

## Memory and History and the Act of Remembering

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### Abstract

In this era of global neoliberal necro-capitalism, we are increasingly faced with a political and social amnesia that yields results without the past producing more and more processes of dehistoricization and depoliticization. In these processes is fundamental the logic of repetition (neoliberal), which produces at least two different procedures of (de) historicization. On the one hand, we have the logic of the Western neoliberal world, which functions as a mere transhistorical machine; On the other hand, in the eastern and southern regions of Europe we detect forced techniques to accept historicization as totalization. In both cases, the result is a suspension of the history whose primary intention is to discard any alternative it contains. Gržinić's idea is to offer some examples and, even more, try to define these processes on a much broader scale, in order to see their political, social and cultural consequences.

### Keywords

Archive; memory; amnesia; seizure; necrocapitalism.

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## Memory and History and the Act of Remembering

What is my proposal as an answer to this title Memory and History and the Act of Remembering that is also a rhetorical question? As how to think of the act of remembering when in neoliberal global capitalism we see deep changes in the basic (modernist) concepts that we are still using freely and unchanged these days?

The answer is: Performing the Archives of Amnesia!<sup>1</sup>

I can state that what we see all around us in this time of neoliberal global capitalism is that we are increasingly confronted with a political and social amnesia that profits that we live almost without the past, while producing more and more processes of de-historicisation and depoliticisation. Central to these processes is the logic of (neoliberal) repetition that produces at least two different procedures of (de)historicisation. On one side, we have the logic of the neoliberal Western world that works as a pure trans-historical machine, and on the other, in the regions in the East and in the South of Europe, we detect a forced technique of embracing historicisation

as totalisation. In both cases the result is a suspension of history that works with a primary intention to dispose of any alternative within it! Achille Mbembe suggests that is necessary to demythologise whiteness, as the demythologising of certain versions of history must go hand in hand with the demythologising of whiteness. Mbembe says: "This is not because whiteness is the same as history. Human history, by definition, is history beyond whiteness. Human history is about the future."<sup>2</sup>

Though to talk about amnesia is also paradoxical as we live in a time at least in the Occident of hyper digitalisation, digital archives are more than just prosthesis, thus the capacity to remember seems almost outdated as a human function. Digital archives do the job instead of us. Therefore, we see that amnesia is also part of a vocabulary that belongs to a former modernist time and to the archive as well; instead, we have digitally enhanced repositories. Again I can make a link to Mbembe that is published online for free that is of vital importance, a long text on the South Africa present reality and the archive, that what I am developing has two parallel expansions. The first is the digital technologies of the information age and the financialisation of the economy that work hand in hand. A second set of expansions has to do with the new work of capital as we are no longer fundamentally different from things. The outcome is a not a liberation but a new racism. As he explains the new technologies:

(...) increasingly entail profound questions about the nature of species in general, the need to rethink the politics of racialisation and the terms under which the struggle for racial justice unfolds here and elsewhere in the world today has become ever more urgent.<sup>3</sup>

For that reason, I can ask: is the relation in between memory and history the same as yesterday's, is the archive the same as yesterday, or it is also my proposal that we should think in all three cases about entirely different apparatuses, that require new concepts? Or better to say new reconceptualisation.

To say this is connected with a thesis that all the notions that we use in the time of neoliberal global capitalism, and specifically because of the intervention of digital media and technologies, we have to rethink deeply anew. Hence, I want to explain these changes and situate memory and history, amnesia and archive within them.

The main change is the fundamental one and is historical. It concerns two different ways connected with capitalism of how to govern over life. Basically, the post-Second World War (WWII) in the west brings a new relation between life and politics that we know by heart as biopolitics. It operates through a multiplicity of regulative techniques in the everyday lives of people. As conceptualised by Michel Foucault in the mid-1970s,

biopolitics designates the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of human species into the order of knowledge and power, or simply, into the sphere of political techniques.<sup>4</sup>

And how does it? In the 1970s not yet for Spain yet as it was under Francoism that lasted until 1975, but for the other former colonialist Occidental European states, it works through a formula I devised and use abundantly: biopolitics is simply: make live and let die. Make a welfare state for the "real" citizens, nationals and not the migrants and etc. and let die all the others, including The East at the time of the Cold War.

