

The Man Without Memory in the Hyperfast Society: Time, Trauma, and Digitalization through Critical Theory

Angelo Falzarano*

Abstract. The essay explores the contemporary crisis of memory in the age of hypervelocity and digitalisation, questioning the fate of historical consciousness confronted with algorithmic temporality and the automation of remembrance. Drawing on the paradigms of Critical Theory from Adorno and Benjamin to Freud and Habermas, memory is conceived as an act of resistance and as the place where wounded time becomes a possibility for thought. The analysis extends to the mnemonic forms of digital society, from social acceleration (Rosa) and algorithmic memory (Esposito) to the connective transformations of memory described by Hoskins. The rise of generative artificial intelligence introduces a new threshold, that of “synthetic memories” which produce the past instead of preserving it. In this scenario, memory loses its ethical value and is reduced to a technical function. Yet, following the utopian legacy of Bloch and Freud’s critique of repetition, the essay identifies a potential reactivation: a memory that, even when immersed in simulation, can still safeguard the promise of time and oppose the dominance of simultaneity with a politics of remembering.

Keywords: critical memory; trauma; Critical Theory; artificial intelligence; algorithmic temporality.

1. Introduction – Memory and Forgetfulness in the Age of Hypervelocity

Contemporary reflection on memory lives within an unavoidable tension: the more society multiplies traces of the past, the less it seems capable of transforming them into experience. The expansion of archival devices, the algorithmic automation of remembrance and the digital persistence of data generate an apparent excess of memory that coincides with a new form of amnesia, a saturation without sedimentation. Under these conditions, memory no longer ceases to accumulate but stops working; it remains suspended in a present that regenerates itself continuously, devoid of historical depth.

One may therefore ask whether the hypermediated subject, constantly exposed to flows of information and automated recollections, still possesses the means to elaborate critically what is received. Memory, which in other historical moments represented a force of resistance to trauma and oblivion, today risks being reduced to a mere function of the technical system. The question, far from rhetorical, is whether a critical form of memory is still possible: not mere conservation but a gesture capable of questioning, interrupting and transforming.

In this context, Critical Theory offers a conceptual laboratory of remarkable relevance. In Adorno, Benjamin, Freud and Habermas, memory is never a simple registration of the past but an act of opposition, a site where wounded time opens to the possibility of the new. For Adorno, it represents the only defence against the repetition of barbarism: to remember means not to allow the wound of Auschwitz to close, keeping alive what resists total integration. In Benjamin, memory becomes interruption, a gesture that breaks the linearity of history and reactivates in the present the unrealised potentialities of the past. Freud, with the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, had already shown that trauma

* School Principal, Italian Ministry of Education and Merit, ORCID: 0000-0002-4766-7481. Address: Via Cappella, 82011 Airola (Benevento), Italy, e-mail <falzarano.angelo@virgilio.it>.

is never definitively archived; it returns, demands elaboration, obliges thought to conceive temporality as deferment rather than as succession. Habermas, finally, reinterprets collective memory as a normative reservoir, a space where historical consciousness can counter the functional drift of late modern societies.

To test these paradigms within the digital age means to question their endurance in the face of an unprecedented transformation: the digitalisation of social time and the emergence of generative artificial intelligence as a new actor of collective memory. When algorithms not only archive but also produce memories, the boundary between remembrance and simulation becomes uncertain. What, then, remains of memory as a work of the negative, as an act of consciousness and resistance? Is an experience of time still possible that is not pure computational simultaneity but retains the slowness necessary for the elaboration of trauma and the construction of meaning?

This essay situates itself within a theoretical-critical horizon of genealogical inspiration, intertwining philosophy, sociology and media studies in order to investigate the transformations of memory in the digital age. The adopted approach is genealogical-critical and theoretical-sociological in orientation: it does not aim to reconstruct a history of memory but to analyse the ways in which it takes shape as a practice of resistance across different phases of modernity. The method consists in bringing into dialogue four constellations of Critical Theory (Adorno, Benjamin, Freud and Habermas) with more recent analyses from memory and media studies (Assmann, Rosa, Hoskins and Floridi). Although the argument draws on psychoanalytic accounts of individual memory, its principal object is social and cultural remembrance: the practices, representations and mediations through which the past acquires meaning within collective life. Accordingly, memory is not attributed here to computational systems as a cognitive faculty, nor does the concept of synthetic memory imply that artificial intelligence itself remembers. Rather, synthetic memory designates a sociotechnical regime in which computationally generated representations can enter, circulate within and reshape human practices of remembrance. The specific contribution of the essay lies in distinguishing this regime from established categories of digital and algorithmic memory: not as another form of technological mediation, but as a condition in which computational systems can produce new mnemonic representations rather than merely preserve, organise or resurface existing traces. The category is therefore intended to identify a shift in the relation between memory, experience and historical referentiality introduced by generative AI.

