

***Alexander Sheyn, Nikolai  
Margiev***

***Translating Memory into  
History: on Reappropriation  
of Memory in the Age of  
Platform Capitalism***



Figure 1 — Atlas VMayakovsky

The genealogy of the artistic project that was started in 2011, which includes the creative teams' feature film VMayakovsky (2018), the dance film Lacanic (2016), the documentaries Timur Novikov. Zero Object (2014), Monroe (2022), Nazidanie, A Whatever Film (2022), the essay film The All of Everything (2022), and the museum projects Signals of Precise Time (2017), 37+1. Punk Divination (2016), Atlas VMayakovsky (2017–2021), traces back to the issue of the language rupture during the era of global political changes and the digital turn at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. This rupture speaks to the impossibility of discovering an authentic language of interaction with the transformed reality. Altogether, the project's audiovisual archive represents over 700 hours of diverse material: original feature scenes, interviews, research expeditions, chronicles, rehearsal takes, and everyday footage. This archive reflects the life and work of many people — a labyrinth without entrances or exits, a collection of transmedial material, constantly intersecting but never reducible to a single center.

One of the project's main themes has been the exploration of the fate of a modernist artist against the backdrop of the tectonic

shifts of the 20th century — the fate of the mythmaking author. This exploration is particularly reflected in the film about Vladimir Mayakovsky — VMayakovsky. In one of the project's further iterations, we created a museum from texts and objects literally tied together by countless threads, the Atlas VMayakovsky project. It is precisely this museum logic, this intention to preserve both the "important" and "unimportant," that gave rise to the idea that a work of art is not a collection of separate objects but rather of the relationships between them. To better define this interconnectedness, we introduced the concept of "whatever material" — a structural representation of a work as a collection of metaphorical connections, a formal approach to such construction. We believe that when these relationships are properly defined, a work of art can be created from anything. Within such a construct, there is no difference between professional filming and everyday smartphone videos; thus, anyone can be an author, and everyone's memory, their archive, becomes the main material for this meaning-making construction.

### **Collapse of an Empire and Digital Turn**

Two important shifts happened on the eve of the millennium that bear significance to our project: the end of the Cold War and the onset of digital technologies. The 1990s historical defeat of the Eastern Bloc in the Cold War suggests that the semiotic system of relations between signs collapses on a sixth part of the world. A breakdown of an empire changes the reality beyond recognition, creating an epistemological shift. The common “recognition” that Warsaw Pact citizens were used to is no longer possible because of the enormous amount of social, political, and economic changes. Such a collapse, even though it poses obstacles for signification and therefore constrains everyday communication, also brings forward an artistic deautomatisation as it is described in Yuri Lotman’s theory of communication:

“In the structure of an artistic text two opposite mechanisms take place: one tends to submit all the elements of the text to a system, to turn them into automated grammar, without which the act of communication is impossible, another one aims to destroy such automatisations and make the structure the information carrier”

(Lotman, 1970:95)

In other words, in the absence of the possibility for communication, the relations between text and “reality” are radically estranged, and words are no longer connected to things.

In this context, we are reminded of a position expressed by Francis Fukuyama in his famous essay about the end of history (Fukuyama, 1989). Indeed, the defeat of the Eastern Bloc manifests that the “Soviet” system of signification is thrown away as history’s garbage as superfluous: these relations are no longer able to describe the world. At the same time, the model of liberal democracy and free market, with their inherent paradigmatic features, gets a *carte blanche* and is being exported around the globe.

As we have mentioned earlier, another epistemological shift that has been brought by the turn of the millennium is the one that is referred to as the “digital turn” (DFG, 2020) in contemporary humanities. The internet’s development, globalisation, and cultural tourism of the last 30 years have rapidly conquered the planet, as if mending the ruptures of the 1990s. Such hasty expansion naively assumed that the world has turned transparent, multi-cultural, that border walls have fallen, and that the signals of times are conventional and are simultaneously received by people in Riga, Bangkok, Buenos Aires, or Sydney as of yet. Later on, it has resulted in a presumption that a simple possession of a smartphone with a camera equals us all by bringing forth a longed-for “universal” language, the most modernist of the modernist dreams.

