these representations of present time. Other visual media were added later (cinema and television), while today images are appearing which, technically at least, are of a completely different order. They are not created with optical devices but are, rather, digital or synthesised images. These new images, the "images of the future," seem no longer to seek, precisely, to *fix the image* (of present time) but to *enter into the image, in real time*, in the present. They are said to be at once *immersing*, *interactive*, and *evolving* images.[15] They thus promise to usher us into *cyberspace*, a space in which time becomes pure event, a cybernetic or computerised event, an on-line reticular process. Insofar as these images are interactive, they often promise to liberate us from the author's subjectivity. This is the case, for example, of the new multi-player role games, such as *Sims* and *Everquest*, in which some commentators see new forms of "intersubjective" narratives taking shape. In the end, however, it is the game's designer who remains on centre stage as the true star of these games (or these toys) in which you, supposedly, are the hero.[16] Will Wright,[17] for example, the inventor of *SimCity* and *Sims*, with their small worlds populated with pseudonyms and avatars, calls to mind in more ways than one the simulators of the 1980s, who were fascinated with models and role playing.

It is not easy to distinguish what here is pure utopia, what is strictly technological, or what is commercial hype. Should we, moreover, distinguish among them? And, above all, do we really want to? In any event, we must take seriously the existence of a "technological utopia" that is one and the same thing: typically modern, utopia here has become inseparable from technology, and vice versa. A techno-utopia our ad experts can spontaneously bank on. This utopia is radically distinct from classical utopia. Here, time has a more decisive role than space: these utopias are no longer located in an unexplored land but in the future, in a future that is coming closer and closer, a future present. In fact, these utopias are "realistic" utopias: rather than confining themselves to proposing the image of an ideal order, in contrast with the real, imperfect world, they want to take form in reality, now, in the present. In this sense, these new utopias are "performative": they do more than propose metaphors, they *make* "promises," just like advertising slogans.[18] The new images they promise us promise, among other things, a perfect *immersion*, by means of *simulation*, in a *virtual reality* and in *cyberspace*. These promises might be seen as so many science fiction tales without proving, for all that, to be pure fiction. The advertising arsenal deployed around them most often brings about what it is they imagine, although not always in the shape of the future that had been reckoned on.

It is true that the new digital images, which are no longer "beholden to light" (at least in the way they are conceived), call into question as a result the visual and optical system upon which photography was founded.[19] In this way, the "rupture of the umbilical cord to light" takes us from the "image as trace" (of time/reality) to the "image as matrix" in real (or continuous) time. On the other hand, however, the present-day paths of the synthetic image almost always pass through traditional media. Moreover, their social or artistic uses, as opposed to their technoscientific ones, tend more towards hybridisation. In this respect, Wright's *Sims* are more closely related to the representational order, and to a somewhat abstract stylisation, than they are to true simulation. To a large extent, then, we still live under the hegemony of the optical, or of its being disputed, which, while not exactly the same thing, remains in its orbit.[20] We might expect not only that the changeover of regimes will be gradual; we are also entitled to think that the hybridisation of the two systems, digital and optical, will prove to be much more significant than we are led to believe. The relevant topic thus becomes the study of their contamination. Unquestionably, these developments have implications for the photographer's "trade," and for the structure of cultural markets. There is no doubt they are contributing to a reconfiguration and restructuring of the field. But they do not foretell the end of photography, any more than photography replaced painting, or cinema replaced photography, or television replaced cinema. On the contrary, there has never been as much painting, photography, or cinema as there is today. While these innovations oblige each medium to become more specialised, to become more specific in its functions, they also multiply tenfold all the others' possibilities.

Seen in this light, the new images do not so much call into question photography's prerogative, with regard to the representation of present time, as they accentuate the question of time, that modern obsession: images in real time (and continuous video-camera surveillance), virtual realities (or a time made up solely of events), and "evolving" (and interactive) images all add to the complexity of the representation of this time. From this point of view, the present-day promise of cyberspace no doubt represents only the ultimate (but not the final) image of this systemic, social, and communicative internalisation of time (as environment), of this "non-temporal extension of time."

Three images pin down this complex and paradoxical problem of time in the present, given its relationship to a past and a future and in relation to our modern, mediatised collective imagination. I will consider last the image, which is entirely theoretical, of Luhmann's system. As for the other two images, they are no more visual, materially speaking. They are also literary and more poetic than documentary. None of the three, moreover, is truly recent and, in that sense, they are not particularly up to date. Those who formulated them, and they are no longer living, came out of different cultural horizons and traditions, at three distinct moments of our times: the Russian avant-garde at the outset of the Revolution (Velimir Khlebnikov); leftist German cultural criticism under the Nazi regime (Walter Benjamin); and the systemic/cybernetic ideas of the post-war and Cold War period (Niklas Luhmann). Although the present times they discuss or from which they proceed are not exactly our own, they belong to our time just the same. Indeed they

all convey a quite up-to-date visual collective imagination – whether media-based or hypermedia-based – whose complexity still calls out to us.