The purpose is not to provide a normative model of “authentic” memory but to understand the conditions under which memory can still operate as a critical force capable of interrupting the automatism of oblivion. Building on the legacy of Critical Theory, the essay examines the impact of algorithmic temporality and artificial intelligence on historical consciousness and the possible utopian reactivations emerging within contemporary social practices. In this sense, memory is not considered a heritage to be preserved but a field of tension between trauma and promise, loss and possibility. To comprehend this tension means to restore to critical thought its highest function: keeping open the space where the past, instead of dissolving into the present, can still become a principle of the future.

2. Memory, Time and Historical Consciousness in the Classics of Critical Theory

In the tradition of Critical Theory, reflection on memory has never been a secondary theme but rather the very condition of thought. To criticise is to remember: to bring back into consciousness what the present tends to suppress. The act of remembrance, far from being contemplative, becomes a gesture of resistance against the neutralisation of meaning. It is from this perspective that Adorno, Benjamin, Freud and Habermas elaborated four distinct yet converging theoretical constellations in

which memory takes shape as the dialectical form of time: not as a linear flow but as the space where the present is transformed by the past.

For Adorno (1966), memory is an ethical act before it is a cognitive one. After Auschwitz, thought itself is called upon to become memory in order not to betray the experience of barbarism. To remember means to refuse any reconciliation that would pacify what cannot be repaired and to preserve the wound as a trace of what resists total integration. *Negative Dialectics* is grounded in this gesture: keeping the negative open against every conciliatory synthesis. Memory in this sense does not soothe but unsettles; it is the subjective counterpart of a truth that cannot be reduced to identity.

Benjamin (1940 [2003]) radicalises this intuition by transforming memory into an act of interruption. In the *Theses on the Concept of History*, time ceases to be a straight line and becomes a constellation: the past flashes up within the present as a possibility of redemption. To remember is not to accumulate but to arrest the continuity of history and to release what has been imprisoned within it. Every act of memory is, for Benjamin, a redemption of the unrealised, an attempt to rescue the past from the oblivion of the victors and return it to the promise of the future. Memory thus becomes a revolutionary force, a political practice of time.

Freud (1920 [1955]), though working in a different field, had already introduced a conception of time that anticipates the critical dimension of memory. Trauma, he writes, is never inscribed once and for all; it returns, demands elaboration and is transformed in the very act of being recalled. *Nachträglichkeit* – the retroactive production of meaning – reverses chronological linearity and shows that every recollection is a rewriting. Memory does not preserve; it produces. It does not fix but transforms. This paradigm of deferred temporality became fundamental for Critical Theory, which recognised in collective history the same movement of traumatic return: only through distance can what has happened be understood.

Habermas (2019) develops this intuition on a properly social level, assigning to collective memory a normative function. In *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, memory is not simple tradition but a reservoir of moral and symbolic intuitions that survive the instrumental rationality of modernity. It preserves the resources of meaning needed to counter the colonisation of the lifeworld by technical systems. To remember becomes, for Habermas, a communicative act, a way of maintaining the dialogue between past and present, between religion, philosophy and society. Memory is not nostalgia but the condition of public discourse and of the very possibility of orientation.

These perspectives converge in rejecting memory as a neutral repository of the past, but they do so from different theoretical positions. In Adorno, remembrance is bound to non-reconciliation and to the ethical persistence of suffering; in Benjamin, it interrupts historical continuity by recovering unrealised possibilities; in Freud, it belongs to the deferred temporality through which trauma is retrospectively elaborated; in Habermas, it functions as a normative and communicative resource within historical consciousness. Their convergence therefore does not erase their differences: what they share is the refusal to reduce memory to passive conservation. It is from this differentiated framework that the digital transformation of memory can be examined.