Though with neoliberal global capitalism this biopolitical managing of life changes radically into a dystopian project of necropolitics, managing of death. NECROPOLITICS: Coined just 15 years ago in 2003 by Achille Mbembe, today it seems already historical, but unfortunately this is not the case, today it works at full power here and now. "Necropolitics"<sup>5</sup> published in 2003 and after 9/11 2001, clearly shows the implementation of a military corpus, that presents itself not as an administration of life but a governing over death (necro means death in Latin). In a similar way as biopolitics, I defined necropolitics as "let live and make die." Obviously, to make live was the 1970s welfare-State slogan for the first capitalist world, and today let live, if you can, can you? They are two radically different modes of life.

What do I want to say? Basically, the last decades have shown that neoliberal global capitalism, historically in order to progress not only did away with the Berlin Wall (1989) but intensified a rupture in the modes of its proper established governmentality. Moreover, it is important to state that this shift from biopolitics to necropolitics and their coexistence here and now, rubbing shoulders so to say, shows that contemporary biopolitics through systematic management of big data, austerity programmes and general immiseration of the biopolitical population produces a violence that was once reserved for those seen as not enough or fully human. And so, if biopolitics is a systematic governing of the life of the population, then necropolitics is much more than this attached to the whole system of life that is now subjugated to death, as capitalisation, austerity, exploitation of the ecosystem, etc.

Biopower that is centered on the body of a single citizen is now shifted to a necropower that is more than just targeting the bodies, it targets the whole space or a scape to the point we see a switch from biopolitical populations to necropolitical deathscapes.



**MACHT ÜBER LEBEN UND TOD (BIOMACHT UND NEKROMACHT)  
 ... SIND IN DEN KÖRPERN VON FLÜCHTLINGEN VEREINT  
 BIOPOWER AND NECROPOWER... CONVERGING IN THE BODY OF  
 THE REFUGEE  
 BIOMOČ IN NEKROMOČ ... KONVERGIRATA V TELESU BEGUNCA**

Gržinić & Šmid, *Dystopic Algorithms - Political Deathscapes* (2017), copyright Grzinić and Smid.

The most important element of this shift is that it is not just a division and differentiation but is established along the colonial/ racial divide. My thesis is that all that we theorise these days regarding the status of refugees and asylum seekers, including citizenship and conditions for a better life, has to be seen through necropolitical lenses. Moreover, it is important that necropolitics functions through measures of an intensified racialisation. This is not just the old racism, but new forms of exploitation, expropriation and dispossession, of people, states, and as well histories, and vocabularies, and last but not least labour, via the constructed category of race that is today a norm.

This fundamental change presents itself in several other passages: from liberalism to neoliberalism, from multiculturalist capitalism to global capitalism, from administration of life toward the administration of death, and from a change in the first capitalist world of imperial nation-States to militarised war-States powers; finally, that historical colonialism changed into a contemporary colonial matrix of power presenting as well a change or a reappearance of two forms of power: governmentality and sovereignty. In all these radical shifts of forms of power, we see as well two different ways of the constitution of the social bond, on one side having post-socialist ex-

second world (former eastern European states) embarking into turbo fascist societies, while the old colonial imperialist Occidental states that were once nation-States changed not only into war-States but as well retained a postmodern fascist social structure (of a pure individualisation, fragmentation and mobilisation of individuals, with persistent rejection of the "other").

Along with this is the change in agency from the modernist notion of a political subject toward a citizen. This is why the emancipatory potential is given to an almost old but re-born politics of managing the city, while the State is corrupted, hegemonic and militarised.

#### WHERE ARE THE NON-CITIZENS? THE MIGRANTS?

In the neoliberal times we have two machines of power working at the same time. The mantra presented by the refugees in the media until recently, that has stopped gradually following the terrorist attacks in Europe, was clear: "are we not humans, like you, EU[ro]-peans"?

In this we see a fundamental reorientation from the figure of agency, from subjects to citizens. Sovereignty decides on the death of these human subjects that knows very well to claim their humanity historically, but they are not citizens. Governmentality is today in direct relation to biopower, and is relegated as an apolitical force to citizens that have now a full right to "govern" the city as in a sort of a travesty of the Greek polis. This is only possible as the state fully exercises its sovereign necropolitical mission that is to get rid of "new subjects" that are pressing as refugees and as non-citizens into the Occidental Europe.