Radio of the Future

The first image, taken from Velimir Khlebnikov's "futurian" writings, dates from the first years of the Bolshevik Revolution. It does not present itself, at the outset, as an image of present time, but rather as a vision of the future – a vision, however, that comes from the past. I suggest we see in it, more precisely, a *promise of a future past.* It goes without saying that, like any promise, it could only be promulgated in the present – in a present which, in the event, belongs to the past. It is a hymn to that old technology of the voice, radio. For Khlebnikov, however, radio is not simply the universal ear it had been not so long before. *Now*, it is "the pair of eyes that annihilate distance,"[21] a tower that "emits its rays."[22] Khlebnikov's Futurians are beings of time rather than beings of space. Khlebnikov himself, a mathematician turned poet, fixed himself moreover the goal of "discovering the secrets of time." In 1915 he wrote: "I will travel through the centuries like the person who discovered the laws of time". His project as a "Surveyor of Time" was to draw up the historical laws which govern the periodicity of events: history can be predicted and its perils averted through the rationality of the Number. In this sense we are quite far here, in Khlebnikov, from Marinetti's Futurism, which was more terrorist in nature. Futurians are closer to angels who vibrate to the voice of other angels. This would appear to be radio's function. This "future past" image thus offers an optimistic vision, a dematerialised or enchanted vision, of the future, a promise of happiness. But, from the outset, it contained peculiar dissonances. Here is Khlebnikov writing in 1921:

> The "Radio of the Future" – the central tree of our consciousness – will inaugurate new ways to cope with our undertakings and will unite all [human]kind.
>
> The main Radio station, that stronghold of steel, where clouds of wires cluster like strands of hair, will surely be protected by a sign with a skull and crossbones and the familiar word "Danger," since the least disruption of Radio operations would produce a mental blackout over the entire country, a temporary loss of consciousness.
>
> Radio is becoming the spiritual sun of the country, a great wizard and sorcerer...
>
> The effect would be like a giant of some kind reading a gigantic journal out loud. But it is only this mental town cryer [*sic*], only the metal mouth of the auto-speaker; gravely and distinctly it announces the morning news, beamed to this settlement from the signal tower of the main Radio station.
>
> But now what follows? Where has this great stream of sound come from, this inundation of the whole country in supernatural singing, in the sound of beating wings, this broad silver stream of whistlings and clangor and marvelous mad bells surging from somewhere we are not, mingling with children's voices singing and the sound of wings?[23]

This *performative* image conveys extremely well, first of all, the state of weightlessness, the moment of taking off or flying, of the present with regard to the future. It is less the present's yearning for the future than it is a present inspired by the future. This image also suggests a kind of media immersion that could still be very contemporary for us. But its up-to-dateness no doubt has as much, if not more, to do with the threat that is introduced in its second sentence: that *loss of communication* which provokes "a mental blackout over the entire country" and its "temporary loss of consciousness." The future the image heralds, or promises us, is indeed that of *communication as consciousness.* As a result, it points less towards the classical utopia of communism, which was more strictly materialistic, than it does towards our present-day communication utopias: virtual realities (and communities), artificial intelligence, Cyborgs, and cyberspace. Of course, there is something out-of-date about the image, with its "giant journals" and its "auto-speakers," whose "clouds of wires cluster like strands of hair." This obsolescence, however, constitutes its inoffensive or dematerialised charm. We thus hear quite distinctly the voices of angels – figures of mediation and communication – through the voices of the birds: "A bright blue

ball of spherical lightning" not only hangs "in midair like a timid bird", but every day, "like the flight of birds in springtime, a flock of news departs."[24] *This stream of birds which fulgurates the mind will rule over force, and sensible ideas will prevail over the threat.* This oneiric universe, which still bases itself on myth, thus brings to mind Chagall's paintings, with their figures floating in space, liberated from the weight of the world, more than it does the work of Kandinsky, Malevitch, or Lissistky, although in these artists too no doubt we can find this same sort of ecstasy.[25]

This hymn's simultaneously mystical and technological "timbre" articulates the promise (in the future tense) of a present which opens onto a radiant future. This future *present* is seen as a collective and unifying intelligence, as a technologically generated utopia. What the poet promises is thus a secular and technological version of *communion.* As he indicates elsewhere in his song, radio has in fact already "solved a problem that the church itself was unable to solve," that of "the communion of humanity's one soul."[26] Khlebnikov's visual and sonorous poetry thus anticipates not only the "audio-visual revolution"; it also invites us to celebrate, beyond that, a new communicative religion, the only religion capable of linking the past and the future and of connecting the present to the future. It is also a typically modern utopia, in that radio, the messenger of the future, is already present among those it addresses: the future is already among us, it has occurred or is in the process of occurring, in the present.

