

Artistic loops in environment memory

Loreto Alonso Atienza

National Center for Documentation and Information Research Arts (Cenidiap/ INBA).

Translation: Loreto Alonso, George Hutton

ABSTRACT: At a time when much of our life depends on the satisfactory exchange of networked digital data, socially shared memory could be interpreted as a floating environment of data and procedures to which we only have limited access. Cultural practices and artistic projects operating in this environment, proposing aesthetic positions and activating critical issues. This article shows the concept of environment memory, associated with technological innovations, in the omnipresence of the collective dream that Benjamin links with modernity and cinema. We will address this potential evolution of what we deem to be environmental memory through three fictional narratives, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, *Big Brother* and *The Congress*.

In the second part of the paper we elaborate on some dimensions of this environment memory, considering the current folksonomic condition and data circulation on the Internet. And we will focus on some relevant strategies and artistic trends, starting from what we define as loops in the transmission channels and the consumption of resources (Parasite Loop, Interactive estrangement Loop, Infinite reproduction Loop, Prosurfer Loop and Popinternet Loop), which, among other things, seem to question what is proper and improper in what we interpret as environment memory.

KEYWORDS: Environment Memory, Loop, Collective Dream, Internet, Art.

From the *Collective Dream* to the *Environment Memory*

Those who are awake have a world in common, the dreamers have one each.

(Benjamin, 2003: 87)

Individual and collective experience in modern, urban and commercial life is intrinsically linked to developments in the technical image, in terms of how it is produced and circulated. Both the cinematic illusion and the current three-dimensional representations of video games reinscribe personal experience in such collectivised and industrialised developments.



In our present, the expanding of connectivity and the increase in interfaces seems to have made ubiquitous that *Collective Dream* that Walter Benjamin so exemplified with Mickey Mouse(1). Conscious and unconscious conformations, as well as mechanical repetitions and servitude, all shape the territories that we share into so-called cultural industries. In these industries, the near-ubiquity of the moving image with sound, and digital hyper-connectivity, together set the parameters for a particular formation of the collective.

In our mediatised and electronic present, the dream not only seems to have been collectivised but also hyper-mediatised and diluted in the atmosphere of our daily habitat. It could be argued that it has become a kind of environment that crosses our subjective, spatial and temporal possibilities, conditioning possible actions and interactions.

We propose an interpretation of a possible evolution of this Collective Dream towards what we call environment memory, through three fictional stories that lead us to different issues regarding particular experiences and how to share them. This path arises from the dictatorial totalitarianism evoked in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the media transparency shown in the television format *Big Brother*, and commercial totalitarianism marketing described in the film *The Congress*, written and directed by Ari Folman from a story by Stanislaw Lem.

In general terms, these fictions bring us closer to transformation processes of subjective dominations linked to technology. This starts with the metaphor of sleep as the intrusion and internalisation of a narrative that is not only collective, but also technological, and controlled by the state through *telescreens*. The figure of power, namely *Big Brother*, is later identified with the viewer and consumer of the Home Screens, replacing a system of subjugation with an apparent receptor of empowerment that is offered endless possibilities of represented experiences. In, Folman's story, this receptor promotes processes of disengagement of conscious and unconscious configurations with which we identify through the ability not only to create new images for our memory but to digitise existing memories.

Nineteen Eighty-four (1949) describes a totalitarian system that subjugates the population through a camera-screen. In the historic moment in which the television apparatus becomes part of everyday life, Orwell anticipates two of the fundamental functions that audiovisual media will have in its double meaning of recording and broadcasting. The author imagines the telescreen as a panoptic device for propaganda, education and subjugation that turns out to be an extremely effective surveillance tool, as well as functioning as a clock, the source of news, the police, the sports coach and the government.

The one who is watching over and deciding what we get to see is presented as an absolute leader, the *Big Brother* who

modulates the reality and expectations within both actual and virtual existence. This figure, perhaps nonexistent, as Orwell seems to suggest, warns the reader of the relativity of all that construction of reality.



This *Big Brother* was subsequently reformulated, becoming the television program that bears its name. It was first broadcast in the Netherlands in 1999, and to date it has been replicated in television networks in 70 countries. Inside the very term ‘reality show’, we can see a combination of the idea of reality being associated with the act of showing.

