# Futures present

## Lite, dark and missing

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'The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy', Adorno wrote in a sentence used here as the motto for Verso's new 'Futures' series, from which these three books by Augé, Berardi and Virno form the bulk of the first batch.* But what becomes of the essay when there is no particular orthodoxy to contest? Where is the frisson when the 'heretical' opinions are, for most who will read them, already received ideas?

Oh, how Verso must wish they'd had the idea for this series in time to include Berardi's *After the Future* (AK Press, 2011) – a book that addresses the topic head-on with its 'Manifesto of Post-Futurism' – rather than being landed with his latest depressive thoughts on mass murder-suicides; newly topical once again though they are, after the Germanwings crash of 24 March 2015. Or was it *After the Future* that gave them the idea? Futures are certainly fashionable at the moment. And not only in the artworld, where this is registered in a proliferation of projects and programmes, such as BAK's *Future Vocabularies* and *Future Collections*.[1] A sense that the crisis of left politics – the absence of fundamental change in the midst of prolonged worldwide economic stagnation – is connected to a deeper crisis of historical temporality, extending to the concept of the future itself, has provoked a renewed focus on the idea. And a wide and conflicting variety of historical and philosophical diagnoses have appeared in response.

At its outset, this series looks like a screen for the projection of Berardi-type post-futurist presentisms onto something like the established common sense of a left-modernist conception of the future as the new. It is a medium of appropriation, then, at the level of that most ambiguous of cultural forms, radical publishing. And like all such appropriations it cuts in opposite directions at once, running the risk of cancelling itself out. Here, the dangers are of weakening the impulse of the left-modernist narrative it is hoped to revive, via the sustenance of a more living present, by that particular present's rejection of any such futures; while softening the intellectual edge of the 'no-future' nihilism which makes that present live, by exposing it as, precisely, an abstract impulse towards the future it denies. This has the virtue of raising some interesting questions about the current state of the philosophical discourse of modernity, qua critical ontology of the present, at the level of the political unconscious of these texts.

Symptomatically, despite its 'Futures' title, the series actually projects a radically dehistoricized time-consciousness, referring in its self-description not to historical futures but only to 'the outer limits of political and social possibility'. The retro-futural feel of the 'outer limits' fits Berardi's brand of post-futurism well. But it reimposes an imaginary of limits in the very act of evoking possibility, thereby situating itself, philosophically, within a transcendental-logical, rather than any kind of historical, conception of the future. This is par for the course in a post-historical milieu in which the post-Situationist canon of French theory (Baudrillard and Virilio) converges with the Italian exodus, to produce a post-Occupy artworld version of autonomia, for which Berardi has somewhat surprisingly emerged as an avuncular posterboy. The Perry Como of e-flux. ('Don't look so sad, I know it's over.')

As Semiotext(e)'s Foreign Agents morphed into their Interventions series (see David Cunningham's review of Berardi's *The Uprising* in *RP* 178), so Verso's Baudrillard–Virilio axis of the 1990s gives way to its Futures brand. In something of a reverse takeover, the Italians – philosophically rebranded during the late

* Marc Augé, *The Future*, Verso, London and New York, 2015. 112 pp., £40.00 hb., £7.99 pb., 9 781 78168 567 9 hb., 978 1 78168 566 2 pb.; Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, Verso, London and New York, 2015. 240 pp., £55.00 hb., £7.99 pb., 978 1 78168 577 8 hb., 9 781 78168 578 5 pb.; Paulo Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, Verso, London and New York, 2015. 192 pp., £55.00 hb., £7.99 pb., 978 1 78168 611 9 hb., 9 781 78168 612 6 pb. Page references appear in the main text, to *F*, *H* and *DV*, respectively.

1980s and 1990s by the Foucault–Deleuze–Guattari line of French thought – have taken over from the French. Even the book by the French anthropologist Marc Augé, which symbolically inaugurates this series, *The Future*, is a translation from the Italian: *Futuro*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2012 – the same publisher as Virno's 1999 *Il ricordo del presente* (*The Memory of the Present*), which appears here, with sublime irony, sixteen years later, in a series dedicated to rethinking the future, under the title *Déjà Vu and the End of History*.