While the promise of a radiant future is articulated in the future tense, the threat hanging over us remains, for its part, quite present, in the "present-present" tense. This threat is technological: a technical breakdown in communication which (temporarily) suspends the utopian awakening, or the dream aroused by technology. Today, we would call this a "bug." This image can be seen as being very close to present-day images of cyberspace, especially if we accept the definition of cyberspace given by William Gibson (whose work was the inspiration for *The Matrix*),[27] to whom moreover we owe the concept: Gibson describes it as a "consensual hallucination". And this is just what Khlebnikov described, fully aware of what he was doing, with complete utopian consciousness. Thereafter it is impossible to read the rest of the poem, in other senses enchanted or hallucinatory, without taking this initial warning into account. The breakdown in communication (or in technical communication) indicates the vulnerability of the apparatus, or of the system, "hanging in midair like a timid bird." The inscription "Danger!" weighs upon what follows and seeps into the very *supraterrestrial song:* "beating wings, whistlings and clangor and marvelous mad bells" which penetrate us "from somewhere we are not." Despite the angels.

The Angel's Gaze

The second image has none of Khlebnikov's enchanted optimism, even though we find here too the figure of the angel. But here it is a question of the angel's gaze, however, and not the voice of the angels. This gaze, turned completely this time towards the past rather than towards the future, also contains a strong utopian dimension. I refer to the famous image of the Angel of History formulated by Walter Benjamin in the last text he wrote, shortly after the invasion of France by Nazi troops and shortly before his own suicide. The image itself, which is allegorical, is also an image of terror and disenchantment. While its point of departure is a painting by Paul Klee, the place it describes is one often occupied by a politically committed photojournalism: that of the powerless witness. For Benjamin, writing in "On the Concept of History" in 1940, Klee's *Angelus Novus* shows an angel who seems to be about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us, he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer

close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.[28]

The angel's posture is odd. He turns his back to the future, towards which he is nevertheless projected, against his will, while the gust of wind that blows him along comes from the past. And this past, paradoxically, or this storm, is "what we call progress" – which, generally speaking, we associate with the future. This allegorical interpretation of Klee's painting depicts a witness both immobilised and rocked by the catastrophic events which are repeated and which accumulate to form but one and the same catastrophe. This catastrophic event leaves him speechless, struck dumb and left with his gaze alone, completely powerless. In so far as this witness is also an angel, and thus a figure of mediation and communication, we could also interpret this freezing or dumbstruckness as a breakdown in communication. But this time the breakdown is not technical. Instead, it is a utopian breakdown, involving a radical reversal of the future's gaze towards the past. It is the freezing or arrest of time itself, a *historical* cessation, in a surrealist and mystical manner. In fact this figure of the angel provides the allegory for what, further on in the same text, Benjamin described as a "messianic arrest of happening,"[29] a stoppage and arrest of time that provides (the historian) an opportunity to grasp the thread of time in order to resume it.

We must place this passage within the more general context of the essay from which it is taken, an essay that addresses the concept of history. Benjamin proposes there a defence of historical materialism, even though, curiously enough, he turns to theology, messianism, and redemption. This might seem like an odd defence of materialism. And yet his position is justified by the way he takes into account a conception of history that he seeks to contrast with two other conceptions, which contributed to the rise of Nazism: on the one hand, pure materialism, which dominated the European Left and which counted on humanity's strictly technical and automatic progress; and on the other, "historicism" and a kind of idealism (an "angelism") which gives historical truth an image of timelessness. In this context, Benjamin's recourse to theology seemed to him not only necessary but obligatory. Messianism is the hunchback dwarf hidden inside the automaton that is historical materialism.[30] Only this tiny and ugly hunchback dwarf, whom no one wants to look at, makes it possible for the automaton to win the historical game that is being played out.

