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PAST AND FUTURE PRESENTS: EXISTENTIAL TIME AND FUTURAL MATERIALISM

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ABSTRACT: The paper brings existential temporality, as developed in the work of phenomenologists Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Husserl, into dialogue with historical materialism. What results is the development of a theoretical background for what the author terms futural materialism, which is taken to be a complimentary logical extension of historical materialist projects. To this end, it is suggested that the past and the future are best understood as materially existing in the present in an immanent way, mediated by conscious beings in the form of memory, projection, residual effect, and affect. Put differently, the present's presence in the past and future play a determining roll in those temporal dimensions, which subsequently fold back into the configuration of the present. Following Nietzsche and drawing influence from Guattari and Deleuze, it is argued that past and future are relatively fluid tools to be purposively deployed in the present for particular purposes rather than being transcendent facts which subjectivity must merely contend with. It is further asserted that as part of a broader non-reductive material monist project of social transformation, both futural and historical materialism are necessary considerations.

KEYWORDS: Temporality; Phenomenology; Materialism; Existentialism

Futural materialism is not a theory or position which seeks to compete with or deny historical materialism, nor is it a position which seeks to draw attention to the importance of planning or care for the future, as one might initially think. Rather, it is complimentary to historical materialism and merely seeks to extend and refine the logics of this body of knowledge by suggesting that the future and past are equally

materially present in the present, or equally absent. The suggestion then, is that if there is a historical material connection from the past to the present and the present to the future, so too is there a material connection from the future to the present and from the present to the past – the arrows of causation point both ways. Put differently, it is suggested here that the past and the future materially bear upon the present in much the same way because the present bears upon them in similar ways. Such an understanding of temporality more fully acknowledges the various fields of possibility that open before (and behind) being or subjectivity in each present moment, rendering the possibilities within those fields more immediately realizable. It is in this way that the enactive futural dimension enriches the transformative possibilities of historical materialism. Moreover, just as we must be cautious when it comes to using and abusing history for life, as Nietzsche (2010) would warn, we must also be cautious of the ways in which we use and abuse the future for life. Futural materialism is firmly grounded in philosophical material monism in that there is a commitment to the idea that anything one speaks of is, in some way or another, material and is located in a relative position within spacetime, though this is a point historical materialists might contest. It should be noted that the material monism underlying the work here is a nonreductive one grounded in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and bearing similarities to the neurophenomenology of Francisco Varela (1991) or what we might call the neo-emergentis non-reductive physicalism of Evan Thompson (2007). Put briefly, this version of non-reductive material monism holds that in complex dynamic systems, 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts' in that what emerges from constitutive parts is not reducible to them and the part/whole division is one of co-constitution and mutual causation.¹ In what follows, the theoretical background for futural materialism is laid out. What remains for a future project is to deploy this more concretely in methodologies and practices which seek social transformation, especially in relation to historical materialist projects.

As human beings, as beings highly capable of copious amounts of self-induced reterritorialization, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983, especially p.273f) would note, there is a way that time can be understood which corresponds to a mode of being that is conducive to social transformations and creative affirmation: existential or phenomenological temporality. Existential temporality is not necessarily non-linear. Time is still understood roughly as a movement of present, future, and past, but this movement is understood as a movement throughout the entire length of the moment or life in question (Merleau-Ponty, p.419, 1967). That is to say, every 'event', including those events which are past and future, shifts and alters as (space)time moves. The

¹ See Thompson (2007) for a detailed explanation of this. Especially Chapter 3 "Autonomy and Emergence" and Appendix 2 "Emergence and the Problem of Downward Causation"

