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LIVING AT THE EDGE OF TIME

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

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AFTER LEARNING FROM HISTORY

It's about time, at least for professional historians, to respond seriously to a situation in which the claim that "one can learn from history" has lost its persuasive power. A *serious* response—beyond merely repeating apologetic discourses and gestures—would certainly have to address the paradox that books about the past continue to attract a growing number of readers, and that history as a subject and as a discipline remains unchallenged in most Western systems of education, whereas professors, academic administrators, and those who pay tuition all somehow feel that the legitimizing discourses about the functions of history have degenerated into ossified rituals. Perhaps we would miss their decorative pathos if they disappeared from history books and in commencement-day speeches; perhaps we would be sad if the past ceased to be a topic in quiz shows and a point of reference in the rhetoric of some politicians. But nobody relies on historical knowledge in practical situations anymore. In the closing years of the twentieth century, people no longer consider history to be a solid ground for everyday decisions about financial investments or environmental crisis management, about sexual mores or preferences in fashion. To respond *seriously* to this change would mean that professional historians (of politics, culture, literature, and so on) would have to begin thinking about its consequences—without being apologetic, and without feeling obliged to prove wrong those who, never expecting to learn from history, have no use for all the knowledge about the past that we preserve, publish, and teach. It is true, however, that sometimes those contemporaries enjoy reading what we write. Could

"learning" and "using" just be the wrong words, and could admitting this perhaps enable historians to enjoy a gain in intellectual freedom and imagination, rather than suffer a loss of income?

At any event, there is a long Western genealogy of increasingly complex reactions to the fear (or the hope) that one cannot learn from history even through ever more complicated intellectual techniques. What we retrospectively call "learning from examples" was the conviction that there existed a stable correlation between certain actions and their positive or negative outcomes. Identifying such correlations, transposing them to different contexts, and applying them like recipes in everyday situations were the primary ways in which medieval societies used knowledge about the past.[1] The practice of learning from examples survived unquestioned for many centuries because the belief that time is a natural and inevitable agent of change in the everyday world was not institutionalized until the early modern era. This very belief became the central element in a construction of time that we now term "historical consciousness," and that we tend to misinterpret as an immutable condition of human life. After 1500, the conception of time as a necessary agent of change began to undermine the validity of historical "examples" whose reputed applicability had depended on the (largely unstated) premise that the implications, structures, and functions of human behavior and actions were influenced only slightly, if at all, by their specific contexts.[2]

The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, which spanned the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, has been canonized as the intellectual event that ultimately invalidated the (to our mind "unhistorical") medieval construction of history.[3] For the first time, different periods and different cultures were seen as incommensurable, and people began asking whether it was possible to learn anything at all from history. The answer to this question—the way out of the early modern crisis of historical learning—was what we still refer to as the "philosophy of history." It transformed the structures of knowledge about the past from a collection of isolated histories (or "examples") into the totalizing image of history as a movement which would continuously transform the frame-conditions of human action. Learning from history could therefore no longer be based on the sameness of these frame-conditions, and could no longer consist in the transposition of patterns of behavior from the past to the present. On the contrary, historical knowledge began

to define itself as the possibility of predicting the directions that history as an ongoing, all-inclusive movement of change would take in the future. In other words, the "philosophy of history" claimed to narrow the horizon of otherness by which the future was expected to become different from the past. If this growing complexity in the techniques of learning from history generated an acute sense of the inevitable otherness of each future and each past—an otherness that especially characterized the intellectual scene in Europe during the nineteenth century (as "historical consciousness" and "historical culture")—it is equally true that, despite a flourishing rhetoric which hailed the importance of historical knowledge, the impact of such knowledge on concrete forms of everyday practice had already begun to diminish.

Until recently, this depragmatization of historical knowledge was obscured by the fact that no other invention of Western intellectual history had obtained a greater chance of proving its validity than the "philosophy of history," specifically within the Communist world. At least on an official level of self-reference, the everyday life of more than half the world's population became dependent on the claim that it was possible to extrapolate "laws" of future change from the systematic observation of past change—and that, in the long run, social systems based on this type of extrapolation would necessarily prevail over those in which the "philosophy of history" was confined to a specific style of academic thought. When European Communism collapsed after 1989, this experiment—which had long been unique by virtue of its sheer size—again demonstrated its uniqueness by becoming the most costly failure of all intellectual experiments ever undertaken.[4] One may certainly argue that the fall of the Communist states did not—and will never—invalidate the explicit ethical goals and standards of Marxism. But the apparently deliberate blindness with which many European and American intellectuals refuse to accept the consequences of Communism's breakdown for the status and practical value of historical knowledge can be explained only by their fear of jeopardizing their traditional social role as those "who know better" about the future than politicians, economists, or scientists (a highly compensatory role, since they are generally less well paid). At the same time, contemporary societies are characterized by a need to predict the future—a need that is perhaps more imperative now than ever before. But this need goes along with a practice, especially in politics and economics, whereby efforts to describe the future through

"historical" induction from the past and present are increasingly replaced by the calculation of risk—which takes as its first principle the unpredictability of the future.[5]