This led Benjamin to insist that "the past can be seized only as an image that flashes up."[31] As Rainer Rochlitz emphasises, Benjamin contrasts "the constellation of a past that is abruptly quotable and a present that feels itself its target"[32] with a linear, homogeneous, and empty representation of time and also with purely mechanical time. Behind this constellation of past and present is found, in actual fact, a pact between generations; a debt on the part of the living towards the yearning for happiness that was felt by the dead: "there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply."[33]

This recourse to messianism and to the themes of mystical Judaism is thus not justified in the name of timeless values. On the contrary, it is justified in the name of a conception of history in which time is, precisely, "filled full by now-time."[34] This concept, which Benjamin invented along the way, owes as much to surrealist experiments in shock effects and profane illumination as it does to the Jewish mystical tradition.[35] It is thus an attempt to shatter the simultaneously monotonous and atrocious continuum of history. No reality becomes historical by virtue of its mere fact of existing. On the contrary, it "became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years."[36] We must, therefore, grasp the constellation formed in our own era with prior eras and thereby establish "a conception of the present as 'now-time' shot through with the splinters of messianic time."[37] We must, in this way, reconnect with the "now-time" of

those who preceded us, and above all with their future as it appeared to them in their "now-time." We must reconnect with this "future past" which, in Jewish tradition, is "the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter."[38]

Can the Future Begin? Can the Past End?

> What moves in times past/present/future *together* – in other words, the present along with its past and future horizons ... Historical time is constituted as the continuity and irreversibility of this movement of past/present/future as a whole. The unity of historical time lies in the fact that the past and future horizons of each present intersect with other (past and future) presents and their temporal horizons. NIKLAS LUHMANN[39]

This last image – that of presents which "move in time along with their past and future horizons" and whose multiplying intersections form historical time – is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. There is no angel and no metaphysics. It belongs, rather, to a general theory of modern society, a functionalist theory as it were, which is based on cybernetics and phenomenology. Its goal is descriptive and explanatory: to describe and explain the modern conception of time in order to draw logical conclusions. And yet, the image retains a somewhat mystical element. This, no doubt, is because in these societies "[t]ime must replace reality as the paramount dimension of social life."[40] Moreover, this image overlaps with several themes in Benjamin: history as the *constellation* of the past, present, and future, with the same cardinal role granted to "now-time." "Such a society," Luhmann informs us, "must let its future horizon dominate,"[41] which is no doubt more closely related to Khlebnikov without, for all that, being completely foreign to Benjamin's logic. Benjamin, after all, was trying to recover the past's future. Nevertheless, this historical time is not more "retrospective"; it is entirely "prospective," turned towards the future, like Khlebnikov. For Luhmann, the punctualisation of the present thus involves a "futurisation" of time: today the future becomes the "metaperspective" that dominates the reflexivity of the present.[42] Just the same, this metaperspective is not transcendental, redemptive, or revolutionary. It is the result of anticipations and dreams that have been cross-bred out of the entire set of these little points, the *presents*, which see it open or close before them. It is not entirely clear, moreover, if all these pixels really do form a "set" in the narrow sense of the term: it is not, in fact, a perfectly unified, consistent, and stable set. It is the result, rather, of the *loss* of stability, which proves moreover to be an *increase* in complexity. The modern conception of time is an attempt, precisely, to confront this complexity.

Above all, this image is more "theoretical" that the other two. Because it is lodged within an overall theory, it requires a little more time to unfold. And to unfold it completely, we must moreover enter into the theory's every detail.[43] Luhmann's perspective on modernity and on the kind of change it consists of, contradicts in particular many present-day images of this change. First and foremost, it contradicts those images which depict this change as a unilateral rupture with the past (tradition), on the one hand, and as a unilateral projection into the future (progress) on the other. There has indeed been a rupture with these earlier or alternative conceptions of time in so far as modernity involved a complete make-over of society's structures, a make-over that left nothing unchanged. But this was not only a rupture with the past, seen here as a founding moment, but also with the future, seen as an ultimate end. Although the future may have a more structuring function than the past, its dominance depends upon a "punctualisation of the present" that came before it. Out of this arises a movement of simultaneous rupturing and opening in relation to both the past and the future. By resituating the problem of time on present time in this way, Luhmann, in the end, allows the idea of time to evade the laws of thermodynamics, physics, and metaphysics in order to obey, in their place, the laws of cybernetics, biology, and phenomenology. What Luhmann understands by movement therefore has little to do with movement in space. Rather, it is an "evolution" that pertains more to the laws of the biological or human life sciences. The entities which form the basis of this evolution are not inert: instead, they are entities we might describe as "bio-subjective," endowed with interpretive horizons, and which are therefore more complex.