past does not become an unalterable, objective, and static, fact bearing on the present and the future is not an open field of possibilities which does not bear upon the present or the past. On the contrary, they both move and shift or are sketched² and resketched by the present being who interacts with them, always with the flavour of a new situation. The present possesses a certain presence in both past and future. Moreover, the present plays a causal role in them through active and passive interpretation and interaction. To put this another way, conscious agents³ may reterritorialize the events of their past and future. It is in this sense that the past and future are always “present in the world” (Merleau-Ponty, p.412, 1967) or “ready-to-hand” (Heidegger, §69, 1962, Merleau-Ponty, p.416, 1967). Recalled pasts and projected futures are tools to be used by present being and without conscious beings, past and future can hardly, or perhaps not at all, be said to exist. Like Heidegger's hammer, 'the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship become and the more it is encountered unveiledly as that which it is – as equipment.' (1962, §69). As conscious beings it makes little sense to always equate our experience of temporality with the linear temporal ordering we project onto mere objects (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p.412), a projection useful in certain situations but not in all situations. As far as we know a rock cannot interact with its past and future, human beings can. There is debate surrounding how far one must take such arguments. Biologist Robert Lanza and astronomer Bob Berman (2009) take a somewhat radical position by suggesting that consciousness is a foundation for reality and the cosmos, while Gramsci (1992, see especially “On the So-called Existence of the External World”) simply suggests that, at least epistemologically, any objective fact, say a chip on a rock from a past collision, is at best 'universally subjective' (p.446), which is to say objective only relative to temporally ('historically') situated conscious beings. A debate may be had regarding whether one must commit to some version of Lanza and Berman's ontological/cosmological argument or something resembling Gramsci's more epistemological argument. Regardless, under the traditional linear conception of time, the past bears on the present and the present bears on the future. Each possesses a certain presence in that which follows. In the existential conception of time, the past and future exist through the present, which possesses a presence in both future and past. Insofar as this is the case, the past and future may be dynamically interacted with, or not, in various ways according to the material

2 Merleau-Ponty uses Husserl's term “Abschattungen” for this. See *Phenomenology of Perception*. p.417f

3 NB: the definition of consciousness and debates around what counts as conscious is quite contentious and beyond the scope of the present work. I would accept a very broad definition of consciousness.

conditions one wishes to presently actualize within certain fields of possibilities. One may use the hammer for carpentry, but one may also use it as a weapon, to crack nuts, to weigh down paper, to prop open a window or any number of other novel uses in situation, again within certain fields of possibility (it would be difficult to use a hammer to fly to the moon). The hammer was designed with a certain form and with purpose, but we may reterritorialize it by using it to actualize different events or phenomena. The same can be said of the past (or the future). What has and will happen may be 'fact' but the reactualization of these events (or pre-actualization as is the case of the future) in the present is, to a large degree, determined by the present being through their ability to use the events in question in various ways. In this sense, no matter how 'real' or 'factual' a past (or future) event may be, its causal efficacy on the present being is ambiguous in character. The past, like the hammer, is determined but its effects within the present are largely determined by the attitude of the conscious being. To begin to grasp existential temporality more fully, it will be helpful to look at its structure.

Perhaps one of the best articulations of the 'structure' of existential temporality is the one offered by Merleau-Ponty (1967). He elucidates his understanding of time by drawing from the work of Husserl (p.416). The idea in its most basic form is that past events are, as noted above, always observed from a present. Insofar as the present is a different 'position' than the original moment being accessed in memory, the past has necessarily been changed, hence Merleau-Ponty's assertion that time moves along its entirety. At the very least the past is being 'observed' from a different point of view, in some cases it has been altered by misattribution, manipulation or delusion. This is a fairly well documented fact in psychology (Lindsay & Johnson 1989., Zaragoza & Lane, 1994., Read, 1996.). Everything that is remembered (or expected) is always already slightly altered by the fact that it is being reconstituted or preconstituted from an instant in which it does not exist in an unmediated fashion and through which it interacts with a different set events and different present situations (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p.416). Like Heraclitus' river (Plato, 1998, 402a), one can never remember or project the same way twice. Borrowing from Husserl, Merleau-Ponty provides a diagram outlining what existential time might 'look' like, a slightly altered version of which is reproduced here in Figure 1.