The Italians have taken over from the French, or rather the Frenchified Italians have taken over from the post-Situationist French, in the anglophone left-populist culturalist imaginary. This is not just, or even primarily, because futurism was so quintessentially – and quintessentially contradictorily – an Italian thing (Soviet Russian futurism not withstanding), as Berardi insists in his obituary of it in *After the Future*. It is largely because the standpoint of the 1970s has finally taken over from the 1960s – 'The Movement of 1977' has taken over from '1968' – and with it comes its contradictory aftermath, the legacy of what Guattari called the 'winter years' of the 1980s: national neoliberalisms and oppositional social movements morphing into neoliberal globalization and art activism.

The second flowering of post-workerism as art-world (post-)autonomism is a child of the Franco-Italian philosophico-political minglings of the 1980s, growing up in the Web 2.0 culture of a 'globalizing' artworld. (Rachel Kushner's 2013 *The Flamethrowers* is the US version of its family romance.) Elements of Foucault and Deleuze nestle comfortably inside Hardt–Negri, but the Baudrillard and Guattari snuggling up together inside Berardi's texts are stranger bedfellows: simulation and subjectivity. In *Heroes*, Baudrillard is most definitely back – no longer as polemic but as presupposition. This makes Berardi the ideal figure for Verso, catching up on some lost ground while maintaining an element of continuity in the imaginary of the cultural-activist end of the list. Žižek's jokey intellectualism held the fort there for a decade or so, but the contradictory individualism of his increasingly op-ed style of intervention lacks the consistency of vision required for a new orientation towards the future.

If Berardi is the symptomatic joker in this pack, Virno's is the philosophically serious text (as one might expect), while Augé is the melancholy representative of futures past, blinking in the bright light of the new day.

## Lite

The retro-futural feel of the outer limits fits Berardi's post-futurism well, but it accommodates Augé's romantic anthropologism less readily. For a fan of the conceptual incisiveness of Augé's 1992 *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (itself quietly – if inadvertently – something of an outer-limits text), *The Future* is a serious let-down. This is in part the result of its anthropologism; in part, genre. Intellectual journalism need not be simple-minded or moralistic, but each is an ever-present danger. As its title suggests, the Italian series in which *The Future* first appeared, Sampietrini (Cobblestones), conceived itself as a set of interventions, but the font of the book's ideas is Augé's 2008 *Où est passé l'avenir?* (*What Has Happened to the Future?*): an explicitly pedagogical text for a popular audience in a genre at which French publishing excels. Within that framework of expectations – 'the survey of a question, clearly written by a competent authority', as its Panama, Cyclo series blurb has it – *Où est passé l'avenir?* works well, with its declarative sentences and Sunday-supplement-style photo illustrations. It even has a polemical thesis: 'the future has practically disappeared'. Transposed into the realm of the philosophical and political intervention, however, its ideas come across as flat and platitudinous.

*The Future* is not the same text as *Où est passé l'avenir?* The material is less academically organized, it is spliced with literary and autobiographical material, and the book struggles gamely to convey a sense of life – albeit mainly via the anxiety it channels. But it cannot overcome the constraints of its standpoint.

It sets out, encouragingly enough, by distinguishing the sense of the future with which it is concerned from the merely chronological sense of 'what is to come'. Its alternative, however, rather than any kind of temporality of futurity, is the more simple 'future as life in the process of being lived', interpreted, furthermore, in a wholly commonsensical manner:

> That future is essentially obvious… What it boils down to is current events which give a content to the future by occurring. On that basis it can arouse every hope and every fear. (*F,* 1)

This kind of future can be studied in a straightforwardly anthropological way, since it is just the processual aspect of the present. It thus turns out that for Augé the problem with understanding the future as 'what is to come' has nothing to do with the theoretical limitations of the famous 'homogeneous empty time' of historicism, but rather concerns its

*uncertainty*: the fact that 'we are in perpetual doubt over "what is to come"' (*F*, 1–3). It is not clear whether this is intended as a historical or an ontological observation.