What becomes of the future and the past in this new temporal setting – which is non-chronological but by no means non-temporal – is just as intriguing as the punctualisation of (present) time. The past and the future do not disappear. Rather, they draw closer to the present, even as they become more distant. In fact, like the horizon, they grow farther away the moment we approach them. The future can thus never begin, no more than the past can ever come to an end. We might also say that the past and the future fall *back on the present*, somewhat as if they would fall on top of it, exercising in this way a considerable degree of pressure (but also of seduction) on all these little present points. In truth, the past and the future find themselves "liberated," and multiplied, in order to be "reinstated" as environments of the present; they are simultaneously temporal horizons of the present and the premises (or matrix) from which this present time breaks loose. Both past and future, from this point on, become what they are for us today: "overloaded" reservoirs or repertories upon which this system of "present time" can draw upon and onto which it can project itself. But they also oblige this system, above all, constantly to make choices. It is through these choices, moreover, that present time is established. In this way, the past and the future are not only the *present-time system*'s environments, they are also, in a sense, its second skin, its mirror and matrix. And they change at the same time as the present changes. As a result, the two "temporal horizons," past and future, stick to the skin of a protean present, which appears to take them into its course through a process of auto-poietics and morphogenesis. This system is a living organism, and is made up of living beings. It is not simply, therefore, a "Time Machine" of the sort imagined by H.G. Wells on the eve of the twentieth century. It does not obey the laws of thermodynamics and physics, but rather those of the evolution of life.

This *present time*, which is in a symbiotic relationship with its

environments, must learn to combine them. In order to do so, it must internalise them. The past and the future remain two divergent horizons, each with a very different status, and over the course of modernity they will diverge even more. This explains, moreover, the increasing complexity of these societies' relationships to time and of their conception of time. What we find in these two repertoires, or horizons, is thus of a different order. The future horizon provides a universe of possible worlds, a utopian universe, that is overloaded with not yet enacted presents and invested with more or less realistic and contradictory expectations and yearnings. This future which, for us, is present, thus leaves room for a number of possibly incompatible "future presents." As for the past horizon, it too is just as encumbered with experienced events (in the present past), which can no longer be modified in any way. It provides our (contemporary) present with its causes, its various conditions and determinations, and its memory. But to remember is also to forget, in the same way that choosing a future involves renouncing many possible others.

As we can see, the punctualisation of the present conditions the possibility of repeated use of the modal forms of time (present, past, and future). This allows the present to leap about in the temporal sequence (from the past to the future). In this way, there are past presents (lived beforehand) and present pasts (those we recall today). There is the present (or open) future, which is the horizon of the present-present. But there are also the future presents, which will come about later. These "past presents" and "future presents" themselves, moreover, have their own past and future horizons, which have little to do with the horizons of our *present-present*,[44] which increases all the more the shapes of the possible horizons.[45]

The cultural reconceptualisation of time has left none of the old meanings intact. Every aspect of social life, submitted to contingency, thus appears to be subject to change or to be one possible option among others, and finds itself in a position of greater selectivity, which is obligatory and continuous. All this accounts for several things: the proliferation of utopias, which are aroused by this open future; the growth of technologies deployed to reduce the future's complexity and uncertainty; the polemic between utopian and technological approaches to the future. This open future also conditions the forms of contemporary optimism and pessimism, from "new age" angelism to contemporary nihilism. All this makes possible not only a *history of the past*, which is no longer simply that of the past-past, but also a *history of the future* (of the past presents). What is more, in a temporal system such as this one, with its free future and past, (present) time grows shorter at the same time as it accelerates. The growing gap between the past and the future heightens the complexity of the present and obliges us to accelerate in tempo in order to respond to it. In the opposite sense, and in so far as the too distant past(s) and future(s) also become irrelevant to the present moment, our temporal perspective becomes narrower. And it is another paradox that this foreshortening of time in a phenomenological sense, or, we might say, in a "socio-bio-affective" sense, corresponds to the growth of time in a chronological sense (B.C./A.D.). In this way, this temporal/cultural system also explains both the lightness of this time (which is freed) and its complexity (which is internalised).

By extending Luhmann's logic, we could say that in such a system the entire question consists of learning to proportion the degree to which the past and the future open and close. As far as the past is concerned, the system oscillates in this way between two extreme tendencies: an increased "de-traditionalising" and an increased "historicising." On the one hand, we have a more or less definitively clear slate, with the various terrorist and nihilist forms this can take. And on the other, a more or less absolute bestowing of heritage status on everything: revivals, rediscoveries, ready-mades, and gigantic archives. On this side of time, the circle is complete when these two opposing movements merge. For example, when historicisation preys on other times, from looting in colonial times (Greece in the nineteenth century) to post-colonial times (Baghdad in the twenty-first century). As for the future, the system oscillates, on the contrary, between "futurisation" and "de-futurisation." In the case of the former, social and political utopias serve to keep the future horizon open, at the risk of condemning themselves to a virtual life that is never enacted or accomplished because they refuse to choose among the multiplicity of possibilities. And in the case of the latter, we see instead various techno-scientific or technocratic forms of strategically anticipating events – such as strategic planning, forecasting, futurology, and probability theory (and systems theory, naturally) – which seek to reduce this open future's degree of uncertainty, or to heighten the system's security. On this side of time, the circle can also be completed, as we see with the advent of "technological utopias," which seek to bring about the future in the present. The proliferation of contemporary *dystopias*, from *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* to *The Matrix* and *The Terminator*, has moreover served to thematise (and internalise) these risks of system closure, even as they serve to heighten the complexity of our relationship to time: future-presents/present-future. Distinguishing among these various forms of time is the only way to prevent them from merging. Historical research, even if it remains motivated by its "present (or near) past," must try to restore the distant past as "past present," in other words within the categories of *former time*. Futurology must also avoid taking its dreams for realities and not confuse the future of our present with the future that will actually come about later.