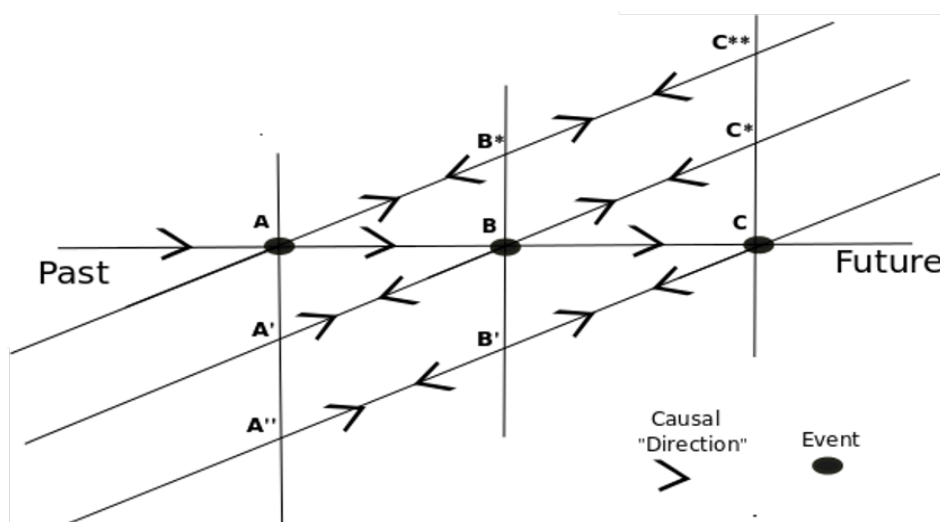


Fig. 1: Existential Temporality adds 'depth' to the linear understanding of time. **NB:** the causal arrows and the diagonal lines 'above' the line ABC have been added. Merleau-Ponty notes that to be complete Husserl's diagram the lines above (indicating futural projections) should be added and the causal lines are implied by his text.

In moving from event A to event B, event A, for the conscious observer, shifts to become A' because it is now being observed from a new position which necessarily alters it, however slightly the alteration may be. The same phenomenon occurs with projection of the future. Event B*, as projected from A becomes B when actualized and shifts again to become B' upon reaching event C, at which point A' shifts again to become A''. It should be noted that the events A, B and C are not denied their material existence as real events and there is still a causal chain running from the past to the present and future. However, as new events occur the past and future ones can no longer be accessed by the conscious agent in their initial form – their material condition is one which exists as memory or projection, residual effect and, importantly, affect – they exist only in a state of transient but immanent mediation. In this sense we must say that the past and the future are similar in many ways in terms of their material existence. Strictly speaking, neither have an independent material existence in the present because their existence is dependent on beings capable of experiencing effect and/or affect. One might even go so far as to say that

documenting something in the form of a picture or video does not suffice to perfectly preserve a given moment or event because the picture will always be viewed from a different moment and thus will be given a different shading, no matter how subtle that shading might be. The 'arrows' of causation in figure 1 are my addition to this depiction of temporality. Without them it might be concluded that Merleau-Ponty is providing a description of how memories perhaps fade or are psychologically altered depending on temporal distance. What I have in mind, as Merleau-Ponty's text seems to suggest, is much more enactive. The primes and the asterisks are, in a sense, inevitable but they also indicate the possibility for conscious interaction with and active alteration of the past. A given being at event B must 'reach through a thin layer of time' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p.416) to access or retain what has happened or will happen. This action of reaching and the shading applied by the present being changes how the event A or C will affect them and is connected to intentionality, both in the philosophical sense of 'directedness' (Brentano, 1973) and in the more mundane sense in which intentional actions are ones involving choice between alternatives, though the latter is not always the case. This is why the arrows of causation run in both directions on the diagonal lines.

To be sure, the past plays a determining role in the present, but the present also plays a determining role in the past by both calling it forth (recalling) and colouring the interaction. As noted by one literary critic, 'the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show' and furthermore the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past (T.S. Elliot, 1960, Sec.1). To be clear, the suggestion here is not that we should become historical revisionists. Rather, it is that we are already historical and futural revisionists – the point is to always ask why we call forth a past or summon a future and what purposes such activities serve.

While it is certainly true that human psychology plays a large role in the alteration of past events by the present observer, what is most compelling philosophically is the malleability of *how* an event is remembered and how a being may actively constitute the style of the interaction. It is true that one may not change the 'facts' of past events or even the 'facts' of future events,⁴ but the style with which one carries them forth and how these facts are put to use in the present moment are largely open. In speaking generally of his own existence, Merleau-Ponty notes that he is 'the absolute source... [and that his existence] does not stem from [its] antecedents, from [its] physical or social environment; instead it moves out toward them and