This framework also enters into dialogue with contemporary memory studies. Erll (2011) conceptualises cultural memory as a dynamic process shaped across media and practices of representation, while Olick (2016) emphasises the social and political organisation of collective memory and the role of historical narratives in the construction of collective identities. The memory of trauma is not a simple conservation of the past but a word that attempts to express the unspeakable, an act of translation that transforms pain into shareable thought. In this view, memory becomes an ethical gesture, capable of keeping open the wound of time and resisting its technical erasure (Meghnagi, 2014).

3. The Hyperfast Society and the Crisis of the Sedimentation of Memory

The very idea of memory as sedimentation is today challenged by a radical transformation of social temporality. Rosa (2013) has described this condition as social acceleration: a continuous increase in the speed with which technical, economic and communicative processes unfold, without this necessarily implying progress in the experience of time. The result is not so much a more efficient world as a chronic perception of instability. Life flows faster than consciousness can process, and the biographical horizon fragments into a series of successive presents. Memory, which requires slowness, deferment and elaborative repetition, becomes the first victim of this logic of urgency.

Acceleration does not simply produce an overload of information; it alters its very quality. Rosa (2013) links social acceleration to forms of temporal alienation that weaken the relation between experience and meaning. Each event is immediately replaced by another, leaving no time for reflection. The consequence is a form of dynamic amnesia: we do not forget because of a lack of data but because of an excess of stimuli. This amnesia of abundance fits perfectly within the logic of digital media, where memory is no longer a process of interiorisation but an external, incessant and reversible flow.

In Assmann's perspective (2011), collective memory requires institutions and rituals to endure over time. Every society establishes forms of transmission that transform the past into a shared heritage: archives, schools, ceremonies and narratives. Collective memory is always an interweaving of experience and narration, the space where individual life stories find symbolic recognition within the social fabric (Jedlowski, 2002). In the digital era, however, these structures are progressively replaced by platforms operating according to economic and algorithmic criteria. Memory is no longer entrusted to care but to function. Everything is preserved, yet nothing settles. The universal archive of the web produces a paradox: the more accessible memory becomes, the less it is meaningful. The loss does not concern content but the capacity to confer significance. Contemporary society oscillates between collective amnesia and memorial saturation: an excess of traces that no longer produces sedimentation but overload and paralysis of meaning (Hassan, 2018). In this sense, digital memory appears as a form of accumulation without experience, where the past becomes available but remains unprocessed.

Hoskins (2018a) describes digital memory as a field in which remembering and forgetting are increasingly shaped by digital media, networks and archives, transforming the ways in which the past is accessed, circulated and controlled. At this point, algorithmic mediation adds a further layer: as Esposito (2017) argues, the accessibility of stored pasts increasingly depends on computational procedures that select and organise information beyond the operations of human recollection. Memory is thus shaped not only by what is preserved, but by the conditions under which traces become retrievable and visible.

Van Dijck (2007) had already noted how digitalisation tends to transform personal memory into an automatic system of archiving. Photographs, messages and posts no longer require an intentional act of preservation: they save themselves, often without the subject being aware of it. Within this passivity lies a new form of alienation. The individual does not forget by choice but because choice itself has been suspended. The algorithm assumes the role of mnemonic filter, determining what remains visible and what disappears.

The overall outcome is an anthropological transformation: memory loses its reflective dimension and becomes instantaneous, performative and circular. Commemorative hashtags, viral campaigns and digital flash mobs create ephemeral mnemonic communities that arise and dissolve within a few days. These devices generate an illusion of participation but rarely produce elaboration. As Assmann (2020) observes, shared memory requires long time, repetition and interpretive practices; otherwise,

it remains emotion without duration. Hyperconnectivity does not therefore lead to a broader memory but to a multiplication of fragmented memories incapable of merging into historical consciousness.

If traditional memory was bound to forgetting as its necessary counterpart, which made it possible to select and order the past, digital memory tends to eliminate oblivion altogether. Everything remains, yet without hierarchy or context. Time becomes a flat archive governed by the logic of continuous updating. Hoskins (2011) describes this condition as the connective turn: the shift from a regime of collective memory to one of connective memory, in which every user is potentially an archivist but no one remains a custodian. This transformation is developed further in Hoskins's notion of a "memory of the multitude" (2018b), which questions the adequacy of collective memory as a model for mnemonic practices increasingly distributed across digital networks. The effect is an extended present that absorbs the past without truly remembering it.