It can be difficult, in all of this, to distinguish between what pertains to the image and what is pure theory. And it is impossible, moreover, to isolate the image without abusively simplifying the theory. In order to be truly seen and experienced, the image requires in addition that we accept several presuppositions, in particular that: 1) modernity is a systemic reality; 2) the systems are self-referential and *auto-poietic;* and 3) these systems really exist just the same. On the basis of this systemic-cybernetic perspective, modern-day present time can be seen as a kind of time management organism, a time system. We might reproach this conception for being a little too "managerial" and not "emancipatory" enough,[46] but this conveys quite well just the same the *spirit of our times*. We should also ask ourselves about the extension of this

(futur du) passé, et en appellent à une histoire de l'*à-présent*, entièrement « citable » (et communicable) maintenant. La position de Luhmann conduit, quant à elle, à faire du temps présent le point tournant de cette communication : une « extension non temporelle du temps » qui en internalise les externalités passées et futures, sur un mode utopico-technologique. La nouvelle conscience du temps ouvre ainsi sur la communication comme conscience du temps présent, seule façon de réaliser (ou de performer) l'intégration sociale du temps. Ceci fait peser un poids considérable sur le présent. Cela explique aussi l'extension de la communication comme conscience du temps présent. L'univers de la communication représente bien cette interpénétration de l'utopie et de la technologie. Les médias techniques de communication ne sont pas tant des moyens au service de l'homme, contrôlés par lui, exclusivement au service de la représentation des événements. Ils apparaissent tout autant programmés pour gérer l'utopie communicationnelle, nouvelle religion, ou nouvelle conscience. À cet égard, l'engouement récent pour la convergence des médias, à travers un hypermédia producteur de cyberespace, se rattache directement au rêve cybernétique : créer un *être artificiel*, communicateur surhumain ou posthumain, qui nous auto-parlerait, ou nous auto-représenterait, tout en s'avérant partie prenante de notre humanité, fondue dans ses rets. L'illusion humaniste nous assure (et nous rassure) d'une parfaite maîtrise de nos appareils, ou exige au moins qu'on en ait la maîtrise absolue. L'illusion antihumaniste, ou posthumaniste, est pour sa part de croire que nous sommes entièrement instrumentalisés par eux, et que nous devrions l'être. Une illusion efface l'autre cependant. Les images, mécaniques ou électroniques, produisent sans doute un *feedback* – le cyberespace – sur lequel on n'a jamais une parfaite maîtrise. Mais c'est justement ici la place laissée libre à la subjectivité de l'auteur, ou des auteurs, à partir du moment où ils acceptent de se faire les observateurs de la forme du temps. ❧