4 Again, the extensive debate around determinism is beyond the scope of the present work.

sustains them, for [he] alone bring[s] into being...the tradition which [he] elects to carry on...' (1967, p.ix). The same can be said of one's past and future. Events are not burdensome externalities which the being simply must come to accept. They are part of the being's 'field of presence', as Merleau-Ponty might say, and they are open to interaction in whichever way the being decides is useful. Every present is a situation where the given being exists in the presence of Sartrean facticity, the concrete material conditions of the present, but this matters little when it comes to the being's ability to choose how they will engage with the 'facts' of the situation, what pasts and futures they call forth aid (or hinder) them, and how they will use those pasts and futures. In a sense there is a "nothingness" which separates the given being in the current situation from the situations of the past and future, but this nothingness is not a direct causal link so much as a responsibility for what they do with their past and future in the present moment (See Sartre, 1956, p.68f). The important point here is that from any given present, the conscious being may both select which past events (and future projections) to engage with (a more or less free choice), but more importantly they may choose how they engage with the chosen events. Both of these choices colour the event or events focused in on, which in turn shape the being's present dynamic interaction with it's *Lebenswelt*. In this way the human present is always a dynamic co-emergence of past, present, and future since each bears upon the other. Certainly the past bears on the present but never before the present bears on the past, while both past and future collapse into a fleeting present. Conscious beings reach into their past and future, their 'field of presence', with 'lines of intentionality' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p.416). This interaction with past and future is a way of actively shaping the events of a life, a situation, a *socius* and so on. It might be helpful to think of feedback loops. The individual is situated in a present from which they project the events of the future and remember events of the past. The manner in which these events are projected and remembered produces feedback which help to determine the effect the events have on the being in the present situation. For Nietzsche, actively 'willing' the way one interacts with a particular event of the past is called 'willing backwards'. To do this is to engage with the 'will as creator' which converts the past from mere, uncontrollable 'dreadful accident[s]' to affirmations of life as a life (1995, p.249f and p.308f). This type of indiscriminate affirmation amoralyzes 'good' and 'bad' past (and future) events, making them all capable of becoming affirmations or celebrations of the present life (Nietzsche, 1995, p.435f).

Another visual representation of existential temporality will help to clarify this. Figure 2 depicts existential temporality as experienced by a being in a situation.

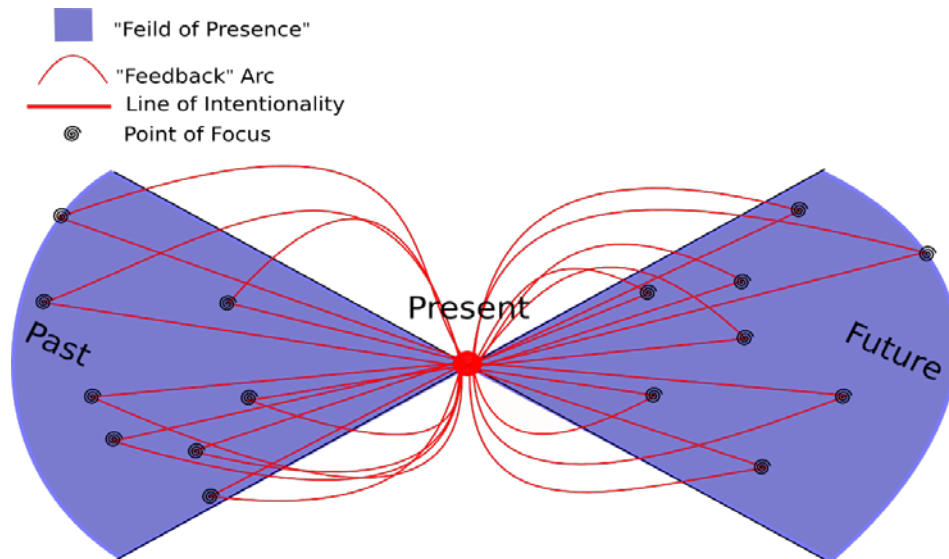


Fig. 2: Pure Existential Temporality

Figure 2 depicts a being (red circle) in their field of presence at a given moment of 'frozen' time where the historical and futural fields 'collapse' on the present through purposive intentionality. It should be noted that this is a dynamic model of time and the diagram would be more instructive if it was interactive. Ideally the black spirals would be spinning and they would fade in and out in different positions along with the red lines as the red circle moved 'forward'. In fact, this diagram can be taken as a slightly different expression of Deleuze and Guattari's plane of immanence, specifically the social strata (1987, Ch.3). Likewise, it may help to think of the temporal dimension of being as a zone of deterritorialization or site of potential breakthrough (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.280f). In any case, as the circle moves 'forward' the futural field collapses into specific material conditions when met by the circle and the field of the past expands once the circle has moved away from it. Both the past and future fields continue to open up at their ends making each of the blue 'points' which constitute them available for use by the present being. The blue shaded fields of historical and futural presence narrow the closer they are to the being to indicate the fact that particular material conditions are rendered more immediately viable, verifiable, or imaginable, the closer they are to presently actualized material conditions. The black spirals indicate past and future events which the individual has