In this scenario, the figure of the "man without memory" does not denote a lack of data but the inability to transform data into experience. The hyperfast society produces subjects saturated with external memories yet deprived of inner temporality. Time no longer settles; it folds in on itself within a circuit of notifications, automatic anniversaries and personalised feeds. Memory becomes event rather than process, constant presence rather than elaboration. In such a condition, the question that traverses Critical Theory acquires renewed urgency: how can memory regain its transformative power when time itself has been colonised by speed?

4. The Man Without Memory: Between Hypermnesia and Critical Amnesia

At the level of subjectivity, this condition takes the form of a paradox: mnemonic abundance coexists with a diminished capacity to turn accumulated traces into lived continuity. In a society that feverishly accumulates traces, data and images, oblivion no longer arises from scarcity but from excess. Technological hypermnemonia, as Stiegler (2010) observes, generates a form of systemic amnesia: everything is recorded but nothing is internalised. Memory, externalised in digital devices, no longer sustains the continuity of the self but disperses it into a series of disconnected moments.

The hypermediated subject lives within a constant flow of automatic mnemonic cues: notifications, social "memories", algorithmic anniversaries. Designed to maintain attention, these stimuli end up replacing memory with its simulation. What was once an act of recollection becomes an automatised display. As van Dijck (2007) notes, digital memory no longer requires intentionality: one does not decide to remember; one is remembered by the system. In this shift, the experience of time undergoes a radical mutation. The past no longer presents itself as distance but as repetition, returning without elaboration, as an echo deprived of meaning.

Freud (1920 [1955]) had already understood that repetition is never neutral. Trauma, unable to be symbolised, tends to reproduce itself compulsively: what has not been thought is repeated. The man without memory is, in this sense, a traumatised subject, though of a collective and diffused trauma, that of living in a present without deferment. Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, that temporal spacing which makes consciousness possible, seems to have been erased by a regime of simultaneity that prevents any elaboration. Algorithmic temporality knows no delay: the past resurfaces immediately as image or notification, stripped of the slowness necessary for thought.

Rosa (2019) has shown how social acceleration can culminate in a loss of resonance, weakening the individual's capacity to establish a meaningful relation with the world. The loss of resonance is, ultimately, a loss of memory: what cannot find time to be experienced cannot be remembered. Experience collapses into stimulus, and the stimulus cannot settle. The hyperfast individual is condemned to a compulsion to the present, an eternal return of the identical that renders history impossible.

The outcome is a paradoxical coexistence of hypermemory and critical amnesia. On one hand, digital society produces an almost infinite archive of data, images and testimonies; on the other, it dissolves the ability to attribute them value and continuity. Memory loses its interpretive function and becomes a technical performance. Esposito (2017) locates this transformation in the specifically algorithmic processing of social memory, where the accessibility and organisation of past information increasingly depend on computational procedures rather than on acts of human recollection. The past becomes a feed rather than a narrative.

In this context, historical consciousness, the capacity to connect individual experience with collective destiny, weakens to the point of disappearance. The man without memory is an individual incapable of temporalising himself. He does not forget for lack of information but because he no longer possesses an inner rhythm that would allow him to elaborate it. Inner time, the condition of memory, is replaced by the external time of permanent connection. As Stiegler (2018) writes, the digital industry does not merely capture attention; it expropriates temporality itself, transforming memory into a commodity.

From this arises an anthropological risk of vast scope: the dissolution of the link between memory and identity. Memory, in the critical sense, is what allows the subject to defer, to avoid immediate coincidence with the self. When this distance disappears, the autonomy of thought weakens as well. The hypermediated subject is no longer capable of remembering critically but only of reacting. Freud might have recognised in this scenario a collective form of *acting out*: a society compulsively repeating without understanding what drives it.

Yet within this mnemonic saturation one may still glimpse a possibility. The excess of digital recollection, its uncontrollable accumulation, might signal an unsatisfied need for elaboration. The man without memory, far from being a completed destiny, could be the symptom of an unresolved tension: that between memory as archive and memory as consciousness. To acknowledge this tension is the first step towards restoring to memory its critical status, capable of transforming repetition into thought.