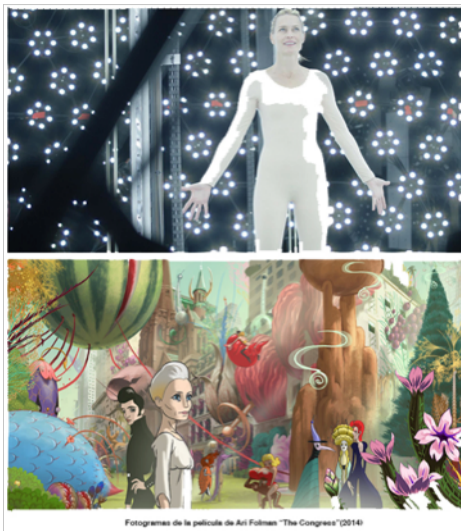
Unlike the novel, in the television show the situation of the cameras and screens is usually presented and accepted as an organic part of the game. This presupposition naturalises the effects of these devices, dodging and diverting attention away from the intrusive mechanisms of the presenters and programme-makers, and viewers are seen as a spread-out Big Brother.

The possibility of making the recording and monitoring functions transparent means that Big Brother dissipates into an unconscious visual, acting from the most intimate moments of everyday life, both of the contestants and of the viewers.

In the impositions of the totalitarian system in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, as with those of the reality TV show *Big Brother*, the screens are presented as a visible device which is the protagonist of the production of a common subjective world. But the current evolution of the devices leads us to believe that what could be interpreted as a collective dream will not materialise in the future in the defined form of any distinguishable electronic device, but rather in an assembled set of technologies embedded right in the subject substrate itself, and their own flesh.

Ari Folman’s film (2014), inspired by Stanislaw Lem’s story “Futurology Congress” (1971), presents the dilemma of a Hollywood actress selling the film rights to her image to the producer Miramount Studios. Although the image of her body is extracted from the films she made when she was younger, her own particular gestures and movements are digitally recorded through a specially-designed three-dimensional scanner, a device commonly used today in the production of virtual environments for video games and other *metaverses*. When the protagonist loses control and rights over her image and gestures, the subjective substrate becomes a brand, a production which is managed and consumed industrially and commercially, and an object of undifferentiated consumption that can be drunk or digested, the result of the absolute alienation of realities and physical bodies.

As with this fiction, *environment memory* is the product of a progressive assimilation of life through collectivised information to the detriment of particular personal experience. It is a potentially ubiquitous entity, so distributed that it is longer in a particular *locus* and cannot be definitively located, although any entity can become a form of access – the people around us, everyday spaces, devices that are activated and disabled become updating agents of virtual content that appear to be technically infinite.



The Sleep of Reason Produces Environment

What technology could make possible, that space of infinite communication, that aleph, absolute perfect transparency, is brought down by endemic dynamics of flow and stop, opening and closing, which manage circulations according to interests of domination, created, stabilised. (Brea, 2010: 121-122)

Electronic extensions of memory pose a reformulation of what we had considered personal, and they are presented not so much as the imprint of an original experience, but rather as an optional agency, unrelated to a specific experience, disembodied, modular and mutant.

The internet of things, geolocation, outsourcing work through protocols and electronic procedures, all makes up the habitat where we usually develop our mental and social life, but these cyber devices, electronic memories, technically infinite images and traffic channels seem to exceed our biological and social capabilities.

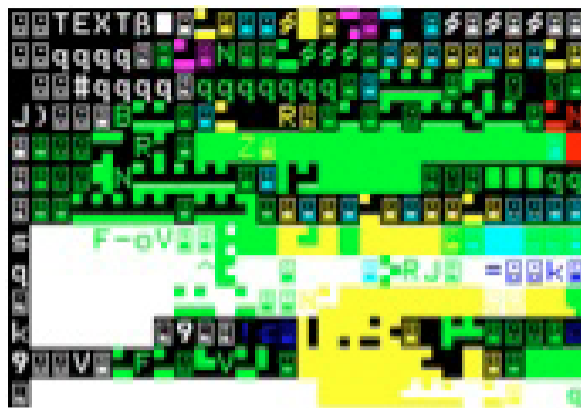
Environment memory is technicised and distributed, it fulfils storage functions but also data management and distribution. It acts as an active agent in the conformations and modulations of shared representations, organised in terms of flows and metadata.