chosen, consciously or otherwise, to focus on or draw forth for use in the present situation. The use of spirals is intentional as this better indicates that the moments are not static and can be viewed and interacted with in various ways. The straight red lines are lines of intentionality being cast by the agent into the past and future with the goal of (p)recapturing the moments of choice. The curved red lines are the feedback lines which carry the effects of the interpretation of the events back to the individual for them to interact with. The temporal fields are very similar to the plain of immanence in that they are virtualities which may or may not be actualized in a present moment and, as noted, the 'closer' the get to the conscious being in its actual(ized) material conditions, the more viable they become as conditions to be actualized in the present. The present moment, where the temporal fields are collapsed, is directly experienced in the same way that B is directly experienced when a being is in that moment, as in figure 1. We might then say that event A is located somewhere in the past temporal field. However, due to the nature of existential time A cannot be 'directly' experienced as A since that moment and its direct material conditions are no longer present, the same might be said of C in the futural field. If we were to locate event A in the field and draw a vertical line, this line would indicate all of the possible ways that the original event A can be interacted with in the present moment (this would of course exclude A proper, since again those material conditions no longer exist in an unmediated way). In other words, the line would be the entire set of A to the power of x excluding A. At any given present moment the being casts numerous lines of intentionality which aid the action at hand in the present situation. It must be stressed once again that there is no immaterial or transcendental aspect to this understanding of temporality. Futures and pasts exist materially, though in a mediated way, as memory, projection, residual effect, and affect.

It is interesting to note that a typical linguistic metaphor used to describe time is that the past is 'behind' us and the future is before or 'in front' of us (Núñez & Sweetser, 2006, p.402). This metaphor fits well with the linear understanding of temporality. That which has happened is relatively passed by and somewhat untouchable, finished, or over. The past, considered this way, is baggage that one drags behind them, corpses of moments that were, always weighing on the present and fixedly determining its material conditions. At best the observer that is moving 'forward' through time can occasionally glance back over their shoulder to see what is there weighing on them. In historical materialist terms, the past material conditions heavily figure into the present material conditions. Furthermore the notion that the future lies ahead suggests that it is somehow more open to being freely shaped. The future is an open path and the agent has at least some relative choice as to their

direction within the confines of existent material conditions. One can see the horizon with anticipation of their future interactions and mold them accordingly, usually with certain limitations dictated by the past and present. This linguistic metaphor is considered to be 'more or less cross-culturally universal' (Núñez & Sweetster, 2006, p.401). However, in the Aymara language spoken in parts of South America the metaphor appears to be reversed: the future is described as behind and the past in front or ahead (Núñez & Sweetster, 2006, p.402). Another observer notes that speakers of this language might use the metaphor this way because the past can be "seen" much more clearly whereas the future possesses a higher degree of uncertainty and cannot be "viewed" as clearly (Santiago et.al. 2007, p.512). This way of describing time is useful in terms of existential temporality because under this framework the past is taken to be somewhat more ready-to-hand. I can more readily and creatively use a hammer that sits before me than I can one which is somewhere in the distance behind me and is thus largely not visible. It is in this sense that the past, while more certain than the future is also, in some respects, less determinant than it. It can be used much more readily and thus in many more ways than the future can. The future, however, is not necessarily more unknown than the past. The difference is that as they move through (space)time, a given being will arrive in a present that was once a future and be able to compare the emergent material conditions to those of the expected future in the experienced past, though as noted the past will have necessarily shifted given the movement of existential temporality. A bias emerges, at least within a given life and perhaps with the aid of recorded history, such that we generally ascribe a heavier weight to the reality of the past than the future because we think we can accurately compare what we thought the future would be like with what the future became once it emerged as a present. However, this implicitly presumes that the projections of the future did not impact the emergence of the future as present. To compare expectations of the future with what becomes of the future once it is present is to ignore the causal role of the expectations and disregard the shading given to the future in the past present as well as the feedback shading provided to the past present by those expectations, which in turn constitutes the emerging present. Moreover, neither past nor future exist in a material way except through mediation with present beings, thus there is little reason to prioritize the efficacy and material reality of one over the other. In this sense the past is almost more indeterminate than the future or perhaps they are equally determinate. No amount of planning and prudence can account for the contingencies of that which has not yet happened. In a sense the contingency of the future is beyond the grasp of the individual. With regards to the past, the attitude taken up by the present being *is* contingency. The determination of

the attitude is the shading added to the past from the present by the agent and this must be accounted for, if not actively engaged with in projects which seek some form of active transformation within the present.

