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AN EXPERIMENT IN REPETITION

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"I ... shall proceed to speak a little of the investigative journey I made to test the possibility and meaning of repetition. Without anyone knowing about it (lest any gossip render me incapable of the experiment and in another way weary of repetition), I went by steamship to Stralsund and took a seat in the Schnellpost [express coach] to Berlin."

—SK CC 150

"If you've heard this story before, don't stop me, because I'd like to hear it again."

—Groucho Marx

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I've immediately destroyed the possibility of repetition by missing my flight.

The first time I travelled to Berlin, I ran into an acquaintance from Los Angeles in the London Luton airport, then tried to act surprised at the coincidence (as another friend had mentioned he might be on the flight). After an exchange of mock delight, I shared my cheese sandwich with him in the Luton lounge. It was nice to have a random travel companion, but I was used to traveling alone and generally prefer it;

I remembered why as he squat down by the money exchange desk and sent himself into a full panic, believing he had lost his travelers checks, and indeed, his entire wallet. I stood by, watching the unprofessional nature of his despair. We continued on to board, and we were seated together. I feigned interest in his snapshots.

We landed, and awkwardly faced away from one another on the S-Bahn into Alexanderplatz. I remember him leaning on my back as a rest, an insouciant gesture meant to elicit camaraderie, but which only made me bristle. That was my first journey into Berlin. The second time, where I was consciously on an investigative journey about the nature of repetition having decided to repeat Kierkegaard's adventure, I luxuriated in my bed for about twenty-five minutes too long, brushing my hair, singing along to the radio, comfortable in my trust of London buses and the power of over three hours to get to a location an hour away. This lolly-gagging set off a chain of events I realized would put me about a half hour short of arriving on time for my flight at Luton. I realized this while on a bus on the M4, motionless in traffic. But I had taken the bus the last time; I recalled there was traffic that day as well, and I had made it with enough time to spare then. This time, my heart rate started to accelerate. Even as I knew I wouldn't make it, somehow I still ran frantically with my bag up to the check-in gates without a boarding pass, panting and looking shocked as the security guard told me no one without a boarding pass could go beyond those gates. The flight was still on the ground and I irrationally believed time could still be on my side. The plane took off without me.

Finding myself on the other side of time, in another life I never thought I would have to inhabit, was the stuff of nightmares—literally, as I have been having the same one over and over since I was in my teens, where I am perennially packing clothing from, say, a dirt gap underneath the house, or trying to catch a non-existent cab, or waiting in a line just about fifty people too long and I miss my flight—usually to somewhere I really want to go, like Paris. However, I had never dreamed of missing a flight to Berlin, so it was a new and old sensation simultaneously; I experienced the difference between the night-sweating terror of missing a dream flight, and the somewhat irritating and mundane fact of now having to take an hour and a half train to Gatwick to catch another EasyJet flight five hours later.

The first time I traveled to Berlin, it was after much hemming and hawing about whether or not to stay in a hotel or impose on a newly made acquaintance; furthermore, one who wasn't even there, as he was teaching in Sheffield on a long commute. But his wife and newborn child were

in the flat in Prenzlauer Berg. I always prefer to stay with people rather than on one's own, providing people are accommodating and up for that sort of thing. One never knows if they are hosting distant acquaintances either out of a sense of openness and charm, never knowing themselves when they, indeed, might need an open door and a host with a good local map, or whether it is merely veiled embarrassment at wishing to say no. I worried about the fact of the newborn child. But after many text messages sent back and forth from the airport, I received sufficient encouragement that I should cancel my hotel and stay with them. So I called the hotel I had booked, to lie and say that I had missed my flight, and wouldn't be able to make it.