Those who find this picture too dramatic or too pessimistic (but why should it be seen as exclusively pessimistic?) may find comfort in more conciliatory readings of our situation. My provocative stance thus far is meant to fulfill a heuristic function: only if we literally cut ourselves off from the possibility of returning to the old and worn-out patterns of "learning from history" will we be obliged to think *seriously* about different ways of using our historical knowledge. Indeed, long before the political events of 1989, and independently from the decreasing impact of historical knowledge on practical life, there were clear symptoms of an intellectual discontent with the premises and implications of that style of thinking which (justifiably or not) has become associated with the name of Hegel. In the 1930s, Alexandre Kojève arrived at the conclusion that humanity, having fulfilled all of its material needs, had reached the end of history.[6] After the end of history as continuous change, however, the need to predict the future could be expected to vanish—and with it the "philosophico-historical" application of our knowledge about the past. In the 1960s, Michel Foucault began using Nietzsche's notion of "genealogy" to underscore the claim that his own reconstructions of past discursive systems and their transformations did not presuppose the existence of "laws" governing such change and therefore did not pretend to have any prognostic function[7] (although many of Foucault's followers seem to have fallen back into the role of philosophers of history). When Hayden White and others began to problematize the traditional distinction between fictional texts (especially novels) and historiography,[8] they did so on the basis of the observation that historians' writing was oriented not merely (and perhaps not even mainly) by real-world structures, but to a large extent by intrinsic problems of discursive, stylistic, and poetic organization and composition. To the "ontological" doubt about whether the movements of history were still governed—if they ever had been—by identifiable "laws," such reflections added the question (typical for an intellectual culture in which constructivism had become a powerful philosophical option) of whether texts were at all capable of representing historical "reality." Yet without the certainty of real-world reference as a cognitive possibility and a basis for argument, most of the claims concerning the practical functions of historiography and historical knowledge are untenable. Some scholars—and probably a majority of undergraduate students—have therefore abandoned the past as a serious intellectual field (though mostly without recognizing that a concentration on the contemporary world does not by any means eliminate the problems of discursive reference).[9] Those who are enamored of the past react either with stoic contempt for such lack of "historical consciousness" or with a desperate insistence on the inherited repertoire of arguments in favor of its didactic value. However aggressive such apologetic attitudes may be, modern historians, in comparison to their nineteenth-century predecessors, feel defeated.

American "New Historicism" has managed to transform some of these apparent losses into postmodern virtues. It is true that, even more clearly than in the case of other academic fashions (and there's nothing wrong with fashions), New Historicism cannot be defined through a coherent set of philosophical options and discursive rules.[10] Rather, it is a stylistic gesture (in the broadest meaning of this concept) that brings together in a loose and, to be sure, often very impressive aggregate different currents from the present intellectual climate. New Historicism's main ingredient is a strong (if not violent) reading of Michel Foucault's historiographic practice according to which reality is constituted by discourses. The concept of "discourse" is seldom defined, and therefore remains comfortably couched between what literary historians used to call "textual genres" and what some sociologists refer to as "social knowledge." More important, however, it is still an open question whether one can and should assume the existence of a "reality beyond" the phenomenal level of discourse. With or without such a metadiscursive "reality" in mind, New Historians restrict the field of their research, and the field of what can possibly be known about the past, to the world of discourses. This self-limitation overlaps with a second philosophical option (referred to above as "constructivist") which claims that what we normally speak of as "realities" are nothing but discourses or structures of social knowledge—and that therefore such realities have to be understood as "social constructions."[11] It is probably the view of realities as socially constructed which has launched the (strange but now familiar) neohistorical habit of referring to cultural phenomena or institutions as "inventions," and of reconstructing their transformations and confluences as "negotia-

tions." If neohistorians use such metaphors to characterize their view of their subject, they never forget to insist that this view converges with the "inventiveness" of their own historiographic writing. This notion could not be more different from the traditional conviction that writing history is nothing but representing (in the sense of depicting) historical realities. New Historians claim a freedom similar to that of fiction writers: they are eager to tell "good stories," and enjoy discussing the "poetics" of historiography. Sometimes (especially among those "reflexive anthropologists" who share the writerly gestures of the neohistorians), such laudable intentions generate frame-narratives about how an author came to write a certain "story"—narratives that end up being longer than the historiographic or anthropological texts themselves.

Only a few decades ago, all of this would have caused a scandal in the field of history, and, luckily for the New Historians' public success, it still succeeds in scandalizing some contemporary "mainstream historians." The potential for making waves within the profession is of course no argument against New Historicism—and even less so in a situation where the classic modes of writing history seem to be exhausted. What bothers me about New Historical practice is, rather, the impression that it has fallen prey to the metaphors emerging from its constructivist strain, and that these metaphors have led to a situation in which the old paradigm of history writing as a precondition for "learning from history" has been replaced by the supremely pretentious implication that history writing means "making history." On a first (and comparatively harmless) level, phrases such as "the invention of class-based society" or "the negotiation of class interests" seem to have encouraged the belief that such realities are indeed products of human intentionality and human actions. What makes things worse, however, is the frequent (and again implicit) conflation of the monumental subject-position presupposed by this language and the "poetic" subjectivity which neohistoricists claim for themselves as writers of historiography. Wherever this conflation occurs, it generates the illusion expressed in the following equations: writing history = inventing historical reality; inventing historical reality = making historical reality. This seems to be why discussions about the "politics" of certain academic discourses are often conducted with a passion and seriousness which would make a neutral observer think that the fate of entire nations and social classes is at stake, and that the

question is indeed no longer how one can learn from history but how historians can make (real!) history.

Whenever New Historicism displays such self-importance, it fails to offer persuasive answers to questions concerning what historians should do "after learning from history." Rather, it appears as a new form of compensation engendered by intellectuals' age-old feeling that they are far more remote from any position of political influence than they deserve. But while the claim to occupy a place of influence in the political system has no truly negative consequences as long as the (both frustrating and healthy) distance between the academic world and the world of politics is maintained, the confusion between historians' unavoidable subjectivity and the "inventedness" of historical reality remains troubling. Not, of course, because the "transformation of historiography into literature" may motivate some historians to become more ambitious about their writing. The *serious* problems begin when the insistence on historians' subjectivity leads to the elimination of the premise that there is a reality beyond such subjectivity—and to the elimination of the desire (as impossible to fulfill as any other desire) to reach this reality. As soon as New Historicism deprives itself of this desire, it no longer differs from fiction and thus can never become a substitute for traditional historiographic discourse, which was based on a claim of real-world reference. But, then, even Stephen Greenblatt, the most eminent New Historian, confesses that his work is driven by the desire to reach past realities, by "the desire to speak with the dead."[12]

Since the philosophico-historical paradigm has lost much of its credibility in the contemporary situation, and since New Historicism—which, at least briefly in the United States, seemed capable of taking its place—has yielded to the temptations of such poetico-heroic subjectivity, there remains the question of what we can and should do with our knowledge about the past. In the ongoing search for an answer, one might well begin by bracketing the normative and pedagogical side of this question ("What should we do?"), and simply concentrate on the fact that this knowledge exerts an abiding fascination. In other words, I propose to focus (from the point of view of both concrete historical research and a theory of history) on the basic "desire for historical reality" that seems

to underlie all the changing rationalizations and legitimations of historiography and of history as a discipline. Such a move will give us distance from worn-out discussions and discourses—a distance that may permit the emergence of new conceptions about the uses of historical knowledge. At least for the intermediary reflections below, the *serious* question is therefore not what we can do with our historical knowledge but, rather, what drives us toward past Realities—independent of possible practical aims.