It is initially presented as a transhistorical one, at least, and broken down into 'two main modalities of relation to the future observed in the diversity of human societies: the one which makes the future a successor of the past … and the other which makes it a birth, an inauguration' (*F*, 4). These correspond to the two main dimensions of ritual:

> it has its rules; from this angle it is rooted in the past; it is executed with rigorous fidelity to the right established by the ancestors; at the same time it is focused on the future, and the emotion attached to its celebration is born of the feeling that it has succeeded in bringing something into being, that it has produced a beginning. (*F*, 21)

But this anthropology is immediately undermined by the detection of a 'new dimension' emerging today, associated with 'technological innovations exploited by finance capitalism': 'an ideology of the future *now*', an 'ideology of the present'. This is the threat to the future diagnosed in *Où est passé l'avenir?* But it is confusing here, since reduction to the present is the central feature of Augé's very definition of the future. The threat must thus be interpreted as a threat to the stability of the 'rules' of ritual (i.e tradition), on the one hand – but isn't it a bit late to be noticing that? – and inauguration or creation, on the other.

Under the conditions of modernity, Augé recognizes, art displaces ritual as the social site of creation. But the problem is that art has come to be about the new, rather than about beginnings. (He makes no mention of the fact that it is the social temporality of the new that destroys tradition; or that the 'ideology of the future now' is a product of its dialectics.) Augé thus sets out to save art as an experience of inauguration from the culture of novelty: 'Art offers to one and all the opportunity to live through a commencement' (*F*, 25).

There is something weakly Heideggerian about this belated anthropological critique of modernity. Good French intellectual that he is, Augé finds it exemplified in nineteenth-century French literature, 'the paradox of Flaubert' (*F*, 29): *Madame Bovary*. This is, amazingly, where the solution to our modern sickness is sought.

> Consumption of tranquillizers and anti-depressants is rising in the so-called developed countries. People commit suicide at work. We keep blundering into glass partitions with our ghostly scrambled reflections. Behind its curtain-walls and TV screens, the planet is changing into an aquarium. In this enclosed world, simultaneously opaque and transparent, this world from which you do not escape, it is tempting to think that the lucidity without hope of Bovarism could be the only way out, the only justifiable madness in this world of lunatics. (*F*, 44)

This is the best that Augé has to offer. Collective political action is eschewed on the Baudrillardian grounds that

> protesters, when they manage to make themselves heard, are themselves imprisoned in the world of images created by the prodigious expansion of the media and electronic communications. (*F,* 48)

Throughout, specifically capitalistic phenomena – such as the changed role of rating agencies within financial markets prior to their 2008 crash – are *reduced* to effects of technological innovation that 'could ultimately shift the parameters of what we still call human nature' (*F*, 60).

Augé gives the impression of having woken up to all this rather late in the day. His narrative is very much that of a sociology of disenchantment, with a familiar technophilic/technophobic inflection. I will leave readers to fill out the rest of this dirge in their imaginations. Augé remains true to this genre by ending with a countervailing pious 'Educational Utopia' (as he did in *Où est passé l'avenir?*). 'The educational utopia is the only remaining hope of redirecting human history towards its ends', we are told (*F*, 86). It is characteristic of the theoretical slackness of the text that what is presented is not actually a Utopia in anything approaching the usual political, philosophical and literary senses, involving the concrete depiction of a situation of the fulfilment of currently socially unrealizable desires (including, Adorno insisted, for example, the abolition of death). Rather, it consists of what might be constructed 'little by little, step by step' – 'partial and concrete reforms that would be wholly achievable' (*F,* 85, 95) – presumably under the auspices of the (French) state. It is at this point that the staggering size of the gap between diagnosis (crisis of the future as such) and cure becomes evident.

> To address educational failure, the size of certain 'difficult' primary school classes ought to be reduced to four or five pupils. The same measure could be applied for a few years – as long as it takes for the primary school reform to start working – at secondary level. The measure would obviously involve recruiting extra teachers.