Odd that this next time I would journey to Berlin, I would *actually miss* my flight. I had, this time as well, booked a hotel for one night, online, named the *Honigmond*. Only later did I realize I had booked a single room at the Honeymoon Hotel, and this may have contributed to my eagerness to cancel it as my arrival was delayed until midnight. I called another friend I had met the first time I was in Berlin, and took her up on the offer of staying at her flat for the night. I reasoned that I would be tired after journeying fourteen hours on a trip that should have taken four, and that it would be nice to stay with someone I knew. Again, I cancelled a hotel room in Berlin.

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Kierkegaard's strategy, whereupon he returns "to ascertain whether or not a repetition is possible," is a kind of farce. It is the joke of twice, and interesting that he only uses the double experience, via the single recurrence, to make this assessment. For if he had returned to Berlin again and again, surely his associations and judgements, his lived experiences and therefore his memories would exponentially unfold and change the character of his impressions of Berlin, and indeed, of repetition itself. But of course, absolute repetition is not possible, in the sense that time alters all, and in Kierkegaard's interest in telling a good story, only one example is needed to prove this: that what we think of as repetition is merely a resemblance to the original (and the vex: *all* moments are originals), which occurred in time once (with all its chaotic variables), and now holds itself up in memory to do with what we will.

At the beginning of his second trip to Berlin, Kierkegaard (under his pseudonym Constantin Constantius) *does* experience a small intimation of repetition, in that a horrible carriage-journey is repeated: "On my previous journey I had the end seat inside the carriage near the front (some consider this a great prize), and then for thirty-six hours was so shaken together with my nearest neighbors, all too near, that upon reaching Hamburg I had not merely lost my mind but lost my legs too." As expected, his second trip was equally horrible; even though he moves to the 'coupé', he states: "Everything was repeated." But from there the second trip unravels in terms of his experiment; upon his return to Berlin, the whole city is covered in a cloud of dust from Ash Wednesday (on his first trip this phenomenon did not occur, "presumably, because it was winter"), the enchanting play of shadows from the candlelight in his first lodging is now gone; he becomes piqued, irritated by the foreignness in his hoped-for repetitions: the clouds of dust that plague him, the lack of candles that make his same residence gloomy and dead. He concludes no repetition is to be found in this double trip.

Twice, the double, taking us into the terrain of the uncanny. The uncanny unsettles, the term Freud uses is *Das Unheimliche*, unhomely, where something is familiar and foreign at the same time. We may experience this sensation in repetition, this 'same but different,' this 'familiar but foreign' feeling. In dreams for example, where this schism of the same but not the same lingers. Photographs offer us this sense as well. A kind of *déjà vu*: already seen.

Think about what happens when you take a snapshot: it's an instantaneous *recognition*—something you photograph is something you have seen before, something you have learned is worth photographing. One *remembers* that this is a scene that would look good photographed. Rosalind Krauss tells us: "...the priorness and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the picturesque...for the beholder it depends on being recognized as such, a re-cognition made possible only by prior example."¹ Towards this singularity, one acts. The framing, the cropping, the light source, the decisive moment, Cartier-Bresson, Levitt, Winogrand. In effect, here you go blind to the moment. The camera goes up and the scene is seen through its lens and your memory, rather than with your own eyes. This moment of disappearance in your lived reality recurs to you later, as a seeming double of the moment.

The intention of a snapshot may be to preserve and repeat the moment, but paradoxically it is a moment one has not really existed fully within. So viewing the snapshot returns as the *single* instance of really

seeing whatever one was looking at in the first place. In this way, the shock of your existence is allowed to prove itself to you. You can look at yourself looking.

Except you weren't really looking. It was only you yourself looking that is doubled. Vito Acconci's project of photographing every time he blinked (*Blinks*, 1970) still proves canny—one doesn't look when one takes a snapshot. So in a sense, the play of photographing means getting to see what you missed: the surprise of the instant, an instant later. This re-shuffling of time has its *petite* thrills. Even if you are seeing a close resemblance in what you think you saw, it always has its surprises. As Winogrand said, "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed."