In order to find an answer, I will return to an argument that dates from a time when it was much less problematic to speak about the practical functions of historical knowledge—an argument whose philosophical precariousness I make no attempt to deny.[13] It is based on a sociological interpretation of Husserl's transcendental concept of *Lebenswelt* ("life-world"),[14] which must be distinguished from the prevailing use of this word with reference to historically and culturally specific milieus. So as to mark this distinction, I will call such milieus "everyday-worlds."[15] In its classic transcendental meaning, the term "life-world" comprehends the totality of possible forms of behavior that we—or, more precisely, the traditions of Western culture—attribute to human beings. Each particular culture, each everyday-world, can then be seen as a specific concretization and selection of possibilities contained in the life-world. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the life-world includes the human capacity to imagine actions and forms of behavior which it explicitly excludes from the range of human possibilities. These imaginings can be illustrated by the attributes that different cultures have invented for their gods—such as "eternity," "omnipresence," "omniscience," or "almightiness." Since such capacities can be imagined (although the life-world concept excludes them from the reality of human life), they inevitably turn into objects of desire. It is therefore possible to argue that many of the actions performed and many of the artifacts produced within the boundaries of the life-world receive their initial impulse from—and remain energized by—the desire to reach what human imagination projects beyond such boundaries. This reflection leads to the assumption that, for example, many of the more recent advances in communications technology are driven by a desire for omnipresence; that the enormous memory capacities of computers (which generally far exceed the needs of their buyers) emerge out of a desire for omniscience; and that, finally, the wish

to overcome the limits that birth and death impose on experience has to do with humans' desire for eternity. It is this desire for eternity which grounds historical and utopian discourses.

But such "irrational" desires are almost regularly concealed by explicit functions and motivations adapted to the various intrinsic rationalities of specific everyday-worlds. In our own social and economic environment, there are indeed good enough reasons for the existence of computers, fax machines, and prognostic methods—beyond their possible grounding in a desire for omnipresence. Yet we lack similarly convincing rationalizations for our knowledge about the past. This lack makes it easy to see that what specifically drives us toward the past is the desire to penetrate the boundary that separates our lives from the time span prior to our birth. We want to know the worlds that existed before we were born, and experience them directly. "Direct experience of the past" would include the possibility of touching, smelling, and tasting those worlds in the objects that constituted them.[16] The concept emphasizes a long-underestimated (if not repressed) sensual side of historical experience—without necessarily being a problematic "aestheticization of the past." For a past touched, smelled, and tasted does not necessarily become beautiful or sublime. Some practices and media in our contemporary historical culture seem to have reacted to this desire for sensual experience. It would be difficult, for example, to explain the new enthusiasm for archival research by adducing the mere need to accumulate more and more historical documents. Rather, touching the original manuscript of a text whose exact words would be more easily accessible in a critical edition seems to make a difference for many scholars. Philological editions on hypercard reinsert the reader into the simultaneity of long-forgotten discursive environments. At the same time, filmmakers pay more attention than ever to the meticulous reconstruction of historical detail on every possible level—so that in movies such as *The Name of the Rose, Amadeus,* or *Mephisto* it has become more important to provide spectators with the illusion of living in a medieval monastery, in late eighteenth-century Vienna, or in Berlin around 1935 than to engage them in specific plots or arguments. Nowhere is this shift in the style of historical culture more obvious than in museums. They long ago abandoned the taxonomic principle which traditionally structured their exhibits, and now tend to organize them as a reconfiguration of historical

environments—ranging from prehistoric landscapes to medieval marketplaces to 1950s drugstores—in which visitors can literally become immersed.[17]

There is an interesting convergence between these practices of a new historical culture and some current philosophical debates. While films and museums have come to focus on environments rather than narratives, our conception of historical time as a sequence has been historicized. Based on the concept of time as a necessary agent of change, the classic notion of historical time had assumed an asymmetry between the past as a circumscribed space of experience and the future as an open horizon of expectations.[18] Between a circumscribed past and an open future, the present appeared as the—sometimes imperceptibly brief[19]—transitional moment in which human actions took place as selections among different possible scenarios for the future. In other words, the present was experienced as constantly moving away from the past and entering the future.[20] Since the 1970s, however, what we perceive as "the present" has been considerably extended—transforming itself into a space of simultaneity.[21] The origin of such a "broader present" lies in a growing reluctance to cross the boundary between the present and the future (or, alternatively, the impression that this boundary has become an ever-receding line).[22] For since the optimism over the concept of progress has faded, the future has become threatening again: it is now inhabited by images of nuclear catastrophe and the pollution of our natural environment, of overpopulation and the spread of epidemic diseases. And even those who resist such pessimism have difficulty coming up with any positive (let alone utopian) scenario. On the other side of our broadening present, new methods of reproducing past worlds (from sound recording to historical cuisine to facsimile editions) deluge us with their products. These transformations of our future and our past have brought forth a present in which images of the future and reminiscences of the past overlap in increasing degrees of—mostly unstructured—complexity.