> The syllabus would be planned along broad-based… [etc.] (*F*, 94)

Perhaps unconsciously aware that this is a whimper of an ending, Augé adds an autobiographical coda, 'By Way of a Provisional Conclusion: The Ethnologist and the Adventure of Knowledge', in which he traces back his own 'particular sensitivity' to 'the paradoxes of spatial and temporal mobility' to his ethnological travels. This is a valedictory signing off, almost a last testament for anthropology. As for the future, in concept and actuality, it remains unaddressed: the elephant in the room.

## Dark

'Death or "nothing": is that the only choice?', Augé soliloquizes at one point (*F*, 45), giving his Bovarism a twist of Hamlet. Yet there is little existential edge to *The Future*, apart from the personal fading of the light at its close. Berardi, on the other hand, lives on the dark side of this doomed romanticism, whence he dispatches regular bulletins updating us on the latest social forms of the deepening gloom. He has an ability to produce identifications in his readers that Augé – professional in participant observation though he may be – delegates only to Flaubert. *Heroes* is the latest, most journalistic and also most literary of these dispatches. Eight of its eleven short chapters are structured around staccato accounts of particular mass-murder suicides, read as emblems of the psycho-social state of contemporary capitalism.

> Twentieth of July 2012. The young man buys a ticket, enters the theatre and sits in the front row. About thirty minutes into the film, he leaves the building through an emergency door that he props open. He goes to his car, changes into protective clothing and retrieves his guns. At 12.30 a.m., he re-enters the theatre through the opened door. He is wearing a gas mask, a ballistic helmet, bullet-resistant leggings, a throat protector and tactical gloves.
>
> Some people in the audience see the masked gunman… (*H*, 9)

> On 7 November 2007, eighteen-year-old Pekka-Erik-Auvinen killed nine students at Jokela School in the Finnish city of Tuusula, sixty kilometres north of Helsinki.
>
> The shooting came just a few hours after a video… (*H*, 31)

This is contemporary history as police procedural. 'I saw the agony of capitalism and the dismantling of social civilization from a very peculiar point of view', Berardi tells us, 'crime and suicide. The naked reality of capitalism is today on display and it's horrible' (*H*, 2).

Yet crime and suicide are neither new nor peculiar points of view. They are pulp-fictional staples of the mainstream of the critical seam of popular culture in capitalist societies, where their narratives are repeated compulsively on a daily basis. '[W]e should not confuse events or "news" with history', Augé remarks at one point (*F*, 20). True, but the historical novel of capitalism has nonetheless always used precisely 'news' (in its full informational range of literary and visual forms) as a central component in its logic of historical construction. Think James Ellroy and David Peace. Think *Deadwood*.[2] Think Dos Passos. Think all the way back to Zola, for that matter. (Think of the informational serialism of the list in *Sentimental Education*, rather than of *Madame Bovary*, if you need to think about Flaubert.) What is new is the intrusion of the genre into critical writing. The question is: how well can Berardi use the form to construct an intellectually plausible – as well as affectively engaging – political diagnosis of the times?

His approach is predictably broad-brushed. Financial capitalism is 'a kingdom of nihilism and the suicidal drive'. As its 'extreme manifestation', 'spectacular murderous suicides' are the 'heroes' of our age. The suicidal drive defines the age because 'humans respond to today's state of permanent deterritorialization by enacting their craving for belonging through a chain of acts of murder, suicide, fanaticism, aggression, war' (*H*, 2–4). The primary documents of this psychopathology are the manifestos and literary and video testimonies left behind by mass-murderer suicides. Examination of these documents reveals them to be paraphrases of the Hobbesian logic of neoliberalism, 'a suicidal form of the Neoliberal will to win' (*H*, 51). As such, these are the documents that speak the truth of our society. From this point of view, one might see the contribution of Andreas Lubitz (the pilot believed to have deliberately crashed a Germanwings plane during a commercial flight on 25 March 2015) as having pushed the form one step further since Berardi's analysis, leaving the crash investigators to compose his manifesto for him, out of the speechless traces of his life.

Spectacular acting out and suicidal intent are the distinguishing features of these neoliberal mass murders, according to Bifo. And his readings of the various manifestos, diaries and testaments work well. It is when we come to the generalization of their significance that things become awkward, as

Berardi moves rapidly, via a kind of pop psychology, onto the territory of the *Daily Mail*. It is 'the digital environment' that is the mediating culprit here, in an analysis that extends Baudrillard's account of the simulacrum into a theory of semiocapitalism as generalized desensitivization.

