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Magee - Heidegger, Religion, and the Transience of Digital Memory - JCRT 2.3
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The time of the world's night is the destitute time, because it becomes ever more destitute. It has already grown so destitute, it can no longer discern the default of God as a default.

' Martin Heidegger

We do indeed say something about it, but we certainly do not speak it, and we have neither knowledge or thought of it. But if we do not have it in knowledge, do we not have it at all? But we have it in such a way that we speak about it, but do not speak it. For we say what it is not, but we do not say what it is: so that we speak about it from what comes after it.

' Plotinus, Ennead V

Not just in commerce but in the world of ideas too our age is putting on a veritable clearance sale. Everything can be had so dirt cheap that one begins to wonder whether in the end anyone will want to make a bid.

' Søren Kierkegaard

Theology is not lost, but it does not know where it is.¹ As philosophical theology finds itself searching for legitimation and direction in its continued inquiries ' what Carl A. Raschke has suggested is the move from "theology to theory"² ' it is forced to undertake a course which takes seriously Mark C. Taylor's "deconstructed theology," one that grasps: the death of God; the disappearance of the subject; the end of history; and the closure of the book, four critical deaths.³ It is in this manner that *thinking about religion* both transgresses and restores its demise, its own 'passing on.'⁴ And woven through the epigraphs by Heidegger, Plotinus, and Kierkegaard, a certain attitude toward these deaths and their age is formed, an attitude characterized by a revival of the notion or conception of memory. This memory is what I would like to suggest is pivotal to any re-thinking or re-formulation of thinking (about) religion and, while it perhaps must be undertaken in new ways, it is both a persistent inheritance of theology and an integral aspect of theory.

8. Webbie Tookay and other digital creations present a new class of citizens known as "Super Virtual Models," valued for their effortless figures, minimal diets, and the ability to be in many places at once. Ms. Tookay is even represented by Illusion2k, a modeling agency run by Casablancas for virtual models. Interestingly, she is inspired not by an actual individual, but by the cult heroine Lara Croft, who starred in the *Tomb Raider* video games series and who is currently portrayed by Angelina Jolie in the current film based on the video game.⁵ Adds Mr. Casablancas, "sometimes I wish all models were virtual."⁶

¹Acknowledgments to David Byrne for such a line, modified from "The Lady Don't Mind," by the Talking Heads, *Little Creatures* (Sire/Warner Bros. Records, 1985). Back

²Carl Raschke, "Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium: From the Sacred to the Semiotic," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Issue 1.1 (December 1999). <<https://jcrt.org/archives/01.1/raschke.html>> Back

³Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) Part 1, chs. 1-4. Back

⁴Throughout this paper, I employ the phrases "thinking religion" or "thinking about religion" interchangeably with "theology" and "philosophical theology." The use of the term "pass" or "passing" is interesting in this context, in that its etymology from the L. *passus* (step or pace) reveals its nature as a general movement of sorts – to go by, through, or beyond – as well as an event in time, and in English vernacular it often refers to *thanatos* and the passing-on of a beloved. Back

⁵The cult status of Lara Croft is also treated by the venerable Douglas Coupland, in his *Lara's Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000). Back

⁶La Ferla, 1. Back

3. Heidegger is speaking of a concern for the world's destitution, that which is marked by an absence of the gods and the need for remembrance of all that has transacted to this point in order to regain an ability to discern. Destitution or loss thus folds upon itself many times over, increasing the distance between the world and its own discernment, a sort of self-distancing or distraction. Plotinus writes of the necessity to recall that having and knowing do not necessarily connote speaking in a direct manner, that speaking after or about is the only choice for religious speech. And lastly, Kierkegaard reminds, in this familiar introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, how certain ideas can be made pedestrian and therefore cheapened, devoid of an attached or earned sense of value, and therefore calls for a memory of the labor with which thought comes. The challenge, therefore, in walking through and between these thoughts, is not only how to avoid not speaking but also how to root thinking in the memory of its own becoming. Memory then, and its corollary, forgetfulness, is the focus of this paper. To further explain this sort of perceiving, thinking, and remembering, the vital role of memory in thinking religion today must be located and described.
4. The *New York Times* recently featured an article entitled "Perfect Model: Gorgeous, No Complaints, Made of Pixels," in which Ruth La Ferla details the recent forays by Western media in bypassing altogether the imperfections and frailties of human subjects as actors, models, and musicians. The full story, almost two years old now, reports how computer animations can now serve as the preeminent subjects "doing for humans what Pixar did for toys and Steven Spielberg did for dinosaurs."⁷ While technically not entirely more complicated than the extensive photographic retouching already employed in print media for decades, these (generally female) subjects are fundamentally different in that they originate from the minds of computer graphics programmers and not from actual photo shoots. The most famous of these creations is Webbie Tookay, who La Ferla describes as:

... the latest lithesome discovery of John Casablancas, the founder of Elite Model Management, which shaped the careers of Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell. Webbie exists only in cyberspace, the creation of a Swedish animator named Steven St'hlberg, but that didn't hinder her from posing for a feature in *Details* in October, 1999, and a new Nokia phone advertising campaign in Latin America. Most recently, Webbie was signed by Sony Music Latin America to join a Spice Girls-style virtual band.⁸

5. Webbie Tookay and other digital creations present a new class of citizens known as "Super Virtual Models," valued for their effortless figures, minimal diets, and the ability to be in many places at once. Ms. Tookay is even represented by Illusion2k, a modeling agency run by Casablancas for virtual models. Interestingly, she is inspired not by an actual individual, but by the cult heroine Lara Croft, who starred in the *Tomb Raider* video games series and who is currently portrayed by Angelina Jolie in the current film based on the video game.[7] Adds Mr. Casablancas, "sometimes I wish all models were virtual." [8]
6. For those interested in the study of religion, culture or theory, this occurrence might suggest several avenues of thought: certainly those who take up matters of gender might want to

⁷Ruth La Ferla, "Perfect Model: Gorgeous, No Complaints, Made of Pixels" *The New York Times*, May 6, 2001, § 9, page 1. La Ferla notes that "the rise of the synthespian was anticipated ... by William Gibson, whose novel *Idoru* (Berkley Books, 1997) features a computer-animated hologram who becomes a Japanese pop idol.", 8. Back

⁸Ibid. Back

explore and critique the cultural desire to perfect (while subsequently canceling) the females on the planet; others might want to trace the propensity of technological culture to substitute the virtual for the real; still others might inspect the effects of idealization and Utopianism on culture. However, the trajectory I wish to take here is the observation, with Heidegger, Kierkegaard and others, that a pervasive but overlooked condition of Western culture is forgetfulness; or, to put it negatively, that our society demands 'even thrives upon' the eradication of its own memory.

7. This interesting example marks a simple passing, the passing of one way of doing things to another, and so in a way is quite unspectacular. It highlights a sort of technological conversion 'in this case the shift of the origination of the image' which abounds in the present digital culture, and which could as easily be found in the realms of medicine, education, art or law.⁹ And yet to mark a conversion of this sort, whether technological, ideological, social or theological, is always to mark an historical transformation and therefore hopes to suggest or unveil a change in the thinking behind such a shift, the theory lurking beneath the change, a point made by Kuhn nearly forty years ago.¹⁰ This second-order step is the attempt to discern the change of the changes, and therefore is to theorize.
8. The creation of Webbie Tookay signifies a passage, but more importantly it highlights the desire of the *new* to convince us of its own originality, its freedom from the *old* and therefore its radical innovation. Put another way, there is a tendency in present thinking to disconnect former modes of thought from current. Intellectual history is thus largely and intentionally forgotten. In the case of Ms. Tookay, the recognition of this passage or transformation suggests that while it is easy to think that Mr. St'hlberg created her *ex nihilo*, he in fact did not form her in a void, detached from the history of image-creation and manipulation. And yet even *this* recognition will be quickly forgotten (a quality of newspaper articles is that they are easily forgotten). The *technique* left behind by his innovation is that of traditional photography of "real-world" materiality (in that the digital imagery aims at being indistinguishable from photography); but the *idea* forgotten, cancelled, or muted with the advent of Ms. Tookay is that images are formed and re-formed by choice and for reasons specific to and rooted in the history of the image. The visual arts have already been quite successful in convincing their audience to forget that in fact the photograph is never really real 'that its contrivance and re-production are its essential characteristics' and so it is consumed in an absent-minded or uncritical manner. Photography wishes it to be forgotten that photos are in fact *made*. In the age of the digital reproduction of the work of art, the emphasis is always away from notions of source or *episteme* and towards the wonder of and functionality of a work itself, away from the past and toward the very present. This age does not ask how the image came to be or what stratagems it has undergone in its arrival, but rather valorizes the "truer" content of the image as consumed.
9. This example illustrates and recalls that things, people, and ideas come to presence and appear to the senses and mind through a number of processes often deliberately intended to hide themselves from thought: the position of the camera while filming; the *ex nihilo* formation of