One of the most noticeable features in the circulation of *environment memory* is found on the Internet, an environment of nomadic associations into which we pour and share more and more experiences, such as archives, data, memories, as well as artistic expressions.

Nowadays, management and access to information makes up an important source of power. These operations in digital logic are relatively open to social participation, including *folksonomic* practices, classification of information through tags, keywords and personal opinions.

The folksonomic manifestations of *environment memory* do not merely consist of an accumulation of data, but as a classification engine and a motion vector. Shared taxonomic modes and logics constitute knowledge tools of thought structures, opinions and trends of a ghostly, spread-out community. It is interesting to note, as Luis Gárciga does, that: “The appearance of the results shared by this specific mode of social labelling is the gesture of speech. It is a kind of improvised humming, which incorporates the rhythm and melody of an online community that sings messing up the lyrics and blurring the content of what is stored” (Gárciga, 2015). According to the author, it is a form of impressionistic

representation that, given the constant updating of data, captures and shows a sort of atmosphere.



As in folksonomy, *environment memory* appeals to speech as the most common, close and accessible model, and its seemingly pluralistic and decentralised make-up calls upon popular culture and its integration into a massive economy and its circulation around a global network.

The folksonomic responds to what we might call an economy of reception in which users, audiences or the distributed public act as information organisers and creators of modes for sorting and categorising. However, they are also followers and fans, whose opinions and tastes contribute to the creation of symbolic value, frequently setting off viral phenomena that are difficult to explain and in which it is also possible to accommodate propaganda, advertising, as well as other settings.

Circulation Loops in the *Environment Memory*

The greater masterpiece isn't something that can be found on Google. The greater masterpiece is the INFOspirit that constructs all of Google. The greater masterpiece is the INFOspirit that constructs all Youtube videos and all celebrity gossip blog posts and all jpegs of Van Gogh paintings and all of officemax.com and all net art yet made. (Bewersdorf, 2012: 25)

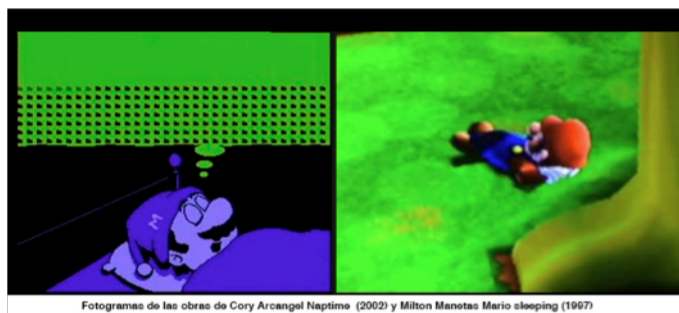
Faced with the idea of appropriation, the Loop movement refers to a new insertion of elements extracted from the data flow we are calling *environment memory*. Loop refers to a continuous movement that returns to its origin. It has a repetitive structure, but not necessarily always repeated in the same way, and it can include variations and diversions.

Ever since the beginnings of net art, parasitic operations have emerged, linked with the Internet with regard to the circulation of symbolic values. These operation connect artistic practices with media criticism, and they set off a loop within the logics of the cultural circuit. Examples of this parasitic gesture as a strategy(2) in relation to the public domain of information, are the first mirrorisations of Internet sites such as *Documenta Done* (1997)(3), or the copies by the collective *01001010100.org*, of websites by paradigmatic net artists such as *Jodi.org*, *Art Teleportancia.org* and *Hell.com*(4) in response to their commercial assimilation.

The parasitism in terms of materials in this *environment memory* is not limited to Internet, but rather it can be extended to institutional, political and aesthetic logics, reminding us of the modern artistic debate triggered by Duchampian strategies like *The Fountain* (1917) or appropriationist gestures, like *After Walker Evans* by Sherrie Levine (1980)(5). In these loops, the meaning of ownership is questioned in relation to intangible assets, but also in relation to the implications of their media and electronic components.



Interactive Estrangement Loops emerge as a diversion of aesthetic, logical and narrative proposals that facilitate interactive electronic systems. The works by the Jodi collective incorporate abstraction and estrangement in the uses and representative functions of digital platforms, programs and games, interfering with the expected interaction of the applications.