5. The Rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence and Synthetic Memories

If the hyperfast society has weakened the sedimentation of recollection, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence introduces a further threshold in the longer transformation of digitally mediated memory. Generative systems do not produce representations of the past *ex nihilo*: they recombine patterns learned from existing textual, visual and cultural traces. What changes is that the resulting representation need not correspond to a specific originating event, testimony or archival trace.

By synthetic memory I mean a form of remembrance in which computational systems do not merely store, retrieve or select traces of the past, but generate mnemonic representations that may have no direct experiential or historical referent. Its specificity therefore lies not in algorithmic mediation as such, but in the production of plausible pasts: images, voices, narratives or reconstructions that acquire the form and social function of memory without necessarily deriving from an event that was experienced or documented. Synthetic memory thus marks a shift from the algorithmic organisation of existing traces to the generation of new mnemonic objects.

Floridi (2023) describes contemporary AI as operating within an increasingly AI-friendly infosphere, an informational environment in which artificial agents interact with data and reshape the conditions under which human practices take place. Within such an environment, generative systems can produce texts, images, voices and videos that resemble mnemonic traces without necessarily corresponding to an experienced or documented event. The resulting problem is not simply one of false information, but of referential instability: representations of the past can acquire plausibility independently of the events to which memory would ordinarily refer.

Chun (2016) has described digital media as habitual infrastructures in which repetition shapes perception and experience. Generative AI extends this logic by producing representations from patterns learned across existing data. The issue is therefore not that computational systems remember, but that their outputs can acquire mnemonic relevance once they enter human practices of interpretation, circulation and remembrance.

Esposito (2017) describes algorithmic memory in terms of computational processes that manage stored information and its accessibility without reproducing the operations of human remembrance. This remains primarily a logic of processing and organisation of existing traces. Generative AI introduces a further discontinuity: the mnemonic object itself can now be produced computationally. Synthetic memory names this additional threshold, where the past is not only filtered or resurfaced but reconstructed in forms that may exceed the archive from which they derive.

Recent work on AI and memory has described generative systems in terms of distributed mnemonic agency and “stochastic remembering” (Smit, Smits & Merrill, 2024), emphasising the probabilistic and interactive processes through which humans and AI systems engage with the past. Synthetic memory addresses a related but distinct problem: not primarily who or what participates in remembering, but the changing referential status of the representations that enter mnemonic circulation.

From the perspective of Critical Theory, this scenario represents the extreme realisation of the culture industry analysed by Horkheimer & Adorno (1944 [2002]). Where the culture industry standardised the products of human imagination, the industry of AI standardises imagination itself. It does not simply reproduce experience; it automates its very genesis. Adorno (1966) would perhaps have recognised in this automatisisation the most complete form of reification: thought reduced to calculation, memory transformed into function.

Whereas the culture industry acted upon symbolic products, the algorithmic industry acts upon cognitive processes themselves, automating the act of remembering. This transformation marks the passage from a standardised production of content to a standardisation of experience, in which the subject becomes an integral part of the technical circuit.

Benjamin (1940 [2003]) might have read the same scene differently, perceiving in it the final triumph of the history of the victors. Synthetic memories are, in a sense, the ultimate stage of the neutralisation of the past. There is nothing left to redeem because everything can be generated anew. The dialectical image that in Benjamin flashed as a promise of salvation now becomes an artificial image produced in series. The revolutionary *Jetztzeit* is converted into a perpetual computational present.

What changes at this point is also the status of absence. The distance between an event and its later representation has traditionally left room for interpretation, testimony and contestation. Generative systems can instead populate that distance with plausible images, voices and narratives, turning what is missing from the record into material available for production. The problem of synthetic memory therefore concerns not only what can be fabricated, but what happens when absence itself ceases to function as a limit.

The distinction becomes clearer in concrete cases. Deepfakes and AI-generated reconstructions can introduce representations of events that were never recorded, while generative avatars of deceased persons can produce new interactions from existing personal traces. Recent studies have examined these dynamics in relation to Holocaust memory (Makhortykh, Vziatysheva & Sydorova, 2023) and AI-driven “synthetic afterlives” (Kidd & Nieto McAvoy, 2025). These cases are paradigmatic because generative systems do not merely reorganise access to existing traces: they produce new representations that can enter the social circulation of remembrance.