In such hopes of the millennium, we can discover an extreme artistic situation: every owner of a smartphone is a content creator, dedicated to the expression of their individual “I”. However, a critique that follows suggests foul play. Dreams of the universal world brought with democratisation of technical means are buried under the platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) is another iteration of the economic regime that now governs the whole planet. In platform capitalism, the individual “I” of the subject is turned into commodity, our supposedly free actions being the cogs in an enormous extracting machine extorting our fossilised memories and feelings. We must remember the renowned words of Marshall McLuhan about medium being the message [McLuhan 1964:7] and should agree, that it is indeed the way that social interaction in digital spaces is formed that defines the modern world, but not the “message” that each and every one of us are trying to carry into it. Since there is no other ideological system to compete with after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, platform capitalism (or technocapitalism (Suarez-Villa, 2009)) has become the sole mode of existence in the contemporary world.

### **The Authorial Position**

A contemporary person creates innumerable amount of memories — he is taking photos, makes recordings, creates videos about himself and the others. His life is documented like no other in history before the digital turn. The democratisation of technical devices suggests that our memory, photos, messages, purchase data, and browser history no longer perish. Instead, they are stored on servers like a dump of something superfluous and unnecessary, existentially questioning us — the dump of memory requires to be reassembled, it asks to be turned into history, it longs to be reappropriated. In other words, the question at hand is how to overcome such an estrangement, brought forth by the ubiquitous commodification of memories and feelings in the age of techno-capitalist platforms.

Mikhail Yampolsky writes in *The Memory of Tiresias. Intertextuality and the Cinema*:

“Sightedness, vision, seeing, looking — all these concepts are related to spectacle. Many texts of culture are presented to us in the form of moving images. In the 20th century, cinema became the embodiment of this cultural drive towards increasing the spectacle. But the story told by Homer reminds us that seeing without remembering means not understanding. Tiresias's memory turns out to be a better observer than the unobscured gaze of Odysseus's mother. A spectacle that is not immersed in memory, not allowed access to the sources of Mnemosyne, remains a meaningless collection of disjointed fragments. The memory of culture, the memory of Tiresias, must be connected to the text for the desired 'connection of beginning and end' to occur, for a history to arise”

(Yampolsky, 1993:9)

We can envision this “connection of beginning and end” in the form of a thread that links the disjointed fragments of memory into history, biography, and image. Undoubtedly performing an estrangement, this thread is a tool of contemporary artist

painting their autoportrait. Following Yampolsky, we should stress that only the memory with an access to the sources of muses and their mother Mnemosyne, only recontextualised and interconnected memory may be allowed to talk of the world.

It is not accidental that we see a tendency towards auto-fiction in contemporary art at the turn of the millennium. Autofictionality sees authorial reflexive experience as artistic material. The term “fictionality” here is of utmost importance, suggesting that “fiction”, or artificialness, the muses' touch, is a mediator in relations between subject and his memories. Fictionalised memory may be perceived as recontextualised memory. Such a memory, the one that has been allowed to Mnemosyne's source, is in no way a mere registration of events, but its artistic ascension and estrangement: it knows both of its unreliability (after all, fiction implies a fantasy, something “artificial”) and of its materiality — in this it bears resemblance to clay in sculptor's hands. It leads us to a vision of memory that can be subjected to an artist. Thus understood, memory assumes the artist's gaze, and from that gaze, the reappropriation starts. It begins from the position of the one who remembers, at the same time reflexive and creative, from the position of an author. Recollection then is nothing other than the montage of fragments of how we perceive our ways of remembering, sort of a double-play with memory's form.

### **Aura and experience**

The dramatic tension we observe in front of modern subject boils down to the relationships between “memory” and “history”, in other words, to the clash between our own experiences of the world and our idea of the world. Memory, as manifested in media, is fragmented and placed in the limbo of endless reproduction; contemporary reality suggests that it is just a mere “content” among hundreds of algorithms striving to create an illusion of a sensible and complete world. History, on

the other hand, the perception of reality, is a subordinated memory, reorganised into a certain order by the subject's own reflection. Since we view the translation of memory into history as a fundamental task of modern humanity, it is necessary to identify the essential difference between these two concepts, to discover the principle around which the entire medial structure drastically transforms and turns to face us.