The appropriation, modification and production of video games already constitutes its own genre within art, from painting and sculpture to the intervention or hacking of video game cartridges. Milton Manetas's *Videos after videogames* and *Art from videogames* manifesto poses invasions in the operation of the video game, used to visualise the interactive and hyperactive logic of the game. The work *Super Mario Sleeping* (1997), as with the work *Naptime* (2002) by Cory Arcangel, present the protagonist of Miyamoto's famous videogame as he is resting. Following this same critical logic of interaction, in *Super Mario Cloud* (2002) Arcangel deletes all the characters and other items from the program apart from the clouds, a traditional genre of landscape painting that invites contemplation.

There is also an *Infinite Production Loop* most often associated with Adobe's Flash software, used to edit the moving image. This program facilitates the creation of a moving picture that can be played and replayed, technically to infinity. The *gif* format allows for an eternal repetition of the movement of images without losing any of its lightness, which is a key for its rapid circulation of the network.

Creators, which Lev Manovich defined as a *Flash Generation* (2002), no longer seem so interested in the critique of cultural mediations, now focusing on technological conditions instead. The *gif* format is a significant mode of technical and aesthetic production for online content, and it singled out by Manovich, from his perspective in software studies, as a "new index of the real" which inherits the critical functions that still photographic had regard to artistic works that sought a media critic.



Lorna Mills's *gifs* (6) are presented as a decontextualisation of Internet content. She collects and assembles scraps from platforms such as *reddit*, *4chan* or *pornfails*, and as she hacks up the rectangular images, frame by frame, keeping the images pixelised and in low quality, she highlights its media source. Her intention of making visible the conditions of the medium seems clear in her work *Ungentrified* (2014) in which she uses the process of gentrification of the physical space in reference to the trend of deleting, from the Internet, anything which does not conform to the standard media circuits.

The practices of remixing online materials and formats are presented as unstable narratives and in a constant negotiation with the contexts in which they are involved. Artists, web designers and programmers point out and play with a boundless data stream, open to any manipulation (cut, paste, change, copy, etc.) and accessible from almost any terminal. These are practices that call themselves *prosurfers*, evoking an analogy with the surf movement that refers to a constant adaptation to the data flow.

As Deleuze anticipated, the act of surfing raises questions regarding some of the characteristics of the current forms of subjective production. It is a wavelike movement which aims to remain in orbit, clinging fast to a continuous wave. In surfing, you play with the force of the sea, you get carried away and you ride the surprise - we could say that one is not subjected to its movements, but rather one reinterprets them. If surfing "has taken over from all the the old sports" (Deleuze, 1999: 280), post-production has taken over from the production of new materials that are now more like interchangeable parts flashing in a seemingly endless physical and virtual circuit of continuous transformation.

The surfing analogy also applies in the configuration of groups or clubs that are no longer beach-bound athletes, but rather image makers. *Nasty Nest* or *Spirit Surfers* are two examples of these group exhibitions. The blog model and open-content pages that serve as a platform for these clubs offer new conceptions of the artist's work. We can say that "from the art practice point of view a post is a hybrid event involving both curatorial and conceptual artistic gesture" (Ramocki, 2008).

The Internet is interpreted, from the perspective of the *Prosurfer Loop*, as an inexhaustible source of resources in which materials circulate or float without disclosing a specific origin. As Marisa Olson notes, "images are removed from circulation, often without attribution or clues as to their origin, unless it is part of the story told by the image" (2014: 39), and as Kevin Bewersdorf points out, "the goal of spiritsurfers.net is equally simple: surfers reveal to others the majesty of INFOspirit" (2012: 26).

Like the pop art of the past century, these practices are part of a dialogue with the uses and customs of a consumer society that, since the sixties, has been developed and expanded by means of incorporating both tangible and intangible products (services, experiences, values, etc.).

Artists associated with the *postinternet* (7) trend propose a loop of contents that circulate the platforms that constitute a global popular culture, digitally installing them onto electronic artistic platforms, and materially installing them in galleries and public spaces. Just as significant as the rematerialisation of virtual objects is their recommodification in renewed channels of the art market.

The *Popinternet Loop* overcomes the paradox between the ephemeral nature of media dynamics (surfing, channel-hopping, posting, gifting, memeing, gaming, etc.) and the permanent and eternal market. Everything returns to being material, spatial and commercial, and the parodies of the code are reinstalled in the artistic traditions of painting,

sculpture, installation and performance, as well as in its new markets.