Much of what has been said regarding existential temporality already illustrates some of the modes of life which open up from understanding time in this way. First and foremost it frees the given being and more generally the socio-political grouping from their past as a burden by granting them a causal role in how past events shape present moments beyond mere (over)determination from past and present material conditions. This type of freedom from one's past is not all that novel. As previously stated it is a foundational element of Sartre's doctrine of freedom and responsibility (see 1956, p.66*f.*) and fits well with Nietzsche's concept of 'amor fati' or love of one's fate (see Thiele, 1990). In short, existential temporality is a mode of understanding lived time which is conducive to a more robust use of desire in the creation of different material conditions within the present.

To be certain, it is difficult to accept that the past and future exist materially only through various forms of mediation because this involves a high degree of responsibility placed on beings in the present. It is much easier to issue excuses when we are overdetermined by past material conditions rather than, as Marx notes, being free to create but not in material conditions of our choice (1963, p.1). The responsibility becomes heavier yet since being is equipped with an extensive arsenal of historical and futural conditions that may be intentionally deployed for the use or abuse of life within the present. Nietzsche is quite critical of relying too heavily on the mode of living which uses the past as an excuse since it is a 'reactive form of life' which merely 'submits' to the 'burdens' of evaluations which are given by the past or those beings of the past; it is to be restricted to the reactive dialectical mode of living (See Deleuze, 2001, p.71). For Nietzsche this is the sickness of modern society, that it 'is the triumph of "reaction" over active life and of negation over affirmative thought.' (Deleuze, 2001, p.68). It is to treat our past and the pasts of others as though they are absolute truth severed from the purpose and situation they serve. A transcendental past (or future) is a self-alienation where human being creates something powerful and then obeys it as though it is something above and beyond its origin. It is a form of historocentrism which focuses on the recreation of past modes of thought and past modes of living rather than on creating new modes of thought and life. This was precisely what the Russian Futurists rejected: the unreflexive imposition of the past on the present. It is perhaps the worst type of tyranny, the tyranny of history or more briefly historocentrism. Human beings are thrown into a world which is largely beyond their control and their freedom to live creatively by manipulating, accepting,

revising, and rejecting, established orders at will in any given situation is partially taken away by a propensity to obsess over the past as though it transcends the present, when in fact it is mediated by it and thus only immanent within it. Recall Deleuze's contention that the history of philosophy has played the repressor's role by intimidating and burdening would-be philosophers, hopeful to create new modes of thought and life (2001, p.65f). Certainly it is beneficial to sometimes engage with tradition, but this engagement must be interactive to facilitate the wondrous ability of being to create or deterritorialize. It is not difficult to see why the Russian Futurists were so eager to 'throw the established doctrines overboard to make way for new ones.' (Burluk et.al. 1917). Rigid historocentrism, relying on the past (often via attachment to traditions) is, at least in part, what allows for the perpetuation of classism, racism, sexism, religious conflict and in general the hindrance of creating new modes of living. In short it is a barrier to personal and societal rhizomatic growth. To go as far as the Russian Futurists is to go too far. Privileging the future is a mistake. It is also mere reaction and an attempt to negate something, namely the past. This is precisely why existential temporality is quite useful. It allows the past and future to coexist with the present as tools to be creatively used to actualize potential events. Hence the contention that futural materialism is best understood as a complimentary component of a broader approach which includes historical materialism. It should also be noted that the claim here is not that existential temporality will eradicate the aforementioned social ills or provide a 'better' way to live. It simply facilitates a mode of thinking and living which is more conducive to creating ever more modes of thought and life rather than constantly trying to cling to that which has been.

Existential temporality does not privilege the past as something unalterable which merely limits current and future action by determining current material conditions. Rather, it considers past (and future) events to be tools for use in the present situation, tools which may be used in any number of ways. One may creatively select which past experiences to call forth and how to interact with them and combine these with imagined futures and presents to generate countless new modes of living. It is worth noting once more that what is being suggested here is that utilization of one past or one future in a present moment does not require the being or beings to always rely on the past or future or to always use it in the same way. Insofar as we freely use our pasts and our futures in novel ways rather than be dominated and constrained by them, we are able to live creatively by affirming the pasts, the futures, and our lives in general as collapses of mediated and immanent futures and pasts. This understanding of temporality is conducive to a more

deterritorialized socius and should be considered in projects which seek to utilize historical materialism as a method towards social transformation.

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