As a symptom of the general incompatibility between simultaneity and subjectivity, we can observe a temporal coincidence between, on the one hand, the emergence of such a complex present, and, on the other, multiple philosophical problematizations of the figure of subjectivity.[23]

Niklas Luhmann has tried to explain this correlation. He describes "historical time" as a space of operation which emerged as fitting the subject and its actions. If "action," at least within the sociological tradition inaugurated by Max Weber, can be defined as present behavior that is oriented by the imagining of a future situation to whose materialization a subject wishes to contribute on the basis of experience from the past, then it is indeed the subject's action that links past, present, and future as a temporal sequence. Retrospectively, the action in the (past) present and the previous experience in which it is grounded appear as the "causes" for the (now present) future—and this retrospective view unites subject, action, and historical time in an image of humankind as "creator of worlds." This means that outside the sequentiality of historical time, situations or artifacts cannot appear as created by human action. Conversely, in the absence of a subject and its actions, the sequentiality of historical time becomes a space of simultaneity that does not allow for any relations of cause and effect. A world of simultaneity is a world that cannot present itself as an effected world because it does not provide a position of temporal priority; hence the resistance of the historico-philosophical paradigm to situations and models of simultaneity, including the urge to dissolve ("merely chronological") simultaneity into ("philosophical" or "typological") nonsimultaneity.[24] Luhmann underscores the need to develop such a concept of simultaneity as a "theory of the present." The recent interest in paradox—that is, in the simultaneity of two incompatible positions or concepts—can be seen as a first step in this direction.[25] In contrast, Hegel's "philosophy of history" is based on the principle that one can undo paradoxes by transforming the simultaneity of thesis and antithesis into a narrative.

The desire for immediate experience of the past has emerged within the broad new dimension of the present. This new present is a frame for the experience of simultaneity, and simultaneity can be associated with a crisis in the category of "the subject." Likewise, the crisis in this category implies a problematization of the notion of "understanding." Understanding and interpreting have always been (more or less explicitly) related to a topology in which a "surface" had to be penetrated in order to reach a "depth"—which was expected to be an aspect of Truth.[26] This model was linked to the assumption that whatever could become the object of an interpretation was the expression of a subject whose intentions or inner thoughts resulted from an act of under-

standing. What turned interpretation into a sort of moral obligation was the complementary implication that either the subject could try to conceal this inner sphere or that, despite the subject's best intentions, the inner sphere could never find adequate articulation on any textual surface. On its most pretentious level, interpretation (and "hermeneutics" as the theory of interpretation) claimed that its power to reveal was superior to the subject's self-perception.

In contrast to interpretation and hermeneutics, the desire for direct experience of past worlds is aimed at the sensual qualities of surfaces, rather than at spiritual depth. Developing a motif from Derrida's earlier books and playing against the hermeneutic tradition, David Wellbery discusses the fact that we can see a written page as pure "exteriority" (that is, as exteriority without any "depth") as soon as we suppress the urge to associate it with a subject.[27] The notion of "exteriority" marks three different forms of distance vis-à-vis the hermeneutic topology: we no longer search for a depth concealed by a surface; we no longer see the signs (or rather the traces) on a page as a sequence, but learn to perceive them as a simultaneity; we cease to suppose that such sequences are governed by a causality grounded in subjectivity and action, and adopt a premise of randomness. But how can we account for the survival of the impression that we "interpret" and that we "understand the other" if we opt for a theory of discourse that refuses to offer a space for the subject and for the constitutive distinction between a surface level and a depth level? A systemic critique of hermeneutics would have to start with a rephrasing of the human psyche ("psychic systems") and of human societies ("social systems") as "autopoetic systems."[28] Autopoetic systems maintain themselves by intrinsically producing and reproducing all of their constitutive elements, and they do so in a permanently unstable balance with their environments. Autopoetic systems react intrinsically to "perturbations" coming from these environments, but they do not "see" them—and they therefore cannot gain insight into the inner sphere of any other system in their environment. According to systems theory, our impression that such insight into another person's psyche is possible comes from an intrinsically produced distinction between the observing system's self-reference and its external reference. This distinction can be refined by further differentiating the (intrinsically produced) external reference into a self-reference and an external reference. In other words, we imagine the psyche of the people whom we think we observe.

The external reference's self-reference is what the observing Self confuses with the Other's self-reflexivity, and the external reference's external reference contains what the Self takes for the Other's image of the Self. What we call "understanding" or "interpretation" is, according to this formulation, a system's oscillation between its own internal reference and the internal reference it attributes to a system that is part of its external reference. If understanding, then, appears as a system-intrinsic process—and no longer as an "(inter)penetration" or "bridging" between subjects, one loses the possibility of evaluating such understanding on the basis of its "adequacy." What we only imagine does not have the status of an external reality against which we could hold any perceptions. Given that historical interest can spring from a desire to "directly experience" past worlds, Luhmann's critique of the concept of "understanding" has two consequences. The first of these two consequences takes us back to a somewhat uncomfortable proximity with constructivism: there is no way in which we—as "psychic systems"—can bypass the need to create those past worlds which we want to experience as otherness. The second consequence yields a new formula for a possible function (even a rationalization) of our desire for history—and thus goes further than we wish to go with this argument and in this entire book. Understanding, as an intrinsic component of Otherness within an observing system, adds to the complexity of this system—and therefore to the degree of flexibility with which it can react to perturbations from its environment.

Pursuing these relations between the desire for unmediated experience of the past and contemporary transformations of concepts such as "simultaneity," "subjectivity," and "understanding" has not led us far enough (it's taken us only back to constructivism), but it has also led us too far (to a hypothesis concerning possible functions of historical culture). Both too far and not far enough because our discussion has postponed a comment that was due since the words "reality" and "direct experience" first appeared in this text without being immediately crossed out. How can one use these words without naiveté or embarrassment in a philosophical climate whose dominant self-descriptions are based on supplementarity and absence? Instead of providing an—inevitably apologetic—answer, one might perhaps do better to respond with another question. What could be the point of so much insistence on supplementarity and absence (epistemological conditions that Western

thought has confronted for more than a century) if this insistence were not the symptom of an irrepressible desire for presence? And what could be the point of so much insistence on the unbridgeable distance that separates us from past worlds if it were not the desire to re-present—to make present again—those past worlds? Historical culture cannot avoid living between its endeavor to fulfill such desire for presence and an awareness that this is an impossible self-assignment. Therefore, historical culture—if it wishes to preserve its identity as a form of experience different from the experience of fiction—must try to "conjure" the reality of past worlds, without indulging in naive analogies with magic but acknowledging the inevitable subjectiveness of every such construction of historical otherness. Yet as soon as historical culture openly opts for this desire for re-presentation (which is not a given), it cannot help being ironic, for it then re-presents the past as a "reality" though it knows that all re-presentations are simulacra.[29]