This loop alludes to the double circulation mode of the popular and authorial, the virtual and the material, the free and the commercial, as in the work by Eva and Franco Mates *Agreement n.1: Exhausted*, in which they exhibit, in a commercial gallery, objects printed with images obtained on the Internet, associated with the term “exhausted”, exhibiting agreement that the artists established with Kevin Bewersdorf for the use of his original idea(8).

The gesture of reinserting the materials into the cultural system could be interpreted as an inverted *readymade*, intended not only for the incorporation of the everyday into art, but to make the extraction of resources visible. If, as Javier Fresneda notes regarding memetic images “we find context in the same action of capturing and cutting up images, as well as on the location of device status” (2016), the interpretation of context for these operations is found in its dialogue with folksonomic practices, in post-production and editing methods associated with pro-surfers, and also in their strategies for reintegration into the commercial circuits where a brand or trend is created.

These loops, be they *parasitic*, or of *interactive estrangement*, *infinite reproduction*, *pro-surfer* or *popinternet*, suggest operations in artistic practices that relate to property, but also to the forms of documentation and transmission of experience in the *environment memory*.

When data circulation seems destined to reproduce hegemonic culture, erasing any entry to a particular position and hindering the visibility of truly effective power devices, i.e. with effects like symbolic exploitation, indiscriminate surveillance and regulation of our subjective possibilities, it is probably necessary to ask ourselves: How, who and why is producing in the circulation flux? Or, as Suely Rolnik has enquired, “what policies of desire will serve as impetus for the various initiatives around files, their emergence, their modes of production, presentation, distribution and acquisition?” (2011).

Glossary

Loop: In the field of programming and cybernetics, loops are repeat cycles of code, and feedback models within systems. In the context of this paper, they are presented as a broad metaphor alluding to a non-linear causality, as well as processes of the self-organisation and self-regulation of information and patterns.

Collective dream(9): “Cinema has opened a breach in the old Heraclitean truth: those who are awake have a world in common, the dreamers have one each. And it has done, by the way, much less through representations of the dream world through creations collective dream figures such as Mickey Mouse - now goes around the world. When one realizes the dangerous tensions that modernization and its aftermath have generated in large masses—tensions that at critical stages adopt that adopt a psychotic character- you get to the recognition that this same technicalization has created the possibility of a contra vaccine such massive psychic psychosis by certain films that forced development of sadistic or masochistic fantasies alucinations is able to prevent dangerous natural maturation among the masses. Collective laughter and represents an early benefactor of collective psychosis such outbreak. The colossal amounts of grotesque events that are consumed in the film are a sharp indication of the dangers that threaten humanity from the repressions that civilization brings. The grotesque American movies and Disney films produce a therapeutic blasting the unconscious“. (Benjamin 2003: 87)(11).

Environment memory: Concept introduced by the present author, as sketched in this paper. It is an attempt to get

closer to the way that life is currently assimilated, mainly through information technologies whose devices, increasingly numerous and varied, are each less easy to locate and seem to dissolve into an environment of contents and logics to which we only have intermittent access. This situation could be contributing to the progressive disengagement of our bodies and flesh, of our subjective substrates and our situated and specific individual experiences. The environment memory is presented as a true habitat, consisting of living beings and technical entities. It appeals to a form of memory that, as Brea has already noted in his conception of RAM memory (2010), is not a simple storage tool, but an active agency capable of organising and dynamically distributing itself.

Pro-surfer: Contraction of professional surfer. This includes authors whose artistic strategies incorporate the search for online materials and the rechanelling thereof, and who are associated to certain clubs and blogs. For more information on these practices, and places to find their proposals, see: <http://archive.rhizome.org/exhibition/timeshares/professionalsurfer.php>

Postinternet: Trend within contemporary artistic practice, related to aesthetics and the ways images and information circulate in computer networks. This label has been defined both as an artistic process in which the work comes from the experience on the Internet (Olson) or as a timely aesthetic category in which online visual production Internet becomes popular (McHugh). However, this trend is best identified in a series of spaces and publications like *New Museum*, *Eye beam*, *Crumb*, *Rhizome*, *DIS Magazine*, *e-flux*, *Spike*, among others, and an interrelated group of artists (Marisa Olson, Katja Novitskova, Cory Arcangel, Petra Cortright, Jon Rafman, Oliver Laric, Seth Price, Timur Si-Qin, Constant Dullart, Kari Altmann).