This may not sound much like the *Daily Mail*, but its structure of argument is pretty much the Mary Whitehouse 'video nasties' line of the 1980s writ large. The exposure to 'electronic hyper-stimulation' during formative years is said to produce a mixture of loneliness and a frustrated search for tenderness with a reactive aggressiveness and violence.

> Clearly not everyone becomes a mass murderer merely because they play video games or engage in digital stimulation. But the mass murderer is only an exceptional manifestation of a general trend in this general mutation of the human mind. (*H*, 47)

It is the fallacious logic of this use of the word 'only', inverting the meaning of 'exceptional' in this sentence, which Berardi shares with the *Mail*. In fact, of course, in its exceptionalism it is precisely *not* a manifestation of 'a general trend of a general mutation'. It is a manifestation of an exception to a general trend of *not* carrying out mass-murder suicide, despite playing video games and engaging in digital stimulation. The account is completely non-explanatory. The significance is not that of a 'trend' at all, but of the legibility of a symbolic structure, which becomes legible precisely at its 'exceptional' extreme – which cannot legitimately be empirically extrapolated.

Berardi's is a classically reactionary use of pop psychology. And for all the talk of semio- and financial capitalism, the argument is breathtakingly technologically reductive. The book also trades in the crudest cultural stereotypes, not only of 'youth', but of South Korean youth in particular: 'the epitome of the contemporary condition of lonely togetherness, of shared isolation' (*H*, 73). South Korea has displaced Japan in the orientalist imaginary of techno-cultures. In one of the three chapters not structured around an account of a mass-murder suicide, 'A Journey to Seoul', Berardi accepts an invitation to a workshop organized by a group of art-activists, and makes a brief trip. He discovers there – pretty much on arrival – 'the desert of the present in its purest version' (*H*, 185): the actualization of Baudrillardian theory. Still, he also finds, somewhat contradictorily, that 'even in hell there are wonderful people' (*H*, 197). So everything works out fine.

The very real gloom of Berardi's clinical left melancholy – his pop post-operaismo tabloid dystopianism – is lightened by sparks of affection, humour, compassion and (in a familiar Italian manner) the odd bit of Latin etymology for conceptual legitimation. But what about the future? This is, after all, the Futures series, addressing 'the outer limits of political and social possibility'.

We are offered two lines here. First (and once again, since this is a recurring motif in Berardi's writings), 'no future', the Sex Pistols' slogan that marks the book's cultural periodization of '1977 and after' – 'In the year 1977 human history came to a turning point' (*H*, 5) – along with David Bowie's 'Heroes', from which it takes its title ('Just for One Day' might have been better) and The Stranglers' more emphatic 'No More Heroes'. Berardi relies upon Hito Steyerl for his musical references, retrospectively translating the outcome of 'The Movement of 1977' in Italy into British pop history. David Peace's *Nineteen Seventy-Seven* (the second in his Red Riding Quartet) might have been more apposite, both psychopathologically and formally. But you can't have everything.

> Leeds.
> Sunday 29 May 1977.
> It's happening again:
> *When the two sevens clash...*
> Burning unmarked rubber ...[3]

'No future' is the phenomenology of time consciousness of the end of the welfare state, intimations of neoliberalism and the onset of Guattari's 'winter-years' – transformed by Berardi into a nuclear winter of the soul. This is the starting point of the analysis.

Second, there is the answer to the Adornian–Leninist question posed in the title of the final chapter, 'What should we do when nothing can be done?' – apart from suicide, one might add, seemingly the most compelling choice on Augé's and Berardi's accounts alike. If 'the task at hand is to map the wasteland where social imagination has been frozen and submitted to the recombinant corporate imaginary', the speculative goal is 'to discover a new form of activity, which by replacing Art, politics and therapy [all at once!] with a process of re-activation of sensibility, might help humankind to recognize itself once again' (*H*, 7). You don't get a narrative much grander than that. And how is this to be done? 'I believe it is only through irony ... that the simulated hero of subculture still has a chance to save itself' (*H*, 5).

