

REMEMBERING THE 1990s

Joe Brooker and Roger Luckhurst

How to believe in the contemporary? It would be easy to show that the times of those who seem to belong to the same epoch, defined in terms of something like a historical frame or social horizon, remain infinitely heterogeneous and, to tell the truth, completely unrelated to one another. One can be very sensitive to this, though sensitive at the same time, on another level, to a being together that no difference or difference can threaten... There are knots, points of great condensation, places of high valuation, paths of decision or interpretation that are virtually unavoidable.

Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of
Roland Barthes', *The Work of Mourning*

Dead on arrival / The 90s revival

Carter USM, 'The 90s Revival' (1991)

Our decision to hold a conference entitled 'Remembering the 1990s' at Birkbeck College in September 2000 was designed to force a conjuncture of immediacy and historicity, those apparently contradictory poles. The analysis of the contemporary faces obstacles and opportunities that are inseparable. On one hand, the familiarity with our own times ought to make them easier and swifter to fathom than more distant periods. On the other, our very proximity is a problem. Pressed up against the quick and ever-expanding flow of the contemporary, our perception may be skewed. We wanted to know, even only nine months after the decade was done, whether the decade's recent end left us in any place to understand it – or any place better than those we occupied during the 1990s themselves. Should analysts of culture now be able to discern large-scale trends and totalities in the decade's trajectory; or is a recognition of dispersion and multiplicity the only honest way to approach the recent past? And just how useful is the span of a decade as a guide to thinking about a culture's tides of change and continuity? Could we now attempt something equivalent to Fredric Jameson's essay, 'Periodizing the 60s'?

The most immediate response to the conference theme was delivered by someone passing the registration desk: 'You people have bloody short memories!' Yet even this seemed a peculiarly apt remark on an era in which

questions of historical apprehension became entangled with 'memory wars', a plethora of amnesias, cryptomnesias, and attention deficit disorders as well as controversially recovered memories at public and private level. The implicit challenge in 'Remembering the 1990s' was how to remember a time in which memory itself might be seen to have undergone significant transformation. Several of the contributors to this issue - Robert Hampson, Peter Middleton, Roger Luckhurst - focus on the category of memory as a theme of 1990s culture. Does memory serve as a means to unravel the historicity of the 1990s, or does the privileging of memory risk collapsing into the superficial immediacy of the era itself? Norman Finkelstein, in his polemic *The Holocaust Industry*, has dismissed the analytical category of memory, 'currently all the rage in the ivory tower', as 'surely the most impoverished concept to come down the academic pike in a long time.' For us, though, the memory wars of the 1990s, whether contested public memorialisation or controversial restructurings of conceptions of private memory, open up key issues of the decade. Questions of cultural and memorial identity cannot be posed without raising, for instance, the changing ways in which memory is processed by technology and media. In turn, these raise issues of globalisation and the new electronic pathways for the flights of capital around the world, with all its consequent destabilisations of political affiliation, cultural tradition or social habitus.

Our first epigraph warns against coercive cohesion, however, and in truth we sought to encourage dissonance in possible routes through the 1990s. This issue will stretch from a synoptic analysis of globalisation (John Tomlinson) to analyses of densely textured local moments in British 90s culture. It will move from Young British Art (and its less well-remembered precursor movement, the New Image Glasgow school of painting, as recovered by Michael Bracewell) to the outer limits of scientific discourse (complexity theory as explored by Wendy Wheeler; scientized New Ageism as limned by Steven Connor). It will pass from high art redoubts of experimental poetry (Hampson and Middleton) to an analysis of the cultural-political significance of the battle of Blur and Oasis (Joe Brooker). From the global to the local, from the aesthetic to the scientific, from the high to the low – these discontinuities nevertheless proffer moments of connection and continuity. Perhaps it is the essays of Lynne Segal and Andrew Gibson that most bring into the open the political anger that drives much of the need of our contributors to apprehend the historicity of the 1990s.

The greatest risk of writing about the recent past is the speed with which the significance of events can take on new patterns of meaning. None of our speakers in 2000 could anticipate how the destruction of the World Trade Center a year later would instantly reinterpret the geopolitical meanings of the post-Cold War New World Order that had emerged during the 1990s. Several essayists here have referred to September 11 in the revisions for the print versions of their talks. Yet the transitional character

of recent history has only been reinforced by The Second Gulf War of 2003. As we write this introduction, some two weeks into the American and Anglo invasion of Iraq, what seems most lacking in our attempt to remember the 1990s is any analysis of the shifting nature of proxy wars throughout the decade (in Africa and the Balkans, most obviously). The framing of the 1990s by Bush Senior and Junior will surely become one shorthand way of isolating the last decade of the twentieth century – even if the articulation of this geopolitics with cultural production is yet to be worked through. Whether the Clinton years will thus seem an aberration or part of a larger emerging pattern will be a matter for debate. Perhaps, as the 1990s become revisited by cultural historians, someone will even find something to say about the mixture of depression and farce that constituted the Major years in England (God knows, we tried). This is a way of acknowledging that these interventions are only the beginning of a process of remembering the 1990s.