Or is it too much of a concession to the spirit of supplementarity to label this situation "ironic"? After all, we *can* touch (and smell!) old newspapers, visit medieval cathedrals, and look into the faces of mummies. These objects are part of the world that we sensually experience; they are spatially nearby and "ready-to-hand"[30] to gratify our desire for historical immediacy. Rather than looking exclusively for the conditions that make immediacy possible, we also have to let it happen. After an initial experience of immediacy, a more scholarly attitude will take over and will remind us of the time span that separates our present from those objects. Scholarship suggests that the past has to become "present-at-hand," that it can be seen "objectively" only if we purify our relation to it by eliminating our desire for immediacy. This effort to establish cognitive distance as a condition for "objective" historical experience can make us blind to our desire for direct experience of the past—which is best served when we do not seek such distance.

While writing this book, I was continually going through old newspapers and dusty books that nobody had read for decades. I never drove my car without listening to jazz recorded in 1926, and I repeatedly watched silent movies made in that year. The main challenge for my writing was therefore to prevent this indulgence in historical immediacy, this ready-to-hand, from turning into the present-at-hand of historical distance and "objectivity." How far can a book go in providing, or rather in maintaining, (the illusion of) such direct experience of the past? How

far can a book go in fulfilling a desire to which other media have quite successfully responded in recent years? What happens if, in writing history, one simply follows this desire instead of burdening it with myriad philosophical constraints and pedagogical tasks? It is precisely the interest in exploring this potential of historical writing and of the medium we call the "book" which persuaded me that I should not include photographs and other visual documents here. For they produce an effect of immediacy which easily overwhelms any that can be provided by a text. My hope is that, in the absence of pictures, the words from the past which I abundantly quote will provide a similar—but phenomenologically and psychologically different—effect.

As an "essay on historical simultaneity," my book is a practical answer to the question of how far a text can go in providing the illusion of direct experience of the past. I make no effort to transform this answer into a "method," for I have always been convinced that claiming the rigor of a "method" is a trope by which humanists seek an easy escape from their traditional inferiority complex vis-à-vis scientists. All I can provide by way of self-commentary is a retrospective highlighting of the most important decisions and lines of orientation that emerged during the composition process. Rather than dignifying this commentary with the epistemological status of a "method," I present it simply as *six rules of thumb for history writing, after learning from history.* These rules overlap, since they point to the (impossible) possibility of a certain historiographic practice, which my own writing, I hope, sometimes approximates.

1

If we distance ourselves from the desire to "learn from history" and to "understand" the past, then *we free ourselves from the obligation to begin historiographic texts by legitimizing the specific relevance of the past moments we choose to write about.* What the German tradition used to call "threshold years," for example, do not exist within a discourse emphasizing historical simultaneity, because this discourse aims at isolating and making present a past[31] instead of establishing a continuity between the past and the present. In the intellectual neighborhood

of hermeneutics and subject-philosophy, threshold years were regarded as moments of transition (often marked by "events" of great symbolic significance) between different institutional frames for human action. The interpretation of threshold years was expected to yield particularly important insights into the "laws" of historical change. But if it is true that this Hegelian frame of assumptions has begun to recede, we may no longer be obliged to subordinate archives and narratives to the economy of such historico-philosophical legitimation. As soon as we admit that the choice among possible topics for our research need not follow those criteria of relevance, the old intellectual obsession with "going against the grain" becomes equally obsolete—meaning that historians are no longer obliged, among other things, to promote "hitherto underestimated" years and events. In exchange, the fluctuating public interest in certain segments of the past can then be accepted as a good enough orientation to follow. For instance, the widespread attention that in past decades has been so frequently generated by "commemorative years" certainly stimulates the desire of countless potential readers to directly experience worlds like those of 1789 or 1492—even if such years were first chosen as commemorative years on the basis of their reputation as historical thresholds.

Regarding the year 1926, I wish to emphasize that it neither fulfills the classic requirement of being a threshold year nor anticipates any forthcoming public anniversary. I first chose it as an emblem of randomness[32] because it seems to be one of the very few years in the twentieth century to which no historian has ever attributed specific hermeneutic relevance. Later on, I noticed that my selection had probably been preconsciously oriented by a construction of family history. I believed that two of my grandparents had died in 1926: Theresa Bender in Dortmund-Hörde, from septicemia following a premature delivery, and Vinzenz Schraut, in Würzburg, from the consequences of an injury sustained as a soldier during the First World War.[33] The impossible wish to hear the voices of my grandparents (for it is true that voices are particularly strong in creating an illusion of presence), to know what had occupied their minds, and to see their worlds with their eyes was responsible for my fascination with documents from the years of their adult lives.[34]

Should I then draw the more general conclusion that, while the year selected must antedate my own birth (in 1948), it also must be recent enough to provide an association with persons whom I can identify as

my relatives? Could I have chosen the year 926, instead of 1926?[35] Disregarding all the problems that have to do with the availability and precise dating of sources from the Middle Ages, I tend to think that one could indeed write a similar book about the year 926. For although only an initial feeling of closeness will trigger the desire for direct experience of the past, such closeness need not be the closeness of family history. I am writing these lines during a stay in Charlottesville, Virginia—and quite naturally my proximity to so many buildings planned and designed by Thomas Jefferson motivates my wish to know more about—"to get closer to"—the history of American independence.[36] Likewise, for all my academic education as a "Romanist," I did not even begin to become interested in the history of Argentinian culture until I first visited Buenos Aires—not to speak of the impact that vestiges of medieval buildings in my hometown must have had on my choice of a dissertation topic.[37] But while I thus cheerfully admit that no general relevance can be postulated for the year 1926, I hope and believe that the deliberate subjectiveness of the choice need not prevent this book from being useful to readers who study the 1920s from different (and probably "more relevant") angles. This is why, in the concluding chapter, I try to show the more general fruitfulness of my approach through a paradigmatic analysis of Martin Heidegger's book *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time),* which was written in 1926—an analysis based on the synchronic reconstruction of that year's everyday-worlds.

