

Historical Relapse, False Memory, and Other Oddities in the Time-Space Continuum

Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory

By Peter Krapp

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Review by Ivy Cooper

In the oft-quoted opening sentences of “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852), Karl Marx writes: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”¹ One can’t help but wonder to what extent Marx is describing an ur-example of *déjà vu*, a phenomenon that wouldn’t be defined and so named until later in the 19th century. Certainly, Louis Bonaparte’s reign would have demanded comparisons to that of his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte. Louis’ actions as president, then emperor, of the French would have borne a distinct familiarity, but with the inevitable difference that his more advanced historical moment provided. That difference accounts for the *déjà vu*: it is a kind of return, farcical in this case, of a past moment Marx hadn’t experienced himself, but that nonetheless felt like a recollection.

Fast-forward in history once again to the present moment in the 21st century. The United States finds itself in a position curiously parallel to and reminiscent of the France of Marx’s age with a President playing out the farcical endgame begun by his father, the President, a decade before. For many Americans, the years of George W. Bush’s administration have felt like a sustained, often nightmarish period of *déjà vu*.

Clearly, the phenomenon of *déjà vu* bears on history. It bears in a more general sense, too, on cultural memory. Its manifestations in art, literature, and historical writing have a great deal to offer those who would understand instances like those cited above as more than mere accidental irony. Peter Krapp’s *Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory* is an ambitious attempt to identify and analyze those moments of historical relapse, false memory, and other oddities in the time-space continuum as they appear in a wide variety of writings.² Krapp’s accomplishment is considerable; one comes out on the other side of his book with a productively destabilized understanding

of déjà vu, keen to scour history and literature for more instances of the phenomenon that might invite something approaching the author's heady, engaging analysis.

Krapp's thorough introduction to the topic, titled "Been There, Done That," effectively accomplishes the destabilization of déjà vu; it becomes clear quite early in his writing that the concept is not and never was solidly defined but rather takes on a variety of manifestations since the end of the 19th century, many seemingly contradictory. "Secret Agents," Krapp's analysis of déjà vu in Freud's work, for instance, is quite simply confounding—not only because it deals with such maddening, slippery Freudian topics as *fausse memoires* and screen memories but because of Freud's own slippages in dealing with these topics. Krapp relates multiple instances of Freud apparently succumbing to false memories himself and writes: "Surely these slips of attention and memory are not completely insignificant. Is this Freud's own *déjà raconté*—and if so, may we analyze him here as he did?"³ Krapp proceeds to do just that, producing an extraordinarily nuanced study of Freud and memory.

Subsequent chapters on Walter Benjamin and Heiner Müller place their writing in a fascinating kind of dialectical historical relationship. Benjamin's conceptual catalog—his angel of history, memories of childhood; his utopian optimism and his reflections on ruins—are all revisited by Müller, the playwright and poet of postwar East Germany and the German reunification. Memories of Benjamin pervade Müller's works, providing points of contemplation, recollection, historical revision and future projection. As Krapp observes, Benjamin's angel of history was rooted in the present, turning its face to the past; Müller's version of the angel faces the torrent of the future. "This release of the future from the confines of the present where it lies hidden is the secret mechanism Müller inherited from Benjamin."⁴

Media technology and its relationship to history, memory, and culture comprise the bulk of the remaining chapters of *Déjà vu*, and represent some of the most original analysis in Krapp's writing. "Andy's Wedding: Reading Warhol" considers memory and re-presentation in Warhol's *a. a novel* (1968), a nearly 500-page tome of tape transcriptions of the Pop artist's conversations. Memory as theme and filmic structural device is the subject of "Unforgiven: Toward an Ethics of Forgetting," a chapter that acknowledges but thankfully does not reenact 1990s-style critical analyses of early postmodern memory films such as *Total Recall*. "Screen Memories: Hypertext," for its part, tackles Jacques Derrida's all-but-unreadable *Glas*

(1974), proposing that online would be the most open-ended, incomplete, and therefore appropriate manner in which to represent it.

Though *Déjà vu* is essentially a collection of individual essays, some previously published, the book is extremely cohesive, with chapters reaching forward or doubling back to engage and connect with ideas elsewhere in the book. Indeed, despite the unstable, chameleon nature of the concept of déjà vu, Krapp deploys it subtly in his writing technique, allowing it to lurk at all times somewhere in and behind his own text while simultaneously analyzing déjà vu in the work of other writers. It's an extraordinary accomplishment.

Notes

¹ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, ed. David McLellan, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

² As such, Krapp's book explores completely different territory from the plethora of recent publications on general forms of cultural memory, memorials and monuments, and phenomena such as traumatic memory suppression, such as Mieke Bal, editor, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999.

³ Krapp, p. 6.

⁴ Krapp, p. 59.