Amid this proliferation of subjectless recollections, Critical Theory can once again play a decisive role. If Adorno and Benjamin saw in memory the locus of the negative, today the challenge is to think

of a memory of the false that does not coincide with falsehood but reveals its structure. Perhaps the technical possibility of falsifying every testimony compels us to interrogate memory not as a guarantee of truth but as a practice of responsibility. The question is no longer what has happened but what we make happen by remembering.

6. Sociological and Political Consequences

The transformations of memory in the digital age are not confined to the cognitive sphere; they redefine the very conditions of social coexistence. As Aleida Assmann (2011) argues, collective memory is the device through which societies construct their identity in time, and its digitalisation profoundly alters this structure. Memory is no longer entrusted to stable institutions, archives, schools, museums or rituals, but to flows of data in constant renewal. In this transition, the relationship between memory and collective identity becomes more fragile: society no longer recognises itself in a shared past but in a multiplicity of partial memories that often stand in conflict with one another.

The main effect of this shift is the fragility of symbolic bonds. As Assmann (2020) observes, collective memory is never a simple repository but a process of selection and interpretation. It requires institutions that ensure duration and the possibility of revision. Digital memory, by contrast, tends to dissolve the long time of tradition into a condition of permanent simultaneity. The communities emerging from this logic, viral campaigns, online commemorations, protest hashtags, generate immediate and powerful forms of belonging, yet rarely lasting ones. Their political value lies in the speed of shared emotion rather than in the construction of a common horizon.

Judith Butler (2020) has shown how the remembrance of victims of racial, sexual or state violence can become a political act of resistance. To remember those who have been erased means to challenge the very conditions of visibility and mourning. Yet in the digital ecosystem, even the memory of pain risks being absorbed by the circuits of attention. Images of wounded bodies, names turned into hashtags and global commemorative campaigns produce moments of widespread empathy that often end within the act of sharing itself. The question is whether this fleeting visibility is enough to bring transformation or whether it ends up, on the contrary, anaesthetising trauma and turning it into spectacle.

In a related direction, Klein (2014) identifies ecological trauma as one of the blind spots of contemporary consciousness. The climate crisis is the collective trauma par excellence: global, diffused, without a single origin. Yet even in the face of environmental catastrophe, memory remains fragmented. Each natural disaster generates a brief wave of emotion followed by a rapid media oblivion. The hypermediated society records but does not elaborate; it accumulates but does not transform. Klein interprets this incapacity as the symptom of a culture that has replaced responsibility with resilience and elaboration with management. Ecological memory, to become political, should instead turn into a practice of temporal responsibility, a way of thinking the continuity between past, present and future.

A similar logic of selective forgetting emerges in postcolonial memory. Mbembe (2019) has shown how Western modernity was built upon a systematic erasure of colonial violence. The memories of the subjugated peoples, fragmented and marginalised, resurface today through digital archives, artistic practices and movements of symbolic decolonisation. Yet digitalisation also entails the risk of neutralisation: subaltern memories may be displayed but rarely listened to. The global archive absorbs everything but does not guarantee the justice of remembrance. As Mbembe (2021) argues, decolonial memory cannot remain at the level of visibility; it must become an act of restitution and reappropriation of time.

The tension between visibility and oblivion, connection and distance, runs through all contemporary practices of political memory. The remembrance of injustice is never a simple act of testimony: the social recognition of trauma also depends on the moral and political frameworks through which suffering and victimhood acquire public meaning (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Every collective trauma involves a process of cultural construction through which a society gives meaning to suffering and elaborates its public representation. Even within the digital ecosystem, the symbolic dimension of trauma remains decisive: what matters is not only what happens but how it is narrated and recognised (Alexander, 2004). Movements such as Black Lives Matter, feminist and queer struggles or global ecological commemorations operate through the logic of shared remembrance and public testimony. Their strength depends on their ability to transform emotion into historical consciousness. While the digital favours immediate connection, the challenge is to maintain it over time, to translate it into language and to turn it into experience.

Collective memory, in this sense, is not simply what remains of the past but what is made to endure in the present. It is a political act in the fullest sense, a labour of selection and form. The outcome of the digitalisation of memory will depend on our ability to recognise that connection does not replace community and that visibility does not equate to justice. Remembering remains a fragile gesture but also the only one through which societies can still interrogate themselves.