⁹Examples of cultural change vary from the mundane to the fascinating: in medicine the shift towards genetically-specific treatments and diagnoses, in education the increasing use and dependence upon electronic sources and communication to replace the classroom or textbook, in art the notion of sampled or source audio/video configured into new work, and in law the tendency away from reform and rehabilitation and towards secure isolation. Back

¹⁰Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). However, for various reasons I do not wish to frame this discussion in Kuhnian terms of "paradigm". Back

digital sex-symbols via elaborate machinations; the hundred crumpled drafts in the trash can; the experiences, people and texts which weave their way into seemingly-unrelated aspects of one's thinking. The intention is that we lose ourselves in the _fin-_ality (to borrow from Simon Critchley), untangled from the course of becoming, thinking, and production. To put it another way, the seamless sea of signification hides itself from view, and artificial notions of seams are projected, suggested, even expected. Thus, there are intentional moments where the idea cancels any knowledge of the roots of its own development, where it quite proudly stands, with blinders on, only sure of its success in being simply as it is. Digital culture catapults us towards forgetfulness.

10. The forgetfulness of modern Western culture is a negation, but more precisely an absent-minded or forgetful negation, wherein the loss of the former is masked by the latter. This sort of forgetfulness is one that inhibits us from remembering that things were not always this way; instead, it pushes away from asking authentic questions of source, history, or connectedness. There will perhaps be a day in the not-so-distant future when the use of virtual models for film and media will be both technically marvelous and commonplace, to the point that it will be trivial to consider. That time will be marked by an attitude dismissive of any remembrance of the transformation now taking place: of asking the question "when (and how) did this change come about?"
11. Forgetfulness marks Heidegger's essay "What Are Poets For?", when he writes "the time of the world's night is the destitute time, because it becomes ever more destitute." He continues:

The world's night is spreading its darkness. The era is defined by the god's failure to arrive, by the 'default of God,' ... [which means that] no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes the world's history and man's sojourn in it. ...¹¹

12. The transience of digital memory releases knowing from remembering, and thinking from recalling. It is indicative of a sort of thinking that proclaims itself *free to think* in its movement, but simply in a na'Ve conception of freedom. Theologically speaking, this is to suggest that *thinking religion* cannot merely think itself past theology and into theory without an estimation of the trace, of the occurrence of thinking the death of god, the close of history and the book, and the vanishing of the subject. Religious theory must always re-think and re-articulate these closures, not as if they are up for grabs once again, but because theory must continually root itself in the memory of its own becoming.
13. Heidegger's essay comes around to suggest the role for poets ' for those whose words touch off discernment of the default *as* a default and of thinking as that which grounds our ability to ground ourselves: "' To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods."¹² The poet acknowledges the trace of what is passed/past, and reclaims the primacy of pointing toward that which has left a trace:

Poets are the mortals who, singing earnestly of the wine-god, sense the trace of the fugitive gods, stay on the gods' tracks, and so trace for their kindred mortals the way toward the turning. ' This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy.¹³

¹¹Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?", *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 91. Back

¹²Ibid., 94. Back

¹³Ibid., 94-5. Back

14. To speak of remembrance is also to speak of a history of philosophical thought: of Derrida's *cl'ture* (closure), of Heidegger's *Vollendung* (completion), and of Hegel's *Aufhebung* (sublation), the double-cancellation that always leaves a gift or trace behind. Crucial to articulating any remembrance of the trace is Heidegger's notion (subsequently reiterated by Derrida¹⁴) of *'berwindung der Metaphysik*, the "overcoming of metaphysics," presented in "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking":

What is meant by the talk about the end of philosophy (*Ende der Philosophie*)? We understand the end of something all too easily in the negative sense as a mere stopping, as the lack of continuation, perhaps even as decline and impotence. In contrast, what we say about the end of philosophy means the completion of metaphysics (*die Vollendung der Metaphysik*).¹⁵

15. To understand this overcoming is not simply to think it done away with, as many today flatten Postmodernity into the idea that metaphysics, Platonism, theology, or meta-narratives have simply been done away with: that their efficacy as models for thought is passed/past. Rather, overcoming is never a cessation, but always a closure. Simon Critchley, in a section of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* entitled "The Problem of Closure in Derrida," describes this distinction well, noting that Heidegger (and Derrida) "does not understand the end of philosophy as a full stop, or conclusion, to the metaphysical tradition; instead, it is necessary to think *das Ende* in terms of *die Vollendung*, as a completion, or fulfillment, of metaphysics."¹⁶ It is not a perfection or finality, but a completion or closure (*cl'ture*) that has left a taste in the mouth of thought.¹⁷ This brings to mind the cancellation or conversion to which Rilke refers in his ninth elegy:

*For the wanderer doesn't bring a handful of that
unutterable earth from the mountainside down to the valley,
but only some word he's earned, a pure word, the yellow
and blue gentian. Maybe we're here only to say: house,
bridge, well, gate, jug, olive tree, window '
at most, pillar, tower . . . but to say them, remember,
oh, to say them in a way that the things themselves
never dreamed of existing so intensely.* ¹⁸

16. That which is seen, thought, held, tasted, is converted into thought, language, memory. In 1925 Rilke added this commentary:

To our grandparents, a "house," a "well," a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their cloak *still* meant infinitely more, were infinitely more intimate'almost everything a vessel in which they found something human already there, and added to

¹⁴See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 4 and Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1999), 76. Back

¹⁵Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 374. Back

¹⁶Critchley, 77. Back

¹⁷Ibid. Critchley picks up – quite forcefully – Robert Bernasconi's thesis that Derrida's *clôture* might correspond to Heidegger's *Verendung*, and goes on to argue that rather than countering Heidegger's notion of *end*, Derrida is drawing out the vast implications of and Derrida's agreement with Heidegger's study of the history of metaphysics. (79, 81) He also contrasts this with what he understands as a wrong interpretation of Heidegger by Deleuze when he (Deleuze) states the place of thinking is "beyond metaphysics." (79) See Critchley §2.5, 76-88. Back

¹⁸R. M. Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, from the "Ninth Elegy." Trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975) 62-63, ll. 29-36. Back

its human store. Now there are intruding, from America, empty indifferent things, sham things, *dummies of life* A house, as the Americans understand it, an American apple or a winestock from over there, have *nothing* in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and thoughtfulness of our forefathers had entered¹⁹

17. Forgetfulness ' whether purely American now or not ' is yet another qualifier for the present moment, yet another term for the postmodern condition, but one which carries the same *ennui* Baudelaire described long ago.²⁰ Forgetfulness is not simply a lack ' a passive state of coming to the world ' but an active uncoupling of event and thought, of theory and action as the world comes to us. Forgetfulness disorients. Forgetfulness uproots. Forgetfulness convinces us (falsely) that the difference between real or digital models is not only an unimportant distinction, but furthermore, that remembering to make such a distinction is also unimportant. Forgetfulness convinces us (falsely) that the difference between a thinking rooted in metaphysics and theorizing founded on sign-networks is not only an unimportant distinction, but that remembering this distinction is petty.
18. The opposite of transient memory is a persistent memory, of the sort that plagues with remembrance, a point Bob Dylan's poetry comments upon:

*I'll go along with the charade
Until I can think my way out.
I know it was all a big joke
Whatever it was about.
Someday maybe
I'll remember to forget.*²¹

19. One strategy might be to suggest that the study of religion, philosophy, or the greater enterprise of the humanities, would be better served to push *through* the current moment, to "remember to forget," and invest wholeheartedly in the economies of surface and signification, to gain a new vocabulary for thinking. Such a course proposes a transcendence by immersion in the immanent. And, as discussed in academic journals, to think of religious theory as the study of religious signs and signifiers would be such an immersion. It would, however, be mistaken if it conceived of this study as detached from the past and a movement on to wholly new lines of inquiry: if it thought of theory as ultimately off the theological map.
20. This would be to again perpetuate the mistaken notion that such a transcendence or perfection is possible, that a memory of the trace is not vital. Even the strident Richard Rorty, in his recent *Philosophy and Social Hope*, acknowledges ' whether by choice or by necessity ' the need for grounding the movement, or the passage of thinking from yesterday to today:

We [pragmatists] simply refuse to talk in a certain way, the Platonic way. The views we hope to persuade people to accept cannot be stated in Platonic terminology. So

¹⁹R. M. Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot*, as quoted in Heidegger (1971), 113. Heidegger adds, "The formless formations of technological production interpose themselves before the Open of the pure draft. Things that once grew now wither quickly away. They can no longer pierce through the objectification to show their own." Back

²⁰Brought to surface through the layers of Lyotard and Habermas, see J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984/1979), 72. Back