Remembering means recollecting the experience. It is no coincidence that in the tradition of 20th-century European literature, from Marcel Proust to W.G. Sebald, some sensory trigger sets off a cascade of memories, producing a narrative shift: within the work, the narrator "recollects," seemingly presenting us with their experience, but in reality, concealing that experience behind the double bottom of convention. The question of convention is simple: how are we to know how trustworthy the narrator's recollection is? Such "untrustworthiness" is true not only for literature but for our own ways of remembering. For precisely at the moment when the recollection of a lived experience begins, the trap of its potential unreliability also arises. Unreliable memory can never be absolute, a memory of every moment lived; on the contrary, memory seems to be a dialectical play of remembering and forgetting. Only a machine can possess absolute memory — a dashcam, a data processing server, a surveillance camera — but here lies its key feature: absolute machine memory has nothing to do with experience. In fact, we can provocatively argue that without a reflective gaze, it is no memory at all. Thus, revealed in the play between remembering and forgetting, subjective and primordially unreliable, the memory of experience cannot be judged in terms of its "truthfulness" or "falsity," but only in categories of its authenticity, uniqueness, and historicity. Jacques Derrida notes this connection between the "historicity" of experience and its fictionality in one of his interviews, saying,

"What actually happened, in other words, the event whose trace the subject seeks to preserve, is identical to the very desire by which what did not happen should have happened, and in this way becomes "history," where the event already intersects with the archive of reality, as it does with the archive of fiction. It would be difficult for us... even to distinguish between historical narrative, artistic fiction, and philosophical reflection"

(Dutoit and Romanski, 2009:254)

Oftentimes, the relationships between experience and history are revealed precisely in autobiographical philosophical reflection, where the notion of experience is encompassed by artistic potentiality.

When describing the relationship between art and technology in the 19th and 20th centuries, Walter Benjamin uses the mystical-theological concept of "aura." The clearest definition of aura is simultaneously one of the most enigmatic:

"What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer's noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence — this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch"

(Benjamin, 1972:20)

The unique manifestation of distance Benjamin writes about certainly has nothing to do with simple spatial distance but creates a special kind of perception, in which relationships between the subject and the object in which, through reflection, obtain a whole world discerned behind the object under consideration. That perception is metaphoric in its essence, it allows us to see the invisible threads that connect things in front of us. In another place, Walter Benjamin writes:

“Originally, the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest artworks originated in the service of a ritual — first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. The oldest works of art, as is known, were created to serve rituals, first magical, then religious. What is decisive is the fact that this aura-inducing mode of existence of the work of art is never fully severed from the ritual function of the work”

(Benjamin, 1969:6)

The theology of the work of art that arises here may, at first glance, seem far removed from the issues we are discussing, but if we can manage to see behind Benjamin’s “contextual integration of art in tradition” the specifics of the historical, social, economic, and political circumstances in which an object appears, we can suggest that the authenticity of an object’s aura lies not within it, but in the figure of its relationships with other objects. Such connectedness is revealed by the historical context in which an object is rooted. In his works, Walter Benjamin often writes about practices of collection, stressing the aforementioned fact (Benjamin, 1999: 204).

Through Benjamin’s writing, we have established two key features that are crucial for our analyses of memory and history. The first of them is that memory, while being essentially unreliable, has a modus of authenticity that connects it to the concept of aura, implying that the whole process of recollection is an interplay of metaphors. The second feature is memory’s rootedness in the historical context of its creation, which allows us to perceive recollection as a constellation of objects.