2

The perspective of historical simultaneity does not depend on the choice of a one-year span—this goes without saying. Any arguable decision about the time span to be treated hinges first of all on the proportion between the available sources and the projected length of the book (or, for that matter, the projected dimensions of the exhibit). Whereas it would be technically difficult to carry out a similar project on a single year from, say, the seventh century B.C., one could easily fill hundreds of pages with references to every month, every week, and probably even every day of the year 1926. A strategic advantage of the one-year span comes from the fact that years (and decades and centuries) often carry certain connotations for potential readers—connotations which may

awaken and preorient their interest. In addition, years (not months or days) are used in standard classifications of printed materials (as well as of other artifacts and even of "events")—a circumstance that simply makes things easier for the historian of simultaneity.

Much more important than the time span chosen, however, is the decision to abstract (as far as possible) from the sequentiality and causality within the historiographic reconstruction of a chosen year (decade, month).[38] This decision does not bear directly on my primary goal of coming as close as possible to actual events and structures of experience which constituted the reality of the year 1926. Rather, the suspension of sequentiality arises from the choice of a specific angle of historical representation. In this case, it is the focus on a year as an environment, as a world within which people lived. Although one can of course retrospectively observe transformations and changes in everyday-worlds as environments within the course of a year, I think that, as a general rule, these changes are hardly ever experienced by the people who inhabit those worlds. The self-imposed imperative to suspend sequentiality obliges us to minimize recourse to the subject-centered concept of causality and to the genre of the historical narrative. Thus, we must ask what discourses and concepts we can elaborate in order to establish noncausal relations between the texts and artifacts to which we refer. An answer is all the more difficult to find as we have to expose ourselves to the unavoidable sequentiality of the text as medium. If we can come up with any solutions at all, they will be contributions to the abovementioned "theory of the present," which we need but do not yet have.

3

Which texts and artifacts "belong" to the year 1926? According to our goal of coming as close as possible to the world of that time span, the range of pertinent materials potentially comprises the traces of all experiences that could be had in 1926. If one takes this formula seriously, it implies the obligation to deal with the almost infinite mass of such traces coming from periods and cultures prior to 1926—provided they were available in 1926. In order to narrow down this overwhelming complexity, I started by concentrating on books, objects, and events that attracted a certain level of public attention during the year in question. Among them, it makes no difference whether a text, say, was actually published

for the first time in 1926, whether it was successfully reissued, or whether, even without a new edition, it simply became a topic of widespread discussion during that year. Once a first repertoire of materials is thus established, one may include objects that were produced in 1926 but entered the public sphere at a later date. Such inclusions have to rely on the impression that topics and concerns of particular public resonance during that year had an important impact on the objects to be analyzed. A certain amount of interpretive arbitrariness is of course the price that must be paid for working with hypotheses of this kind. Among the books that were written (not published) in 1926, I have therefore chosen only Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*—a decision I was encouraged to make by some recently unearthed archival evidence that dates the actual writing process to April through December of 1926. In general, however, I resisted the temptation to use such evidence, because I was interested in exploring the challenges of chronological randomness. Sources without a clear 1926-inscription were simply considered as not available, even though in some cases they might have contributed to the refinement, illustration, and confirmation of some of my views.

But even that randomness is relative. Being used to enormous chronological breadth in the choice of sources for their narratives, many historians overlook the fact that what they reject as "chronological randomness" appears as random only in relation to a metaphysical claim according to which the past is structured by an underlying principle of causality. And there is yet another rule regarding the selection and status of sources: if the main criterion for the inclusion of texts is their status as traces of experience available in the year 1926, then the distinction between fictional and nonfictional texts becomes irrelevant. The only empirical difference I discovered between the value of nonfictional texts and that of fictional texts lies in the—rather unexpected—observation that, on average, fictional texts presented a much higher density of those concerns and perspectives which I came to identify as specific to the year 1926.

4

I do not exactly remember the type of documents I started with, but I do know that, at a very early stage, I abandoned all nonchronological criteria of selection. Any sources, artifacts, or events dating back to 1926

were potentially relevant. With this opening, I of course gave up the expectation of ever reaching a level of exhaustiveness. Though it was not particularly difficult to relinquish this aim, which was impossible anyway, I then faced the more practical question of *when I could consider my research on the available sources completed.* The obvious answer—obvious at least for any type of historical research pertaining to a recent historical period—points to a level of documentary density at which the analysis of further sources will yield no additional insights. There is a moment in every historical investigation where the recurrence of certain types of materials and conclusions becomes empty—or (to use a contrasting metaphor) a moment where our picture of the past reaches a level of saturation. While of course one cannot theorize about the question of when, exactly, the search for sources and materials from the past comes to such a "natural" end, it is obvious that any given historiographic text can carry (and use) only a limited amount of documentary evidence. Seen from this perspective, my style of work was thoroughly inductive. I was eager to let my reading and writing be guided by what became visible as predominant structures of 1926 (instead of following the New Historical pattern of "inventing" such structures), and I have tried to minimize interpretative commentary in the presentation of my results. Of course I know that a historian cannot help "inventing" past worlds—but I still hope that my "construction" comes as close as possible to world views *from within 1926.* Thus, the critical question to which I am ready to respond is not whether there are events, works of art, or books that I have "forgotten" in my reconstruction of 1926, but rather whether their inclusion would have changed in any important way my description and simulation of those past world views.