But Winogrand's approach has a different temporal emphasis than most of us taking snapshots: he was after the *what might occur* in a picture. But most people taking snapshots see what we remember is worth seeing—or see what we want to remember. This is different than allowing the future to ambush us. It is a 'knowing in advance of seeing.'

And this knowing in advance of seeing, or finding what you are looking for, or looking for what you know, has its future corollary: "nostalgic-to-be." This term was used recently in the New York Times in an article on the health benefits of nostalgia. "I don't miss an opportunity to build nostalgic-to-be memories," Dr. Sedikides says. "We call this anticipatory nostalgia and have even started a line of relevant research." The researchers obviously feel nostalgia has gotten a bad reputation; they want to clean out the cobwebs—all those soldiers and their malaise—and make nostalgia an exercise in the good health of living a meaningful life.

In contrast to pushing the past forward in 'anticipatory nostalgia' is the app Snapchat. From a New Yorker article on the phenomenon: "Snapchat is a photo- and video-messaging service that deletes images and videos from a recipient's phone within ten seconds; every shot is ephemeral. As of this past February, the service handled sixty million photos a day." The founders of Snapchat say that through this deletion, their mission is to change the notion of what a photograph is and use it as a means of "communication." I think by communication they mean that everybody makes mistakes. In an interview with founder Evan Spiegel, Spiegel says that the service allows you to "free yourself from an amorphous collection of who you've been forever."

Who you've been forever—now you can be only what you are next.

Deletion as an artificial shove towards forgetting probably works, although occasionally you must remember that you photographed something. In the avalanche of snapshotting (there are 2.5 billion cameraphones in use) Snapchat functions as a kind of 'mop-squad' (as Stephen Colbert has called it), deleting and sending out little pieces of code to follow the image to ensure its deletion. (Whether or not you believe the pictures are really gone is another matter.)

What we see in these trends a sense of a temporal itchiness; a wish to either retreat-to-build, or delete-to-move-forward; in other words: to escape the uncertainty of the future, or the embarrassment of the past.

But Kierkegaard tries to tell us that just as one cannot live in an endless fog of remembrance, that "one can only be wearied by the new." Rather than these nostalgic or manic leaps backwards and forwards, repetition has a unique temporal movement in Kierkegaard's thought: "what is recollected is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards." The embrace of what has been, willed forward into unknown terrain: repetition is properly *the time of one's life*.

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Comedy and tragedy have their perfection, Kierkegaard states, but when neither pleases him, 'he turns to farce.' It is in this spirit I have further extended Kierkegaard's experiment for this symposium in the form of snapshots.

I have thought a lot about the comedy and perhaps hysteria in all this picture-taking we engage in. Even if one is serious about the absurd in their photographic practice, as I consider myself to be, is it not truly absurd to be taking so many snapshots? I began to wonder while reading Kierkegaard's description of his theater-going experience in Berlin—could the snapshot be considered farce? There are aspects of farce I see in the act of taking a snapshot: speed, unruliness, inclusiveness. Everyone can participate in it.

Also, as Kierkegaard writes, "all the characters in a farce are sketched on the abstract scale of the general." He describes it as the "spaciousness of the abstraction" and it is something a person taking snapshots (as well as a viewer viewing them) can 'move around' in.

Because it is not predetermined what particulars will align to fit the abstraction, and in this sense, as every performance of the same play is a new performance, every snapshot is its own performance, and its details have the potential to provoke great feeling (versus the deadening power of having to look at something again). The impulse to perform the same always allows for a *vibrato* of the new. As Jonathan Rée writes in his text on Kierkegaard in this book, "Every performance is a performance of something—in other words of something larger than itself, of something abstract, or typical, or generic." And it is our own participation in this—our own emphases, glances, and blinks—that animate this spacious abstraction, and will the performance onwards.

Notes

¹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1985) 166

Unless otherwise noted, references to Kierkegaard are from: Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, trans. Howard H. Hong and Edna V Hong (New York: Princeton UP 1983)