Precisely of these features, commodified memory is devoid. When turned into a commodity by techno-capitalism, memory is

equated with other goods, primarily money, the universal commodity, and consequently falls into the whirlpool of economic exchange and exploitation. Deprived of authenticity and historical context, it becomes a fragment, a discrete piece of a mosaic, which is unlikely to find a place in the whole canvas, that canvas being the subject. But at this very point of rupture, we also see the possibility of reappropriating memory. Understood and reflected upon as the authenticity of experience, reconnected with other discrete fragments, memory becomes history. Just like with frames of a film on a montage table, we see a potentiality to edit together disparate fragments to create a third meaning. Engaged in this meaning-making process, we ourselves become the artists whose gaze is so crucial for translating memory into history. This is what Yampolsky speaks of when he writes on Mnemosyne: “*The memory of culture, the memory of Tiresias, must be connected to the text for the desired 'connection of beginning and end' to occur, for a history to arise*” (Yampolsky, 1993).

### **Practical Implementations, or How to Collect Memories**

As we have mentioned before, in the context of modern-day rupture, memory is alienated and appropriated by



Figure 2 — Jean-Luc Godard, shot from A Whatever Film

technocapitalist platforms. The core principle of these media platforms, whether it be streaming services or social networks, is their verticality, which creates the illusion of endless content and an infinite world. These platforms use opaque algorithms to “curate” the content that users see. As it is profoundly investigated in Arcades Project

by Walter Benjamin, the shopping arcade exists similarly: it is an illusion of the world in miniature, where an African lion coexists with an Irish pony, and an Australian native is displayed alongside a German burgher (Benjamin, 1999). There is no longer any need to travel anywhere because everything is already presented to us behind the shop window — or its modern equivalent, the smartphone screen. It's impossible to perceive the whole behind the fragments and shards of the media stream, and concepts like "network" or "labyrinth," once used to define the internet, have become perverse metaphors. Ultimately, alienated memory transformed into a commodity and displayed in the social media storefront becomes the opposite of the reflective author's position due to the semantic appropriation performed by these platforms.

We believe that the horizontality of digital space — the unfulfilled dream of net artists from the 1990s — is the only possible answer in the struggle for the reappropriation of memory by the subject. To this end, we developed a digital media platform whose two main tools are the infinite canvas and the connecting thread.

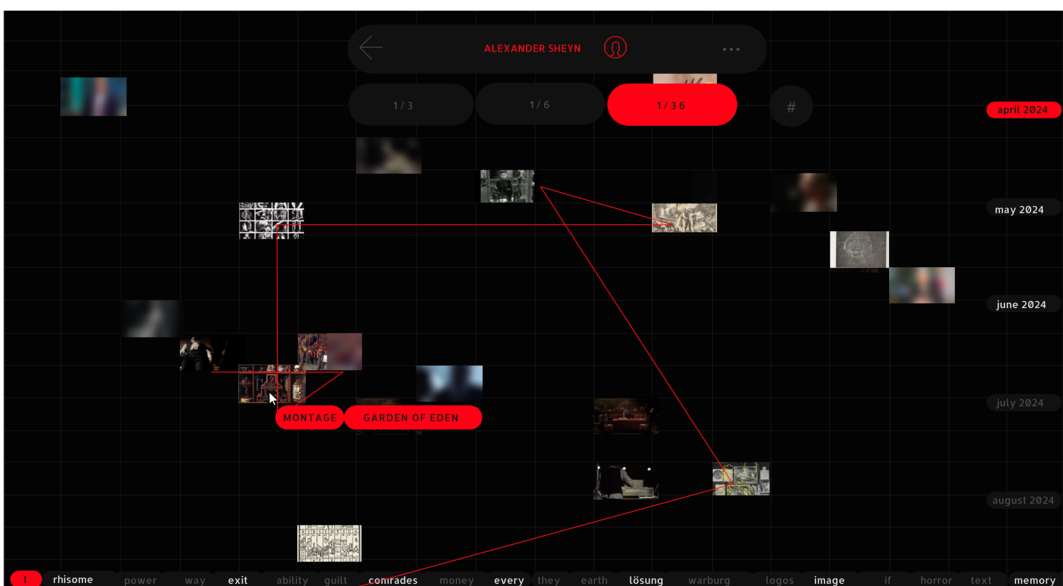
In developing our project, we were inspired by Aby Warburg's Atlas Mnemosyne and came to understand that contextual

integration of memory into history is only possible by way of the canvas — within a space devoid of hierarchy. The canvas is "omnivore," it makes no distinction between the "types" of media the user uploads into it, since transmediality and multi-format characteristics are precisely how our memory and perception work today.