I propose a further thesis and this is a genealogy of governmentality and sovereignty after WWII. It is the following that we can identify. In Foucault governmentality and sovereignty are separated, in Giorgio Agamben they are conflated, the biopolitical and necropolitical. Abandonment was long a status of economic migrants, they were needed for cheap labor but prevented from entering any public discourse in the Occidental public space. When the economic migrants were outside of the labour-capital relation in the welfare capitalist States, they were in reality abandoned in their needs, subjectivities, and desires and therefore the abandonment soon changed into a ban. The forms of abandonment differ historically, today the mandatory integration is also a form of a ban. When they are not dismissed as economic migrants or seen as potential threats, asylum seekers and refugees are frequently positioned as "speechless emissaries" whose wounds speak louder than the words they say.<sup>6</sup>

In Achille Mbembe, they are projected onto each other and simultaneously duplicated.



**AKTUELLE BERICHTE EINER GEWALTSAMEN ENTMENSCHLICHUNG VON LEUTEN ZEIGEN JENES AUSMAß, WIE DAS NACHKRIEGSEUROPA MIT SEINER NAZIVERGANGENHEIT HEUTE DAS LEBEN VON BÜRGERINNEN IN EINEM WESTLICHEN NEOLIBERALISMUS PRÄGT.**

**ACCOUNTS OF THE VIOLENT DEHUMANIZATION OF PEOPLE ARE SIGNALING THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE EUROPEAN POSTWAR IMAGINARY, ASSOCIATED WITH A NAZI PAST, IS TODAY GOVERNING THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE WESTERN NEOLIBERAL CITIZEN.**

**OPISI SEDANJE NASILNE DEHUMANIZACIJE LJUDI NAKAZUJEJO MERO, DO KATERE JE EVROPSKI POVOJNI IMAGINARIJ, POVEZAN Z LASTNO NACISTIČNO ZGODOVINO, PRISOTEN V VSAKDANJEM ŽIVLJENJU ZAHODNEGA NEOLIBERALNEGA DRŽAVLJANA.**

Gržinić & Šmid, *Dystopic Algorithms - Political Deathscapes* (2017), copyright Grzinic and Smid.

Or, to be even more schematic, the genealogy is the following: Michel Foucault (centres on governmentality), Giorgio Agamben (centres on sovereignty) and Achille Mbembe (takes both at once, sovereignty and governmentality) though now governmentality is overdetermined by sovereignty but being simultaneously present. The change from biopolitical governmentality of life into necropolitical sovereignty over death decide, as formulated by Achille Mbembe, who should live and who must die. Furthermore, sovereignty is foundational, vertical, militarised and governmentality is de-foundational, apparently horizontal, dispersed and if necessary, can be confiscated, seized instantaneously by sovereignty. It can be suspended, social transfers blocked, public access to knowledge and space immediately revoked.

Now, we finally open the terrain to talk about amnesia, memory and history.

In the 1970s, we see the imposition of what I can term a biopolitical amnesia that is not seen as a racialising process of forgetting, but it presents itself as a deficit in memory. When we say performing the archives amnesia is to make evident precisely these processes of racialisation not rationalisation, though structural racism is also connected with rationally structured violence.

In the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and coextensive with the Agamben notion of abandonment, the suppression of counter history continues as aphasia. Ann Laura Stoler in her "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France" presents clearly the case of France that cannot connect the French Republic and the Empire. I quote Ann Laura Stoler who states that the term

(...) colonial aphasia is invoked to supplant the notions of 'amnesia' or 'forgetting,' to focus rather on three features: an occlusion of knowledge, a difficulty in generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things, and a difficulty comprehending the enduring relevancy of what has already been spoken.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017, French theoretician Marie-José Mondzain published a book with the title that in English echoes as *Confiscation of Words, Images, and Time*<sup>8</sup>, with the subtitle that can be read as "For Radicality." She shows that the neoliberal anaesthesia of political action works by delegitimising "radicality." Mondzain is clear: economic liberalism has seized our vocabulary. The word radicalism is equated with terrorism and we see calls for deradicalisation. But Mondzain does not capitulate before such demands; she insists: "Deradicalisation is supposed to act like the awakening that leaves the subject of the nightmare and immediately restores it by proposing another dream, that of the return to order and health." Mondzain is not naïve, and clearly distances herself from those who train for terrorism. Nevertheless, she calls for a different perspective: "Not only must we not emerge from the crisis, but rather we must intensify it in its radicality, so as to deploy all creative resources and mobilise all revolts in order to bring forth the figure of another world."