Popinternet: Concept introduced by the present author, highlighting an association of practices related to the label *postinternet* with pop art strategies. Among the similarities that lead to this comparison is its ambiguous position regarding the market and the spectacle, its approximation to the aesthetics of mass and commercial culture, its assimilation of the devices we associate with design and fashion, as well as the recurrent use of advertising strategies, their movement within the channels of hegemonic art, and its interest in engaging a specialised target audience.

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Notes

1 This statement is referenced in the original text in the Glossary at the end of this text.

2 As Bookchin and Shulgin write, the first net art was not only associated with the electronic circuit of the Internet, but also with amateur attitudes and an interdisciplinary conception of artistic production. The most characteristic proposals of these practices were “the formation of communities of artists across nations and disciplines, investment without material interests, collaboration without regard for the appropriation of ideas, privileged communication on representation, immediacy, immateriality, timing, based on a process action, acting without concern or fear of possible historical consequences, parasitism as a strategy” (1999).

3 This is the exact replication of the documenta X page by Vuk Cosic made in 1997 when they closed the physical exhibition and thus its extension on the network was closed. See: <http://www.ljudmila.org-nvuk/dx>

4 Replications of pages of the most significant net art works. Art by Eva and Franco Mates under the name 0100101110101101. Available at: <http://0100101110101101.org/copies/>

5 In *After Walker Evans* Levine reproduces the images in the exhibition catalogue of Walker Evans’s First and Last. She expanded and exhibited them in a New York art gallery.

6 There are many pages of reference on these practices of the appropriation of material online. The work of Mills, for example, can be found at <http://www.digitalmediatree.com/sallymckay/LornaMillsImageDump/>. Also in imgur.com/0HP0i3P in <https://vimeo.com/user1988175>, <http://giphy.com/search/lorna-mills> or on the page created by Carlos Sáez and Claudia Mate <http://cloaque.org/> and <http://i5u.cloaque.org/>. Mills, like many other authors, interprets the virtual environment and electronic circulation, but her works are not necessarily limited to it and come in both exhibition and digital work platforms, such as at monumental spaces like the screens at Times Square in New York.

7 Among the best-known representatives of this trend are Mariza Olson, Kari Altmann, Katja Novitskova, Petra Cortright,

Oliver Laric, Jon Rafman, Angelo Plessas, Herman van der Dorpel, Ryan Trecartin and Artie Vierkant.

8 For the work presented in the New York Post Gallery, see: <http://0100101110101101.org/agreement-n-1-exhausted/>. The reference work of Kevin Bewersdorf conducted in 2009 is titled *Google image search result for "exhausted"* and can be consulted at <http://www.postmastersart.com/archive/futurenot/exhausted4.html>

9 Faced with possible ambiguities, I refer to the Mexican publication of the *Urtext*, prefaced by Bolivar Echevarría, which includes notes on the different versions. I annex the full citation and the annotations by the translator of the fragment (Andrew E. Weikert) in which Benjamin refers to the collective dream:

10 (Annotations) In version C, "the rational technique has engendered within capitalist economy that is irrational long ago" (Benjamin, 2003: 87)

11 In version B, the following footnote is found:

Incidentally, an all-embracing analysis of these films should not shut its contradictory sense. It should start from the contradictory sense of those facts that are altogether comedy and horror. Comedy and horror go closely together, as shown by the reactions of children. And, before certain facts, why would I be forbidden to ask which of the reactions, in a given case, it is the most humane? Several of the latest movies with Mickey Mouse represent a fact that seems to justify this question. (His grim "magic fire", for which the color film has created the technical premises, emphasizes a trait that so far only acted covertly and shows the ease with which fascism appropriates the "revolutionary" innovations in this field) what is shown in the light of the latest Disney movies and indeed hinted in earlier: the tendency to accept bestiality and violent act as collateral phenomena of existence. This recovers an old tradition that is anything but trustworthy, which begins with the hooligans dancers found in the medieval representations of pogroms and continue imprecise and pale way in the "ragged mob" Tales Grimm. (Benjamin, 2003: 109)