One may agree with Berardi that merely 'denouncing' neoliberal theology and capitalist absolutism is

'scarcely useful', without buying the tired idea that it is a 'line of flight' that is needed; still less that of the Guattarian 'chaoide', an 'ironic elaborator of chaos', through which dystopia will be 'dissolved by irony' (*H*, 199–200, 222, 224). Berardi is emphatic: 'ironic autonomy is the answer'. We end, then, with a late Heideggerian Guattari: neither a God nor a Poet (Berardi's previous plan), but 'only irony can save us'. By this point, Berardi has started dispensing advice in a manner disturbingly similar to the manifesto-manuals of the murder-suicides from which the book sets out.

> Do not belong. Distinguish your destiny from the destiny of those who want to belong and to participate and to pay their debt. If they want war, be a deserter. If they are enslaved but want you to suffer like them, do not give in to blackmail.
>
> If you have to choose between death and slavery, don't be a slave. You have some chance to survive. If you accept slavery, you will die sooner or later anyway. As a slave.
>
> You will die anyway; it is not particularly important when.

The difference lies in a certain self-defeating scepticism about his own 'horrible' book (the self-description is repeated, several times).

> Finally, don't take me too seriously. Don't take too seriously my catastrophic premonitions. And in case it is difficult to follow these prescriptions, don't take too seriously my prescriptions.
>
> … at the very end: don't believe (me). (*H*, 225–6)

It's OK, Bifo, we don't. In *Heroes*, Berardi transcribes a parabola from anti-heroes to anti-prophet.

## Missing

For all their differences of intellectual and political background and tone, Augé and Berardi share a broadly dystopian depiction of the present as a kind of black hole into which the future is rapidly disappearing. For each of them, this is a historical phenomenon associated with financial capitalism – and theirs is a distinctly European perspective on this process, for all Augé's ethnology. Yet neither of them offers any theoretical or critical discourse about the concepts of history or historical time. The philosophical grounds of their purportedly 'post-' – but one might equally say 'anti-' – historical views remain buried in their sources: French anthropology and Virilio, and Baudrillard and Guattari, respectively. These all involve some sort of informational reduction of the social. In *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, Virno offers an alternative, explicitly philosophical – indeed, fundamentally, ontological – take on these issues; in fact, it is claimed, 'a new theory of historical temporality'.

The title – as ever in these kinds of translation – is thus misleading. It repeats the title of the first of the three rather different parts of the book. Part II, 'Temporality of Potential, Potentiality of Time', is its core, taking up over half its length. Part III, 'Historical Materialism', attempts to give Virno's Bergsonism a Marxist result; or, at least, to render explicit the Marxist metaphysics of labour-power of which the preceding temporal ontology of potentiality appears as a philosophically transcoded metaphysical generalization.

Virno is primarily concerned to develop a Bergsonian philosophy of time – more particularly, of memory and potentiality – as a temporal-ontological ground for historical materialism. He thus begins by diagnosing the philosophical basis of the *illusion* of the 'post-historical' (the 'end of history' thesis): 'the mediocre ideologies' that set up camp on the 'terrain of the fragility of historical experience' (*DV*, 10) The key to all this is Bergson's idea of 'the memory of the present' – the phrase that provides the original Italian publication with its title (borrowed from Bergson's 1908 article 'Memory of the Present and False Recognition'). It is not an easy idea.

The phenomenon of déjà vu is important here, since it appears to offer an experiential glimpse into a world in which (in Bergson's words) 'the future is closed'. In the experience of déjà vu, it seems there is never anything new because each moment is a repetition of the past. Déjà vu appears to affirm the 'centripetal and despotic *actuality*' of an eternal present, leading to 'apathy, fatalism and indifference to a future that seems prescribed even down to the last detail' (*DV*, 8–9). As such, at the level of individual experience, it is the pathology of memory corresponding to the philosophico-historical thesis of the disappearance of the future. Hence, Virno argues, it is the philosophical clue to the latter. In the society of the spectacle, he suggests, déjà vu becomes a public pathology: 'the spectacle concerns, first and foremost, the post-historical inclination towards *watching oneself live*' (*DV*, 47, 55). The 'end of history' and 'disappearance of the future' theses, then, take a certain contemporary social experience at face value, instead of delving deeper to uncover that of which they are the misrecognition.

