

# Amnesia or Transmission

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In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, when the question of a new beginning involving a radical change could still animate philosophy, based on the conviction that thought itself is capable of originating a new beginning, the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century are marked by a loss of the belief in the very possibility of a new commencement.

Today we thus seem to be in a worse position than Mallarmé, who, after the defeat of the event of his time, the Paris Commune, declared: “There is no Present, no, a present does not exist. Unless the Crowd declares itself.”<sup>1</sup> In designating his time as an epoch without a present, to the extent that he established a direct nexus between the presence of the popular subjectivity on the scene of history and the production of the present, Mallarmé does not, however, exclude the possibility that in some unforeseeable future a new event might inaugurate the present that we lack today. For us, in contrast, even this timid hope must be quenched. The prevailing opinion regarding the new beginning could be summed up as follows: not only did nothing take place but the place, to borrow Mallarmé’s celebrated formula, but, more drastically, the current “shortage” of events, the feeling that there are no more history-breaking events to be expected, is a clear sign that we are living in the times of the end of time, a time which excludes by definition the very possibility of something new taking place.

The present time could then be designated as a time of amnesia, a peculiar amnesia to be sure, since we are not dealing here simply with the forgetting of some past events whose effects, to paraphrase Lacan, have stopped being written in the present conjecture. It is not merely about forgetting the forgotten. The amnesia of the amnesia is rather an anticipation

of the amnesia, a readiness to forget in advance, a programmed amnesia, so to speak. Hence, for us, something is doomed to be forgotten even before it has actually taken place. This anticipated, programmed amnesia is namely the ability to wipe out not only what has happened, but to annihilate the very idea of the possibility for something to happen, in short, the ability to erase the possibility of the possible. What is crucial today, however, is not the question: how to restore the traces of the forgotten/effaced past, but rather: how to deactivate our readiness in advance to forget.

It is precisely in the present conjecture of the amnesia of the possibility of another world that the articulation of philosophy's contemporaneity to the question of transmission has attained its central place. It is not a question, here, of merely bridging the temporal gap between the generation of the sixties and the present generation. What is at stake here is nothing less than the possibility of transmission under the circumstances of contemporary nihilism, a transmission from the "evental generation", a generation that, in effect, experienced in the 1960s, if only for a brief moment, the possibility of a new beginning in the guise of a categorical departure from the existing state of affairs, to a properly nihilistic generation, marked, not by the event but by its absence, a generation that was literally marked by the nothing, a generation that was under the spell of the dominant ideology, according to which a new beginning that could be considered a clear-cut rupture capable of founding a new world and thus inaugurating a new time, a new historical epoch is no longer possible.

How then can the past beginning be inscribed in such a conjecture in which the gap separating the evental from the nihilistic generation seems to be ineliminable? For what is at issue in transmission is the restitution of the moment of the real that evades all integration into chronological time, into history, a moment of the real I call it precisely to the extent that the real is fundamentally trans-historic: That quality namely that is shared by those moments of the infinitisation of the impossible possibilities of a given world which are, as such, transworldly and transtemporal.

In this context, the current amnesia of the beginning could be viewed as a peculiar subjectivation of time, a mode of the subjective time, characterised by the erasure of all discontinuity. This principled indistinction between a "before" and an "after", that is at the core of the "amnestic" operation, produces a new temporal figure, that of the present without the future. By denying the discontinuity in which the eventness of the event consists, the amnesia of the amnesia not only annihilates the past, but also the future. Not, of course, some abstract future, but the future of the very present, the future of its proper present.

How, then, is it possible to insist on the possibility, necessity even, of transmission? How can a break, a rupture, be transmitted? What could be a transmission of the eventual rupture if such an encounter with the impossible-real cannot be inscribed in experience, and would, for that reason, preclude all idea of a common denominator between a generation of rupture and a generation of amnesia, an experience which implies the affirmation of the irreducible distance between the two generations?

Indeed, what is at issue in such transmission cannot be simply the establishment of the continuity between the past and the present. In contrast to history, which, in order to ensure temporal continuity, is precisely immune to all discontinuity, such transmission aims at wrenching from the times “something eternal”, to use Foucault’s expression, the present’s immanent eternity, which cannot be integrated into history, or stored in the archives of memory. Ultimately, what such transmission brings to light is the moment when time is literally suspended, that impossible non-temporal instant before the bifurcation of time into a “before” and an “after” takes place.

Here, the relation between transmission and the beginning, fundamental in contemporary philosophy, becomes evident, here it also shows its political relevance. To be sure, for there to be a transmission at all, something must have taken place. The beginning is therefore a condition for transmission. Today, however, with the loss of faith in the very possibility of a new beginning, the causal relation between transmission and commencement is inverted.

The inversion of the relationship between transmission and commencement has an implication at the level of the restoration of belief in the possibility of a new commencement. Indeed, one might argue that transmission today appears as a first step in the opening of a space for the inscription of a new breach in time, a new beginning to come. From such a perspective, without constituting the sole condition of the possibility of a new commencement, transmission could nonetheless be considered an operation that opens up the possibility of the beginning precisely there where the beginning seems to be impossible.

Amnesia and transmission are, thus, two, ultimately, mutually exclusive relations to the past and to time in general. While amnesia aims to re-inscribe within history that which cannot be inscribed into it, an unforeseeable, non-derived interruption, in order to neutralize its explosive potential, transmission is forced to break with history in order to save something of the past, but in so doing it secures the present for the sake of the future.

<sup>1</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “L’action restreinte,” in *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés* (Paris : Gallimard, 1976), p. 257.