

The past weighs heavily

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It is difficult to get scientists to see eye to eye on anything, but one thing they all agree on is that we shall never be able to journey to the past. A one-way trip to the future might be possible: they say one day we may be able to travel through space at incredible speeds, and after a year playing cards with the other crew members, return to Earth to find our great great grandson, now senile and locked up in a home. But, never, they say, will we be able to return to the past. It simply isn't possible. The past is unrecoverable, it's a fatal time.

But out of pure contradictoriness, we seem to be engaged in a concerted effort to return to the past over and over again. It's a virtual return, obviously. And the many ways we try —unsuccessfully— to tame the past can only lead to one feeling: loss. In the past, mice, damp and time acted as implacable censors, deciding what would be preserved and what would not. Now, though, there is no longer any possibility of censorship or selection. Nothing from the past (or rather, what remains of it) must be forgotten; everything must be documented. And so, thanks to this conservationist dogma (which, it should be noted, has nothing to do with ecological principles), this documentation of the past grows like an uncontrolled octopus stuffed into the bottomless depths of our hard disks.

And there is another dogma hidden behind this forced resuscitation of the past: we cannot afford to forget anything and so we must preserve the remains of the past. It becomes a moral duty, then, not to lose our memories. But forcing people to “remember by decree” does not seem like a good way of preserving memory. For memory, despite all our attempts, is capricious and changeable, and it does not yield to imposition. Take that most extreme form of institutionalisation of the duty to remember: commemoration. What is really left after the dust of the destroyed buildings has settled, the eye witnesses have died and the memory of the events is no more than a quotation in some book?

But the past, in the form of tons of documentation, does not just have physical weight. The past weighs heavily on us. Take nostalgia, for example. One summer at one of those courses in Arteleku, I had a rather absurd conversation with another participant about nostalgia. She argued that the malaise of nostalgia would soon be wiped off the face of the earth. Her nephews and nieces, those strange creatures wired to Playstations, would soon be freed of the useless baggage of nostalgia. Such is the bombardment of new contraptions, images and experiences to which new generations of humans are subjected that they will have no time for memories. So, she went on, nostalgia is not just a feeling towards the past, nostalgia is itself something of the past.

Some years have passed since that conversation. With the re-opening of Arteleku, the centre has entered the sticky terrain of “things with past and memory”. I suppose the same thing will have happened to that woman's poor nephews and nieces. And in the meantime, the cruel aunt will have had to yield to the evidence: nostalgia is a permanent mood (and state of anxiety), a disease for which no known vaccine exists.

Or perhaps it does. The only possible vaccine is forgetting. But if we could

choose, would any of us opt for the oblivion of Alzheimer's over the bane of memories? I doubt it. To quote Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Total Recall*, when a slime-covered mutant asked him what he was looking for: “The same as you. To remember”. “But, why?”, asks the creature. “To be myself again”, says Schwarzenegger. What Arnie —or rather the character created by Philip K. Dick— knew well was that, without memory or memories, we do not exist.

But for whatever reason, we live in a time when nostalgia is celebrated. You only have to turn on the television during off-peak times and hook in to the latest rerun. Why is nostalgia now bigger than ever before? For the very reason for which the cruel aunt denied it: because too many things are happening too quickly for us to be able to register them. And so our world is governed by this equation: “the greater the number of changes and events in the lesser time, the greater the number of losses. In other words, the greater the acceleration of history, the greater the feeling of nostalgia”.

Let us look more closely at this business of the proportional increase in the feeling of nostalgia. Is there not something prefabricated about this increase? I am not questioning the veracity of the feeling of nostalgia itself. Nostalgia may be called many things - including self-seeking, but it can never, (and I speak as a practising and enthusiastic nostalgist), be accused of being phoney.

No, I am talking about something else. I am referring to the insistence on manufacturing nostalgia as a collective sentiment, which can be used to polish up any social act and make it feel more fraternal, whether it is a tedious dinner-party or a school reunion. Manufacturing collective nostalgia can thus be seen as an intelligent way of capitalising on a huge surplus of preserved past. Can we learn anything from this? “The nostalgia industry is the work of brains as altruistic as they are solvent”. But then I am completely immersed in the climate Philip K. Dick generated. And I have to reluctantly concur with another famous film adaptation of one of his books, where tailor-made memories were manufactured for humanoids called “replicants”. But then *Blade Runner* was just a film, and Dick was a poor sick paranoid man.

In any case, this whole obsession with recovering the past in different ways leads us to a well-known, albeit frightening, conclusion: today the past is a huge theme park, a shopping mall we visit when we need a bit of amnesia and something more than anaesthesia. The past, then, although unrecoverable, is a comfortable place to visit. It offers something that the present and the future can never give — certainty. Though if it's any consolation, that is not the place to find it either.

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(This text was written on the occasion of the project [memory] Garai Txarrak for the re-opening of Arteleku on 21 June 2002. The project was coordinated by Ibon Aranberri and included contributions from Ixone Arregi, Blami, Gorka Eizagirre, Iñaki Garmendia, Gemma Intxausti, Mattin, Asier Mendizabal, Asier Pérez-González, Sergio Prego and Xabier Salaberria, among others.)