1 Cité par Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain / 1*, Paris, Plon, 1949, p. 242.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
3 Niklas Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 273.
4 Pas plus d'ailleurs qu'avec l'idée de mouvement.
5 À ce sujet, voir Poulet, *op. cit.*, p. 236–258.
6 Journaliste, poète et essayiste, Lamennais est surtout connu comme fondateur de *L'Avenir*, premier journal à se dire à la fois catholique et de gauche, ce qui n'était pas le moindre des paradoxes de *son temps*, et situe peut-être mieux la nature des tiraillements qu'il pouvait éprouver à son embranchement. Sa vie aura été un long combat (perdu) contre l'ultramontanisme. Sur la relation du romantisme au temps présent, au passé et à l'avenir, voir Poulet, *op. cit.*, p. 32–44. Celui-ci montre notamment comment le XIX^e siècle, à travers le romantisme, « devient de plus en plus apte à surprendre, au fond de son actualité frémissante, l'image croisée des réminiscences et des prémonitions » (p. 32).
7 Deux textes de Luhmann précisent particulièrement ses positions sur la question : « The Future Cannot Begin. Temporal Structures in Modern Society » ainsi que « World-Time and System History. Interrelations Between Temporal Horizons and Social Structures », dans Niklas Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 289–323. Le premier aborde la relation du présent avec le futur, le second celle du présent avec le passé. Pour un approfondissement de ces questions, voir, sur l'histoire et les mass medias, Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2000 ; et sur la modernité, Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 1998.
8 Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 274. [Notre traduction.]
9 *Ibid.*, p. 276.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
11 Il ne faut pas non plus la confondre avec le mouvement, même si cela bouge. Selon Luhmann, la chronologie sert à réunir l'idée de temps et l'idée de mouvement. Ainsi, dans ce système, le changement temporel ne relève pas du mouvement dynamique de la physique mais des lois de l'évolution du vivant.
12 En poussant ici la logique de Luhmann qui ne l'affirme pas explicitement.
13 On sait en effet qu'ils sont continuellement réécrits et réajustés au jour le jour, et restructurés en profondeur d'une fois à l'autre.
14 Plusieurs auteurs ont souligné successivement cette dimension temporelle de l'image photographique, depuis Walter Benjamin (« Sur le concept d'histoire », dans *Œuvres III*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio Essais, 2000, p. 427–443) et Roland Barthes. Mentionnons Henri Vanlier (*Philosophie de la photographie*, Les Cahiers de la photographie, Hors série, Lasclède, Brax, 1983), Philippe Dubois (*L'acte photographique*, Paris / Bruxelles, Fernand Nathan / Éditions Labor, 1983), et plus récemment Danièle Méaux (*La photographie et le temps : le déroulement temporel dans l'image photographique*, Aix-en-Provence, Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1997). En relation avec le cinéma, voir Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps*, Paris, Les Éditions de minuit, 1985.
15 Voir à ce sujet Edmond Couchot, « Synthèse et simulation. Une autre image », dans Louise Poissant (éd.), *Esthétique des arts médiatiques*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1995, p. 275–289.
16 Plusieurs revues spécialisées, souvent *on line*, se consacrent à l'étude de ces nouveaux jeux, ou jouets. Mentionnons *Game Studies* (www.gamestudies.org) et *Artifice* (www.artifice.qc.ca). Pour une analyse de certains de ces jeux, voir Carl Therrien, « Jeu vidéo et narration », *Artifice*, www.artifice.qc.ca, décembre 2002 ; et Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and*

some of these games, see Carl Therrien, "Jeu vidéo et narration," *Artifice*, www.artifice.qc.ca, December 2002; and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). The journal *Crossings*, also on line (www.crossings.tcd.ie), is dedicated to more general questions of technology and hypermedia.

17 On Will Wright, see in particular his interview with Celia Pearce, "Sims, BattleBots, Cellular Automata God and *Go:* A Conversation with Will Wright," *Game Studies. The international journal of computer game research*, www.gamestudies.org, vol. 2, no. 1 (July 2002).

18 On this subject, see Thierry Bardini and Serge Proulx, "Les promesses du cyberespace. Médiations, pratiques et pouvoirs à l'heure de la communication électronique," *Sociologie et sociétés* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2000).

19 On this topic, see Couchot, "Synthèse et simulation." These images appear to be radically different in their ontology. They are both unalterable and unstable: unalterable because they are digital, without the need for any empirical support; and unstable, when their interactive and evolutionary dimension is taken into account. Indeed digital images are called upon to ceaselessly metamorphose: "Absolute memory, it is at the same time capable of leaving no recollection, no remnant. It is swallowed up whole by its virtualities. It is the fate of the matrix to be always giving birth and to be reborn itself" (p. 282). Thus these matrix-like and non-degradable images, with their possibility of perfect and unlimited reproducibility, do not seem to belong to the logic of re-production but rather to the logic of cloning. Without apparent material bases, they also evade the order of re-presentation, which is distant and anchored in a present reality, in order to bring us straight away into simulation. In this way, they promise to project us "beyond space and entropy" into *cyberspace*.

20 Couchot, p. 286.

21 Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Radio of the Future" (1921), *The King of Time: Selected Writings of the Russian Futurian*, ed. Charlotte Douglas, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 157.

22 Khlebnikov, "The Radio of the Future," p. 158.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

24 *Ibid.*

25 On the figure of the angel in Lissistky, see Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, "Le modernisme et les tribulations des anges. Les figures flottantes de Chagall et de Lissistky," *Parachute* 65 (Winter 1992): 18–23.

26 Khlebnikov, p. 156.

27 Indeed this film was largely inspired by, or derived from, Gibson's science-fiction novel *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), an astonishing if somewhat muddled work.

28 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), trans. Harry Zohn, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 396.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 389.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 390.