What is misrecognized, it is argued, is the very opposite of the situation depicted: 'the hyper-historicity of experience' (*DV* 50). It is misrecognized

because it is confused with its own fundamental condition: a non-chronological 'memory of the present' that is the temporal mode of virtuality or potentiality (Virno does not distinguish terminologically between these two, and the text moves between them). This leads to a strong and paradoxical thesis:

> *the 'end of history' is an idea, or state of mind, that arises precisely when the very condition of possibility of history comes into view*; when the root of all historical activity is cast out onto the surface of historical becoming, and is evident as a phenomenon; when the *historicity* of experience is itself also manifested *historically*. (*DV*, 33)

This is a difficult – possibly sophistic – argument that mixes together different philosophical discourses on a single discursive plane. And it is made more complicated by issues of consistency in the translation of terminology across four languages – Italian, French, German and English. Basically, Virno takes the Bergsonian dualism of the virtual and the actual, mapped onto the distinction between memory and perception, and argues that 'the virtual is simultaneous to the actual *because* memory is simultaneous to perception.' The possible, as 'the mirage of the present in the past', is thus a 'memory of the present', which is 'in the past in its form and of the present in its matter' (Virno is quoting Bergson here). This non-chronological past is the condition of possibility of both chronology (as the representation of the relation of its objects to one under the form of their respective presents) and history as action in time that is new in relation to 'the past in general' but 'becomes possible only in the moment in which it is realized' (*DV*, 15–17).

A range of issues are raised by this argument, of which five leap out. First, what does 'simultaneity' mean here, in the simultaneity of the virtual and actual? Second, how can the condition of possibility of history itself become the object of social experience? Third, what distinguishes this argument, methodologically, from the transcendental ontology of the early Heidegger? Fourth, in what sense is this really a philosophy of *historical* time or of history (as opposed to a philosophy of the time of life)? And, finally – and most importantly for us here – where is the future in this philosophy of time?

Simultaneity cannot be used in its usual – space-generating – sense to refer to the common chronological time of more than one event, since the virtual is not in chronological time. Nor can it refer to a relation within the temporality of memory of the non-chronological past, since there is no temporal differentiation within this constantly present 'immemorial' past in relation to which two or more things may be judged be occur simultaneously. It must, therefore, refer to the constant conjuncture within experience of the two temporally radically different ontological domains. Yet 'simultaneity' can only be used metaphorically here, since it codes the relation between these two disjunctive domains in a language that is appropriate to only one of them: the actual. It seems as if it is something more like the eternity of the virtual, non-chronological past that conditions its relation to the present. Hence its misrecognition within the present as an 'eternal present'. '*The potential is permanent, the permanent is potential*', Virno remarks at one point (*DV*, 72) But, then, how can this become an object of social experience – in the spectacle of misrecognition that is a kind of collective déjà vu? Bergson remains here much closer to the theological vitalism with which he has historically been associated than Virno might like, with no conceptual space for the mediating role of the social, and thereby no history, in a philosophical sense, either.

Virno's methodological means of escape from the 'theological vitalism' reading is an ontological version of transcendental logic. The relation of the actual to the virtual/potential is that of something to its real condition of possibility. Yet the transcendental-logical sense of 'possibility' that is deployed here is inconsistent with the sense in which 'an event becomes possible *only* in the moment that it is realized' (*DV*, 15–16; emphasis added). Heidegger deployed a similar ontologization of transcendental logic in his existential analytic, but from a very different premiss: Dasein, rather than the generalized consciousness of life itself. For Heidegger it was the possibility of the possible itself that was a stake in temporalization, not an 'anachronism' internal to an ontologically doubled present of perception and memory (*DV*, 141).

The sense in which this can plausibly be described as a 'historical' temporality is dealt with by Virno in the form (familiar in neoclassical philosophies) of a stipulative definition.

> The instant that I am living – understood as the instant in which the simultaneity between act and potential … takes place – will from now on be indicated with the epithet historical moment.

