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Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia

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Present Pasts:
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One of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies, a turning toward the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity. From the early twentieth century's apocalyptic myths of radical breakthrough and the emergence of the "new man" in Europe via the murderous phantasms of racial or class purification in National Socialism and Stalinism to the post-World War II American paradigm of modernization, modernist culture was energized by what one might call "present futures."¹ Since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically.²

But the contemporary focus on memory and temporality also stands in stark contrast to so much other recent innovative work on categories of space, maps, geographies, borders, trade routes, migrations, displacements, and diasporas in the context of postcolonial and cultural studies. Indeed, not so long ago there was a widespread consensus in the United States that in order to understand postmodern culture, the focus had to be shifted from the problematics of time and **[End Page 21]** memory ascribed to an earlier form of high modernism to that of space as key to the postmodern moment.³ But, as the work of geographers such as David Harvey has shown, we would separate time and space at great peril to a full understanding of either modern or postmodern culture.⁴ Time and space as fundamentally contingent categories of historically rooted perception are always bound up with each other in complex ways, and the intensity of border-crossing memory discourses that characterizes so much of contemporary culture in so many different parts of the world today proves the point. Indeed, questions of discrepant temporalities and differently paced modernities have emerged as key to new and rigorous understandings of the long-term processes of globalization, which supplant rather than merely adjust Western modernization paradigms.⁵

Memory discourses of a new kind first emerged in the West after the 1960s in the wake of decolonization and the new social movements and their search for alternative and revisionist histories. The search for other traditions and the tradition of "others" was accompanied by multiple statements about endings: the end of history, the death of the subject, the end of the work of art, the end of metanarratives.⁶ Such claims were frequently understood all too literally, but in their polemical thrust and replication of the ethos of avantgardism, they pointed directly to the ongoing recodification of the past after modernism.

Memory discourses accelerated in Europe and the United States in the early 1980s, energized by the broadening debate about the Holocaust (triggered by the network television series *Holocaust* and, somewhat later, the testimony movement) and by media attention paid to the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries of events in the history of the Third Reich: Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the infamous book burnings remembered in 1983; *Kristallnacht*, the organized pogrom of 1938 against Germany's Jews publicly commemorated in 1988; the Wannsee conference of 1942 initiating the "Final Solution" remembered in 1992 with the opening of a museum in the Wannsee villa where the conference had taken place; the Normandy invasion of 1944 remembered with grand spectacle **[End Page 22]** by the allies but without Russian presence in 1994; the end of World War II in 1945 remembered in 1985 with a stirring speech by the German president and again in 1995 with a whole series of international events in Europe and Japan. Such mostly "German anniversaries," along with the historians' debate of 1986, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and German national unification in 1990, received intense coverage in the international media, stirring up post-World War II codifications of national history in France, Austria, Italy, Japan, even the United States, and...

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1. Both the title of this essay and the notion of present futures are indebted to the seminal work of Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

2. Of course, an emphatic notion of present futures still operates in the neoliberal imaginings of financial and electronic globalization, a version of the former and largely discredited modernization paradigm, updated for the post-Cold War world.



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