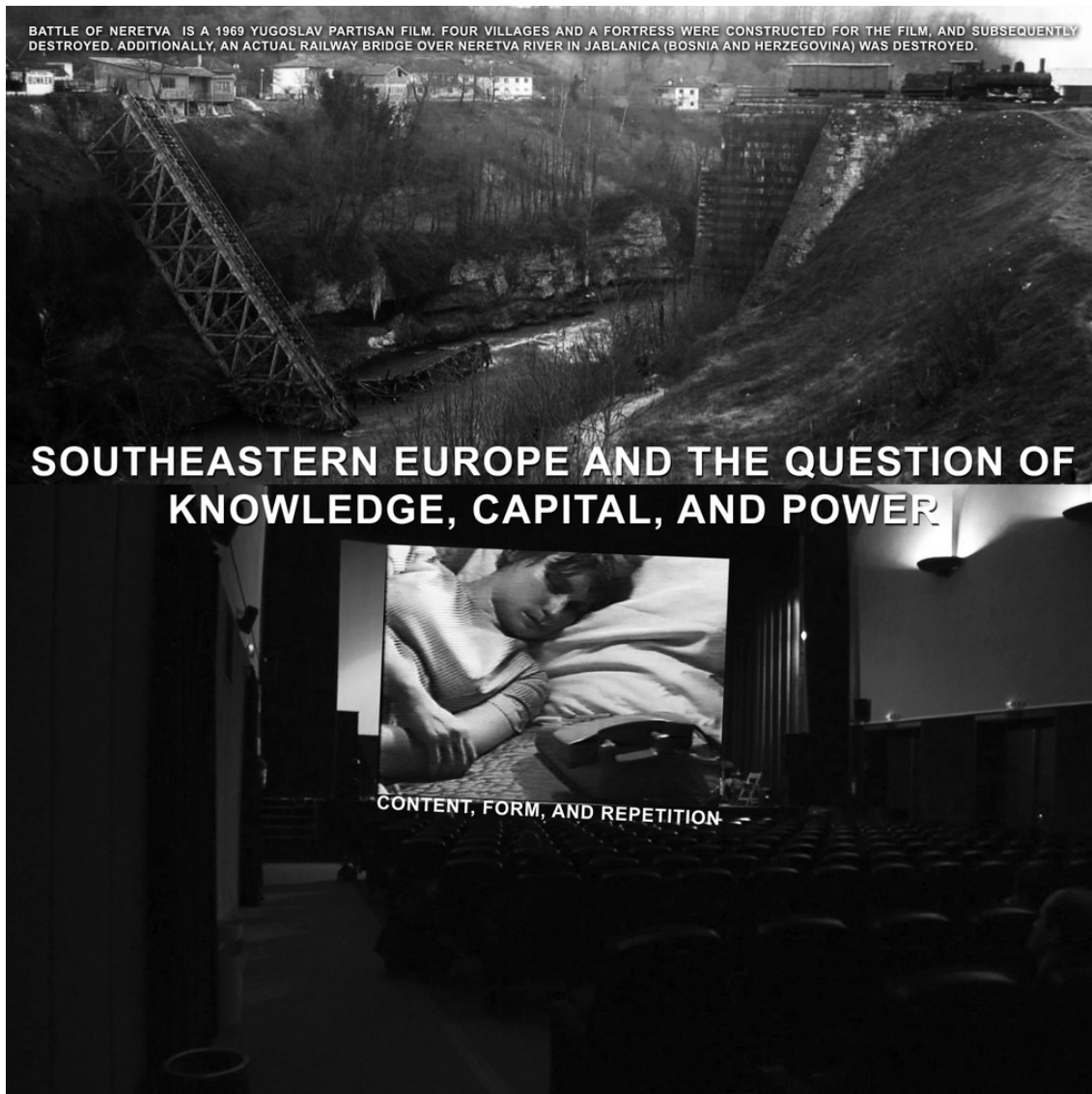
What is that we have today? After amnesia and aphasia? The answer is seizure. Seizure is cosubstantial with necropolitical racialising assemblages; it presents a confiscation and therefore an absolute erasure of counter culture political histories. Schematically, this is the possible trajectory:

1970 BIOPOLITICS /Amnesia

1990 ABANDONMENT / Aphasia

2003-2017and on NECROPOLITICS / Seizure

This is why we have to perform the archives of amnesia in order to counteract the necropolitical seizure of history!



Gržinić & Šmid, *Seizure - Rewriting Counter-Histories*, (2015), copyright Grzinic and Smid.