The justification for this is that it refers to 'the present understood in its genesis' (*DV*, 140). There is thus no distinction here between temporalization in general and the historical moment. There is no philosophical specificity to 'history'. As Deleuze put it, back at the

start of the Bergson revival: in Bergson 'history is only ever a matter of fact'.[4]

Furthermore, for Virno, time is temporalized not by the future, but by 'potential *as* past' (*DV*, 62). Similarly to Augé, but on strictly philosophical grounds, the future exists only as the ongoing genesis of the present, in the relation between present and non-chronological past. There is *no futurity*. Oddly, given the references to Augustine, there is attention (perception) and memory but *no expectation or anticipation*. 'The totality of time is nothing other than the *potentiality of time*' (*DV*, 95) and the potentiality of time is that non-chronological past that is the memory of the present. So 'no future' yet again, but this time in a fundamental-ontological sense. The future is not dark, or vanishing; it is missing altogether, despite the talk of 'historical becoming'.

It will come as no surprise, after this, that the treatment of potentiality as labour-power in Part III involves a reduction of the latter to a Bergsonian ontology of life, familiar from the *Grundrisse*-based reading of 'labour in general', flowing into the account of the 'general intellect' in the 'Fragment on Machines', of the autonomist Italian Marxism of the 1980s and 1990s. 'Labour-power incarnates … the pre-historic side of human praxis. … Only labour-power … makes the non-chronological past carnal and external' (*DV,* 187).[5] Rather than the generality of this capacity being the product of historical development – specifically the commodification of labour-power and the 'abstract labour' that it produces – as it was for Marx, here it is ontologically transhistorical. There is no conceptual space in Virno's position for the historically specific *social actuality of this potentiality, qua potentiality*; or even for Agamben's 'act of impotentiality' or potentiality to not-be.[6]

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If the common goal of what critical rethinking of time and history we currently have on the left is 'the recovery of the future as such' (to cite recent accelerationist ambition – see p. 31 above), then, if these three books are anything to go by, this rethinking is failing, and failing dismally. On this evidence, the Left has a philosophical crisis no less deep than the political one it reflects.

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The theme of the 56th International Art Exhibition in Venice is *All the World's Future*. It opens on 9 May.

## Notes

1. BAK – bais voor actuele kunst – is the art gallery in Utrecht that is the institutional home of the FORMER WEST project (2008–2016), co-funded by the EU's Creative Europe programme. It is the sponsor of Dutch artist Jonas Staal's *New World Academy*, organizational base of the New World Summits. (See E.C. Fleiss, 'Autonomy for a 'New World'?, *Radical Philosophy* 189, January/February 2015, pp. 70–72.) *Future Vocabularies* is a research project aimed at developing 'a new future-oriented conceptual lexicon'. *Future Collections* is an exhibition programme within which *New World Academy* has been refunctioned as an exhibition (11 April–21 June 2015, Centraal Museum, Utrecht), which has also been 'acquired' by the Centraal Museum, Utrecht.
2. See John Kraniauskas, '*Noir* into History: James Ellroy's *Blood's a Rover*', *Radical Philosophy* 163, September/October 2010, pp. 25–33; Joseph Brooker, 'Orgreave Revisited: David Peace's *GB84* and the Return of the 1980s', *Radical Philosophy* 133, September/October 2005, pp. 39–51; David Cunningham, 'Here Comes the New: *Deadwood* and the Historiography of Capitalism', *Radical Philosophy* 180, July/August 2013, pp. 8–24.
3. David Peace, *Nineteen Seventy-Seven*, Serpent's Tail, London, 2000, p. 3.
4. Gilles Deleuze, 'Bergson's Conception of Difference' (1956), in John Mullarkey, ed., *The New Bergson*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999, p. 52.
5. It is interesting to contrast this with the historical but nonetheless still ontological treatment in Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt's recently translated 1981 *History and Obstinacy*. See Stewart Martin, 'Political Economy of Life: Negt and Kluge's *History and Obstinacy*', *Radical Philosophy* 190, March/April 2015, pp. 25–36.
6. Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999, pp. 177–84.