7. Memory as a Utopian and Critical Resource

If the analysis of the hyperfast society and its technologies reveals the dissolution of memory as consciousness, we must still ask whether it is possible to think of memory in terms of possibility rather than loss. The tradition of Critical Theory offers here a perspective of resistance: memory is not only the space of the wound but also that of hope. In this direction, Bloch (1959) formulated perhaps the most radical vision, conceiving memory as a principle of hope, as the custodian of unrealised possibilities that the past entrusts to the future.

For Bloch, time is not a closed sequence but an open field of potentiality. Every experience contains, alongside pain, a utopian residue, something that has not been but could have been. Memory therefore serves not only to preserve the past but to keep its promise alive. As Bloch (1959) writes, only what has been hoped for in history can still be changed. In this sense, to remember also means to anticipate, to awaken in the present what has not yet taken form. Memory is not a backward movement but an exercise in political imagination.

This intuition lies at the heart of Benjamin's dialectic. For Benjamin (1940 [2003]), the past is never definitively closed but awaits redemption in the moment when the present recognises it as incomplete. The revolutionary *Jetztzeit* and Bloch's concrete hope converge in conceiving memory as an interruption of linear time and as an opening towards a qualitatively different future. Utopian memory is, in this sense, a critical practice par excellence: it preserves absence but transforms it into possibility.

Today, this utopian function of memory appears in many social practices operating within the field of digital culture and the politics of the body. Feminist and queer commemorations, community archives of marginal experiences and digital platforms collecting testimonies of discrimination or violence all escape the logic of the ephemeral and the viral to create spaces of symbolic duration. In these practices, remembrance becomes performative: to remember means to circulate again lives and words that would otherwise remain invisible.

Butler (2020) has emphasised how memory can become an ethical and political alliance, capable of uniting the living and the dead in a community of shared vulnerability. It is not a cult of the past

but an ethics of relation. Memory in this sense is not only what remains but what allows us to remain together. It is a relational gesture, open and non-identitarian, which finds in emotional resonance a form of resistance.

Similarly, Klein (2014) and Mbembe (2019) have shown how ecological and postcolonial memory can serve as laboratories for rethinking justice. To remember the wounds inflicted on the earth or on colonised peoples does not mean only to bear witness but to reactivate a sense of collective responsibility. These memories, often preserved in digital archives or diffused artistic practices, assume a utopian function precisely because they propose a new alliance between memory and the future, not remembrance as conservation but as reinvention of the common world.

In an environment dominated by speed and simulation, critical memory thus represents the possibility of reclaiming time. It allows us to escape the compulsion to the present, to slow down, to reopen the space of thought. From this perspective, remembrance becomes a political act in the deepest sense, a decision about how the past continues to live within the present. The utopia of memory is not evasion but transformation of the real through awareness of its incompleteness.

As Bloch (1959) suggests, only what is remembered can still be redeemed. Memory is therefore not only resistance to trauma but also its transfiguration. In recognising absence, memory opens a passage towards what does not yet exist. It is within this space that Critical Theory rediscovers its strength, not in nostalgia but in promise.

8. Memory, Time and Critique in the Digital Age

To reflect on memory in the age of its automatisations means to question the very destiny of historical consciousness. The technological, social and perceptual transformations that have been examined do not simply represent a change in scale or speed but a reconfiguration of the relationship between time and experience. In a world where every event is immediately recorded and reproduced, the risk is not the loss of memory but the loss of its meaning. The past is no longer forgotten; it is neutralised, made available and harmless.

Critical Theory remains relevant here not because it provides a ready-made model for digital memory, but because it preserves a conception of remembrance as interruption, elaboration and normative orientation. What changes in the digital environment is the technical condition under which these functions can still operate.

Digital technologies and generative AI do not merely alter what is remembered; they modify the conditions under which something can enter the field of memory at all. Read together, these perspectives (Floridi, 2023; Esposito, 2017; Hoskins, 2024) shift the question from how technologies mediate remembrance to how generated representations can enter the field of memory and alter its relation to historical evidence. The issue is therefore not whether technology destroys memory, but how generative systems transform the relation between remembrance, experience and historical referentiality.

The same infrastructures that automate and synthesise remembrance can also support practices of critical reappropriation, from participatory archives to collective forms of commemoration. The decisive distinction is therefore not between human and technical memory, but between forms that collapse the past into immediate availability and practices that preserve distance, contestability and responsibility. In this sense, memory remains a critical practice of time: its political force lies not in preserving the past intact, but in maintaining the conditions under which the past can still interrupt the present.

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