What all this implies is another shift that Marc James Léger describes as contemporary displacing to a great extent the cultural politics of representation of postmodern cultural studies for (the much needed) radicalised constituent politics. That means it implies collective struggle and oppositionality as the basis of a maybe possible democratization of neoliberal necrocapitalist societies.

Of course, this proposed genealogy in the process of imposed, produced and instituted failed modes of remembering is definitely connected with the perception of time. Necropolitical seizure is the immobilisation and fundamental negation of time. Mbembe argues that negation of time that is a colonial point of view on time means being without history:



Being radically located outside of time, or to connect on the initial logic of repetition —it is repetition without difference. Native time was sheer repetition —not of events as such, but the instantiation of the very law of repetition. Fanon understands decolonisation as precisely a subversion of the law of repetition.<sup>9</sup>

The way that history is foreclosed by processes of racialisation changes in terms of the changes to capitalism after WWII, reproducing the relation between governmentality and sovereignty.

Thus, through procedures of necrocapitalist racialising assemblages imposed onto counter histories we get: –the 1970s biopolitical amnesia, forgetting; –the 1990s imposed abandonment and ban as a form of aphasia, “forgetting” as not being able to find the words, –and presently, we see that we face a necropolitical sovereign seizure or confiscation, a complete privatisation of communal counter histories by those in power, from the state repressive apparatuses to all sorts of cultural, artistic, archival, political, economic institutions.

Therefore, I connect what I call necrocapitalist sovereignty management of the human with seizure, confiscation of counter-cultural, political, social histories. Counter-histories are as the human under harsh processes of racialisation. But why is this so important? Because without counter-histories it is not possible to reclaim the present.

Hence, performing the archive of amnesia means nothing other than to understand that we face a moment in time where the notions of archive and amnesia are altered radically, they are almost too old or too human.

And what is that is going on with the relation between history and memory? The difference is that, in the past, this logic was hidden, but in neoliberalism, these connections are clearly visible. In neoliberal necrocapitalism, the whole of society has been transformed into merely one big investment sector that provides new opportunities for the incessant capitalisation of capital in order to make surplus value. Within this whole process, other maybe less visible procedures are additionally taking place in order that institutions can maintain their power at any cost. Today, we have to speak not only of financialisation of capital, but also of the financialisation of (cultural) institutions as such. What is bought and sold here is information itself, as it were, devoid of any content. Moreover, a process of “a cleansing of the terrain” is to be added, as was learned from the Balkan Wars. Practices and theories that disturb the flow of incessant production of information should be erased, they have to vanish.

Consequently, to summarise, what is taking place is a two-fold process: on the one hand, speculations are the outcome of a hyper-activity, not of

production, but of a hyper-production of information itself; institutions are activated as incubators for the constant production of information —about themselves. The result is, to put it simply, a daily bombardment of an unbelievable quantity of information about projects and activities that nobody can follow anymore. A boom is fabricated in the infinite speculative sending and distributing of whatever. We are witnessing a completely psychotic process of the total evacuation of history, counter knowledges and alternative modes of life. Today in global neoliberal capitalism, biopolitical and necropolitical modes of life reproduce themselves near one another, transforming many of the former biopolitical sovereign States into necropolitical ones.

The outcome is that memory is a question of biopolitics and history is the main terrain of necropolitics: it is constantly under attack, being erased, rewritten, and evacuated.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the insights provided by the research project I am in charge at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna with the title "Genealogy of Amnesia: Rethinking the Past for a New Future of Conviviality," funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), through its Programme for Arts-based Research (PEEK), in the period from 2018 to 2020. Working jointly with researchers an interdisciplinary platform to counter genealogies of amnesia of traumatic past events in Europe and the global world was established. The platform questions politics of silencing of violent genocidal histories: colonialism, anti-Semitism and fascist nationalism. It was presented at Macba Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in the frame of the seminar "La condición del contorno. Sobre el archivo y sus límites" in February 2018. All the lectures in video at [www.macba.cat](http://www.macba.cat)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," paper for Achille Mbembe lecture.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" *Public Culture*, 15 (2003): 11-40.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11.3 (1996): 377-404.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France," *Public Culture*, Volume 23, Number 1, 2011: 121-156. Cf. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/23/1/121/31989/Colonial-Aphasia-Race-and-Disabled-Histories-in?redirectedFrom=PDF>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Marie-José Mondzain, *Confiscation: Des mots, des images et du temps*, Paris: Liens qui libèrent, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," paper for Achille Mbembe lecture.