Another important aspect of the canvas relates to its potentiality, the artist's awe before the blank surface, where anything — an entire authentic world — can be realized.

The second tool, the thread, is designed to tie fragments of memory together on the canvas, attributing them. By attributing their elements, the user engages in the process of signification, reflecting on each particular shard of memory. As we previously mentioned, an element can gain an aura only through its relationships with other elements, and this is the purpose of the process of signification, which invariably creates connections between discrete fragments. Using signifying tools, the user constructs narrative chains, continually encountering new ones: once two elements are linked, a third element always emerges to complete the sequence. By engaging in such an assembly of memories, the user creates a new image, a metaphor. Here, the montage image is not simply the sum of one frame and another but their relationship —

Figure 3. Prototype



a third meaning. In this reflective work, the user becomes an author, formulating a subjective position towards the world and their life.

Considering the relationship between the canvas and the meaning generated by the montage, we notice that any given element, always being part of a narrative structure, changes depending on the narrative line the user builds. The content within the frame is recontextualised and can perform various functions within the grammar of the work. For example, imagine a frame depicting an altar in a church with the image of Jesus Christ. Next, a montage cut shows portraits of Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung on a building in Pyongyang.

This produces a “portrait” montage series. The portrait image — the subject of this grammatical construction — has a metonymic relationship: Kim Il-sung literally replaces Christ, allowing us to equate the cult of power with religious worship. But because our element is placed within a non-hierarchical canvas, where it is just another

structural element, we can also imagine the reverse situation, where the altar scene is a verb. If, within the narrative, the altar signifies salvation, then the predicative, or verbal, chain would be composed of other “salvational” actions: our frame might be paired with Malevich's Black Square and Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People. In such a sequence of images, the connection occurs through metaphor, through indirect signification, whose meaning is not reducible to what is depicted. Instead, we find the metaphor's meaning in the space between the frames, in the caesura. As the author's reflection is expressed on the canvas through signification, these relationships between elements multiply into narrative sequences, producing new and new montage links, and memory work becomes meaning-making. It is in this reflective work with metaphor that the author's position lies, and here it directly contradicts the illusion of the social media feed — the feed cannot produce a montage link; it is creatively barren in its very form.

Figure 4 — Pyongyang



Figure 5 — Mayakovsky's Portrait



Thus, the user's position in our project becomes that of ancient humanity, encountering the starry sky for the first time, carefully assembling mythological figures of their life from the as-yet-unconnected stars — constellations. The canvas becomes a mirror of the individual, woven from the threads of their media elements into their image. In the relationship with this image, the unique sensation of reflexive distance emerges with ourselves: life becomes a work of art, memory is translated into history, and biography is turned into the fate of the subject, freed from the amnesia of the lotus-eaters.

## Bibliography

Benjamin, W. (1972). *A Short History of Photography*. Translated by S. Mitchell. Monogram, 2.

Benjamin, W. (1999). *The Arcades Project*. Translated by H. Eilberg-Schwartz. Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, W. (1969). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In: H. Arendt, ed. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books

DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). (2020). *The Digital Turn in the Sciences and Humanities*. [online] Available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/4191345> [Accessed 2 October 2024].

Dutoit, T., Romanski, P. (2005). *Derrida d'ici, Derrida de là [Derrida from here, Derrida from there]*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.

Fukuyama, F. (1989). *The End of History? The National Interest*, (16),

Lotman, Y.M. (1970). *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta [The Structure of the Artistic Text]*. Moscow: Iskusstvo.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Suarez-Villa, L. (2009). *Technocapitalism: A Critical Perspective on Technological Innovation and Corporatism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Yampolsky, M. (1993). *Pamyat' Tiresia: Intertekstual'nost' i kinematograph [The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film]*. Moscow: RIK "Kul'tura".