The empirical observation of recurrence—in contrast to totalization—served in yet another important way as a working principle for my project. It was geared toward identifying multiple topics and concerns that had captured attention in 1926. This meant, first of all, that I could forgo any speculation about levels of preconscious "depth" underlying the cultural manifestations with which I worked. But the decision to focus on surface phenomena and to resist in-depth interpretation also motivated my endeavor to describe them as succinctly and impersonally as possible, the prevailing use of the present tense being a further trace of this ambition. One might say—if one can bracket, at least for a moment, all the philosophical problems that come with this formula

from the poetics of literary modernism—that the surface phenomena which I describe "mean" what they "are." Using a conceptual distinction belonging to the phenomenological tradition, one could also say that they refer to the level of "lived experience" *(Erleben)* and not to that of "experience" *(Erfahrung),* because *Erfahrung* always presupposes that an interpretive perspective has already been applied to *Erleben.* Rather than using the term "historemes" (as Wlad Godzich proposed to me in conversation), I would refer to the surface phenomena which I describe as "configurations." For the word "configurations" (or, as Norbert Elias would probably have said, "figurations") emphasizes an aspect of form and perception, whereas the neologism "historemes" resonates with "narremes," a concept that used to be applied when treating the "depth level" of narrative texts.[39]

5

What kind of "historical reality" emerges from a reconstruction that—against all odds—attempts to fulfill the desire for direct experience of the past? I sometimes arrived at the illusion (and, taking into account the historical materials I was working with, one may claim that it was not only an illusion) of being surrounded by the everyday-worlds of 1926. Such memories of the most exciting moments during the years I worked on this project eventually suggested the book's title, *In 1926,* which, grounded in the pleasure of having the historical materials ready-to-hand, cannot deny an at least metonymic proximity to Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world." Wanting to be-in-the-world of 1926 through writing a book had quite a number of practical consequences. The world that one must find and reconstruct is an everyday-world, a world of normality (Heidegger says that his existential analysis required focusing on "average everydayness" and "facticity"). Corresponding to the desire of being-*in*-1926, such an everyday-world has to be an environment, an imagined realm, that brings together different phenomena and configurations in a space of simultaneity (hence my insistence on this perspective in section 2, above). But in calling the everyday-world of 1926 a "space of simultaneity," I wish to do more than point to its temporal dimension. With the nonmetaphorical meaning of the word "space," I also allude to the desire to bring phenomena and configura-

tions into an (illusory or not-so-illusory) position of spatial closeness. Only such proximity would indeed enable us to touch, smell, and hear the past.[40] As an aspect of time, however, simultaneity allows for paradoxical relations among the phenomena re-presented. For if what we call a paradox is the simultaneous presence of two contradictory terms, it follows logically that a historiographic perspective of simultaneity engenders multiple paradoxes.

Choosing simultaneity as a frame-condition for this book not only required a tolerance toward paradoxes. It also excluded, independent of any philosophical preferences, the possibility of treating subjects as agents, because actions can be credited with agency only in a narrative, and narratives require sequentiality. The world of 1926 therefore appears here as a stage without actors. This of course does not mean that I am "not interested in people," but is a consequence of the form I chose for the re-presentation of a past year. In renouncing the sequentiality of a narrative plot, I also forgo the most "natural" criterion for selecting among the historical materials. What are the limits of my research, and of the re-presentations based on this research, if I do not pursue or construct a story line? Certainly not the boundaries of any "national culture"—and not even (at least not by way of any logical deduction or induction) the limits of Western culture. The only reason my pictures of the world in 1926 are de facto confined to Western culture lies in the (highly contingent and deplorable) fact that all the materials accessible to my linguistic and semiotic competence come from the West. Whether the various pictures I present really coalesce into a larger panorama of Western culture is another empirical question. The materials seem to point to a fairly coherent network of everyday phenomena, with national idiosyncrasies as well as suggestions of openings toward non-Western worlds. Somewhat paradoxically, the various totalizing world-pictures that emerged within this framework belong to the more idiosyncratic elements. They constitute a second level of reference for the concept of "world," a level occupied by multiple and normally well-circumscribed ideas—as opposed to what I call "the world of 1926," which constitutes this book's ultimately unattainable object of re-presentation. Inside each national or regional culture, the totalizing world-pictures are generally not experienced as "specific" in any sense (neither "black," nor "Western," nor "middle-class," nor "Italian"). But it is easy to delineate their

individual profiles by focusing on the inclusions and exclusions through which they are defined. What we could call "Central European culture of 1926," for example, is obsessed with establishing a contrast between the Soviet Union and the United States; it includes an image of Asia but excludes, even as a geographic entity, most of Africa. At the same time, Central European culture eagerly discovers and admires African-American forms of expression. What this world-picture clearly renounces, though (except perhaps in the case of France), is the existence of a transcendental horizon (the concept of "world" is about to become a purely immanent one). From a Latin-American perspective, in contrast, the world-picture includes the United States and Europe but does not seem to share the focus on the Soviet Union. Within such contiguities, overlappings, and differences between multiple everyday-worlds, my reconstruction does not—at least not intentionally—privilege any single perspective or observer position. If many of the individual configurations that I describe seem to center on references to the metropolitan cultures of Berlin, New York, and Buenos Aires (rather than, say, the culture of Paris), such a focus reflects, I hope, the effect of condensation and of the mutual feedback between predominant structures of relevance in 1926. This book tries to situate itself by identifying those places "where the action was."

Finally, how can one find a substitute for the notion of "event" in the context of an "essay on historical simultaneity"? Such a substitution is unavoidable, because the traditional use of this concept presupposes a plot structure (within which the "event" marks a turning point). At the same time, however, events point to the interference of contingency, to whatever resists total integration into the internal logic of a plot. In order to find an equivalent for the concept of "event" within a reconstruction of simultaneity, we have to focus on this second semantic component. An "event" would then be whatever threatens the structures of existing everyday-worlds without being accessible for formulation and interpretation within them. In this sense, we could speculate about the uncontrollable impact of technology (or of technology as it interacts with the natural environments of everyday-worlds) as a potential stimulus for events. Events could arise from the accumulated effects of different cultural codes as they converge or diverge. Events could be a result of external couplings by which everyday-worlds join with other everyday-

worlds in their environments (think, for example, of the coupling between modern theoretical physics and the military—two everyday-worlds sharing an environment).