²¹Bob Dylan, "Tight Connection to My Heart (Has Anybody Seen My Love)," *Empire Burlesque* (Columbia Records, 1985). Back

our efforts at persuasion must take the form of gradual inculcation of new ways of speaking, rather than of straightforward argument within old ways of speaking.²²

21. To speak *after* (or to close) Plato, metaphysics, or onto-theology is ironically to always speak with one foot in that tradition. To suggest that the history of philosophy has been “a series of footnotes to Plato” is therefore to acknowledge this grounding, despite the effort to overcome or transcend it. The trace which remains in the “everywhere cracked and fissured” state of being always grounds that which is thought, that which is.²³
22. In the case of digital models, memory insists that one recall that these fabrications do not mark the closure of the traditional image as if it were done away with or superseded. Rather, it is to recall that their formation and function stand in the same history, that they are brought forth in the familiar image-vocabularies of contrivance and transfiguration. To properly speak of the shift in image-creation and image-manipulation along these lines is to invoke the very history within and behind this vocabulary, not necessarily favoring one or the other but pointing out the fact of the change, the fact of the transformation, and both the reasons and the ways in which it came about. What is truly interesting about Webbie Tookay is not the divergence from a particular way of doing things, but rather the intensified continuation of the image-manufacturing process in her formation. Yet this idea, no matter how interesting, is continually lost by the forgetfulness of consumptive digital culture. In this sense, the role of the artist, image-theorist or critic is to remind the audience of this history, of this series of transformations, by unveiling the very roots that made its growth possible. As an informing voice in the process of image-reception, it culls hazy and subjective memories and reminds us that no matter what is passed/past, there is a larger frame in which to place any image.²⁴
23. Perhaps then, a wider task for theologians *as* theorists is to remind. They are to remind thinking that it came from some place, it grew from soil both rich and turbid, that it often takes many (or most) things for granted in its origination and that it will never be the last word. It can and should remind that as things, people, and ideas come to us in manifold sublation ‘via the “swarm(s) of signification,” the hidden histories of development ‘and that the task of religious thought is to recall and then remind us that thinking is in fact never free, never groundless, never in truly uncharted waters, no matter what it closes off or destroys.²⁵ Memory does not whisper in our ears that one thing is perchance better than the other; instead, it merely reminds us that ‘this is not how things have always been.’
24. To remember is not to reinvest in tradition or old economies of thinking (about) religion. It hopefully is not to romanticize or close off knowledge to new or unfamiliar ways of thinking. In a way it is to attend to the Rortian notion that the world comes to each of us and we make truth out of what is given, and yet that can never mean forging an entirely new set of descriptions, creating sequestered, isomorphic vocabularies. We work not only with what is given, but with whatever has been given before. To remember is to attend to the laborious work of history,

²²Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xix. Back

²³Carl Raschke, “Para/theology: The Study of Religion and the Science of the Negative,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Issue 2.1 (December 2000), ¶14. <<https://jcrt.org/archives/02.1/raschke.html>> Back

²⁴Two obvious examples of such artists are Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, exemplars of the Pop-art movement who, in works like Johns’ “Flag” (1954) and Warhol’s “Campbell’s Soup Can (Onion)” (1967), self-consciously nod to both the subject as common and the idea of the artwork as contrived and that, while portraying ordinary, everyday objects, the work remains forever un-real. In this way these artists are pushing against the tendency to negate the history and uncritical thinking of the work of art by in fact drawing up the memory and critical self-reflectivity possible in art. Back

²⁵See Raschke (1999), ¶16. Back

of investigation, of understanding difference and change as they have occurred. It is not to repeat the quest for a pure, god's-eye view, but to begin to re-conceptualize with an eye toward history and the acknowledgment of change. Thus the move from theology to theory is always already to point out the necessity and choreography of that move, to underscore Taylor's four deaths (god / subject / history / book) and how those deaths came to be. To re-think how to think about religion, the occurrence of these deaths and closures must be articulated and rearticulated; their stories must never be forgotten but told in order to make sense of any new story. And so, as *thinking religion* continues in the throes of its transformation and search for legitimization ' alongside those other disciplines that concern themselves with what un-grounded and "desublimated" meaning, as individuals and as a discipline, might in fact mean ' it is both challenged and fed, transgressed and restored by memory.²⁶

Notes

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²⁶Again, from Lyotard, 72: "... if modernity has failed, it is in allowing the totality of life to be splintered into independent specialties which are left to the narrow competence of experts, while the concrete individual experiences 'desublimated meaning' and 'destructured form'..." Back