32 Rainer Rochlitz, "Présentation," in Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 48–50.

33 Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, p. 390.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 395.

35 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge UK: Polity Press/Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 11.

36 Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, p. 397.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 397.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 397.

39 Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, p. 307.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 321.

42 The future's greater complexity, a result of its being unforeseeable, accounts for why it has asserted itself as the dominant horizon. The past, itself too complex to be reproduced, can today no longer serve to guide the path of the present. For the same reason, the study of history has become the study of the future: in order to re-establish the rationality of those who preceded us, it must rediscover the future of their "presence of the now." Present time, for its part, remains under the contingency of the future. At times it can even be reduced to being considered nothing more than a "future past." "Realism" itself can no longer be conservative: it no longer consists of adjusting the present in accordance with the lessons of the past, but of betting on the future. Only the present, however, provides an adequate degree of hold and restraint for temporal integration and thus for "reality." This reality and this (temporal) unity are not given *a priori* (by tradition), however, but rather are constituted *a posteriori*, by a pragmatic rationality made up of projects and of processes.

43 This theory, which has made complexity its principal theme, has developed as systems theory, communication theory, and socio-cultural development theory simultaneously. For an overview, see Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Luhmann is one of the last sociologists (along with Bourdieu, perhaps) to have attempted to propose a general theory of society. From this point of view, he is not very representative of contemporary sociology. Each of his three theoretical axes are formed around principal themes, which make it possible, moreover, to (too) rapidly situate their author: the implausibility of communication and of social interaction, marked by a *double contingency*; the intrinsic instability of social systems, defined as communicative acts and which rival in complexity the turbulence of the environments which serve them both as horizons and as premises; and the evolution from a stratified society (whose unity is guaranteed by a centre or the summit of a hierarchy) to a decentred society which obeys the principle of functional differentiation in sub-systems, each of which is like so many points of the expression of the unity of the system as a whole. As Luhmann remarks, a society's unity is nothing more than the difference of its functional systems.

44 When we project ourselves in this way into the past or the future, we must each time re-establish or establish the temporal structure in question in relation to the present: the present of this past or of that future.

45 Luhmann grants the highest importance to the question of distinguishing between these temporal forms. He sees them, in particular, as being at the root of the polemics between utopian approaches to the future (which address themselves to an open future, the future of the present) and technological approaches, which involve another kind of future, the future presents (which, moreover, these approaches tend to transform into anticipated presents). It is in a sense a battle between those who want to keep the future open and those who wish to incorporate it as quickly as possible into the present-present. For Luhmann, this divergence of viewpoints is a historical fact, produced and reproduced by society's structure. It is inevitable. Rather than continuing the polemic, he suggests we learn to use the two methods to reduce the future's complexity. Substituting utopia for technology, or vice versa, will not solve the problem, which is a problem of temporal integration. Rather, we should learn to develop continuous (utopian) predictions and (technical) actions within complex self-referential models which take into account social and structural limitations, which the analysis of the system's evolution makes it possible to identify. In order to understand these systems' development, he also suggests that we pay attention to the changing of the system's structures, and in particular to those changes which maintain the possibility of later changes. Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*, p. 311.

46 See in particular Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*, pp. 353–85. Habermas, concluding his discussion with a critique of Luhmann (1995), reproaches him for imparting subjectivity to the idea of system. Behind this lies an implicit critique of one of cybernetics' most controversial assumptions: that humankind and the machine can be placed on the same ontological level. Although Luhmann does not go so far as to suggest that we could replace humankind by systems, it is clear that his position leads to a considerable relativising of the integrating role of human beings in the production and reproduction of society. It is, on the contrary, communication (which is always improbable) and the informative performance of the systems that become structuring. The birth of cybernetics is inseparable from the post-war and Cold War context. While we can not, no doubt, reduce it to that, its lightning-fast development at the time was motivated, above all, by a heightened confidence in the abilities of machines and a corresponding loss of confidence in the abilities of human beings, a particularly vital loss in the political field, in the context of the nuclear threat: machines for governing, making decisions, and thinking were destined to take over from our incompetent and hazardous decision-makers. On this subject, see Philippe Breton and Serge Proulx, *L'explosion de la communication. La naissance d'une nouvelle idéologie* (Paris/Montréal: Éditions La Découverte/Boréal, 1994), p. 98.

47 Jean-François Lyotard uses Luhmann in this way as a negative example of the postmodern condition. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 62–67, Michel Freitag, in the same sense, associates this theory with the typically postmodern decision-making and operational mode of reproduction that he sees as currently taking over from classical modernity. See Freitag, *Dialectique et société* (Montréal/Lausanne: Éditions Saint-Martin/L'Âge d'homme, 1986).

48 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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