On the level of history writing—which, as I have said, turned out to be a level of empirical experience for my work—the most frequently observed phenomena and configurations in the year 1926 seemed to fall into three categories. There are certain artifacts, roles, and activities (for example, Airplanes, Engineers, Dancing) which require human bodies to enter into specific spatial and functional relations to the everyday-worlds they inhabit. Borrowing a word first used within the context of historical research by Michel Foucault,[41] I call such relations—the ways in which artifacts, roles, and activities influence bodies—*dispositifs,* or *arrays.* Coexisting and overlapping in a space of simultaneity, clusters of arrays are often zones of confusing convergence, and they therefore tend to generate discourses which transform such confusion into the—deparadoxifying—form of alternative options (say, Center vs. Periphery, or Individuality vs. Collectivity, or Authenticity vs. Artificiality). Since identifying the *binary codes* in which such discourses are grounded turns out to be surprisingly easy, and since they provide principles of order within the unstructured simultaneity of everyday-worlds, one might reserve the concept of "culture" for the ensemble of such codes.[42] This would be an alternative to a recent tendency to use the notion of "culture" as coextensive with "everyday-worlds"—a usage in which the concept becomes too large to allow for any distinctions.

There is reason to assume, however, that individual codes are not integrated into overall systems, and that the codes sometimes do not even succeed in maintaining their deparadoxifying function (in 1926 this seems to be the case, for example, with the binary gender distinction or with the contrast between Transcendence and Immanence). Such *collapsed codes* are particularly visible because, as areas of malfunction and entropy, they attract specific discursive attention and, often, specific emotional energy. From a theoretical point of view, collapsed codes have to be located on the boundary between the internal sphere of everyday-worlds and that zone "beyond" everyday-worlds which we noted as a possible substitute for the concept of "event." Collapsed codes belong to everyday-worlds, inasmuch as they are based on the binary codes that provide order through deparadoxification. But as soon as the codes fail to serve a deparadoxifying function, they move beyond what can be

expressed and conceptually controlled. This is why, in the sense of our definition of "event," the collapse of codes implies a potential for change, and why it would be wrong to see this collapse exclusively from the perspective of loss and malfunction.

6

Arrays, codes, and breakdowns of codes are the three levels on which I present the different objects and configurations that appeared central within the everyday-worlds of 1926. *But is it possible to integrate these various objects and configurations into a historiographic discourse?* Although I have developed some elementary hypotheses about the relations that connect the three levels of phenomena, the nature of their interrelatedness is still not obvious enough to allow us to suggest a new form of historical writing. Similar reservations apply to the three individual levels. It is unlikely that different arrays and different codes (let alone collapsed codes) belonging to one and the same temporal moment ever enter into relations of a systemic character. And even if this were the case, we—in the position of immediate historical witnesses—definitely do not experience everyday-worlds as systems.

Likewise still unanswered is the question of what discursive form would most successfully enhance the illusion of being-in-a-past-world. I have opted for the encyclopedic structure of multiple entries, using the word "entry" to refer to the individual texts that constitute an encyclopedia or dictionary, but also using it as a way of stressing that everyday-worlds have neither symmetry nor center and can therefore be entered from many different directions.[43] Each entry leads toward an encounter with an element of concrete historical reality, and each of these elements is connected to other elements via myriad labyrinthine paths of contiguity, association, and implication. The arbitrariness of the alphabetical order in which the entries are presented and the encyclopedic device of cross-references mimic the nonsystematic character of our everyday experience and suggest that readers constitute the world of 1926 as an asymmetrical network,[44] as a rhizome rather than as a totality.[45]

Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues (Dictionary of Received Ideas)*[46] is a—certainly unattainable—model for the re-presentation of past everyday-worlds through a network of entries. Being a mere

notebook in which Flaubert collected the most frequently used commonplaces of contemporary French society, the *Dictionnaire* cannot be held up as a model of historiographic strategy, because he was not confronted with the task of making a past world present. But I don't know of any other text that provides latter-day readers with such a powerful illusion of experiencing a past everyday-world from inside. In addition to the decentering arbitrariness of the alphabetical order, two additional features greatly contribute to this effect. Flaubert treats his collected commonplaces as quotations, as fragments of a historical reality—and not as descriptions of this reality. They appear as quotes (although they are not enclosed in quotation marks) because there is no authorial voice or discourse to comment on them or put them into historical perspective. This absence, however, creates a prevailing irony. In reading Flaubert, we tend to attribute such irony to an author who destroys commonplaces by strictly limiting himself to their reiteration. The irony underlying my book, in contrast, could perhaps best be characterized as the irony of a project which tries to re-present the reality of a past world despite (or because of) its fundamental awareness that such a re-presentation is impossible. Knowing the impossibility of its own fulfillment, the desire for immediacy should not degenerate into the illusion of immediacy.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLDS OF 1926

Martin Heidegger,
Hans Friedrich Blunck,
Carl Van Vechten

Not a Good Year

From a professional perspective, 1926 was not a good year for the philosopher Martin Heidegger. In 1923, he had left the University of Freiburg and his beloved retreat at Todtnauberg in the Black Forest (where his wife had built a cabin for the family the previous year)[1] to accept a long-awaited offer from the University of Marburg. But his new position was only an *Extraordinariat,* which, like an associate professorship in the American academic world, left at least one further step to climb on the career ladder. This was probably why—although the new appointment gave him and his family financial stability in the hard times of postwar Germany, and although his relatively short list of publications made him academically vulnerable—Heidegger would never be satisfied with his employment at Marburg. Even in his acceptance letter to the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy (June 18, 1923), he seemed to be using delaying tactics with his new university, by not giving the titles and topics of the courses he was expected to teach:

> To Your *Spektabilität:*[2]
> I humbly confirm that today I received an offer from your university concerning an *Extraordinariat* in philosophy, with the rights and status of an *Ordentlicher Professor.* I shall accept this offer. At the same time, I humbly ask Your *Spektabilität* the favor of transmitting to the vener-