What does Nietzsche mean in writing “The Abuse of History”, and what is its reference to our understanding of historical discourse in Museology and Visual Culture?

“History, so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power, and thus will never become a pure science like mathematics. The question how far life needs such a service is one of the most serious questions affecting the well-being of a man, a people and culture. For by excess of history life becomes maimed and degenerate, and is followed by the degeneration of history as well.”

Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the most influential thinkers within the realm of critical and philosophical discourse. His concepts appeal to a wide range of subjects, ranging from existentialism and metaphysics to spirituality. Concepts such as “The Eternal Return” and “Nihilism” have been influential in various disciplines. Nietzsche has written ‘Thoughts out of Season – The Use and Abuse of History’ in effect of his attempting make sense of the historical climate within which he writes. Karl Jaspers, one of the founders of existentialism whom studied and wrote extensively on Nietzsche’s philosophy in the early twentieth century says “His (Nietzsche’s) glance is directed to his own age, for his historical thinking is concerned above all to fathom it. He wishes to comprehend the world’s historical moment in which he participates, with a view to knowing what is really being decided now”.

Philosophers who have referenced Nietzsche’s concepts within their work include those such as the French essayist and philosopher Georges Bataille, who explores the possibilities of spiritual life outside religion through his appropriation of Nietzsche’s notion of mysticism and spirituality. Martin Heidegger reinforces Nietzsche’s essay ‘Will and Power’ into his own work and ideology. He appropriates certain parts of Nietzsche’s philosophy such as the ideas on beauty and truth in art and transfers that to his own working practices in life. An area in which it appears Nietzsche was alone in his time was that of historicity. A form of existentialism (concerning history), although less romanticized than Sartre, Nietzsche focused on how one lives ones life in relation to what comes before and after. Deleuze in his essay ‘Nietzsche and philosophy’ perhaps gives the most unadulterated account of Nietzsche’s work, ‘combining scholarly rigor and imaginative interpretation’ as opposed to Bataille and Heidegger who are on opposite ends of Nietzsche’s philosophical trajectory.

Historicity – ‘Is the underlying concept of history, or the intersection of teleology (the concept and study of progress and purpose) and temporality (the concept of time).’ So, why does man need history? And why does history, as a necessary component of man according to Nietzsche’s philosophies, make man degenerate? I will attempt to answer these questions through the consideration of three main points as discussed by Nietzsche in “The Use and Abuse of History.”

First of all, the construction of history is binary. As well as having a conscious recognition of the past, one should appreciate the fact that there is a lack of it. Through the scientific method of only recognizing what has been unearthed and scientifically

reconstructed, the further back in time one travels, the more gaps appear in knowledge and canon. Not that I am suggesting that a scientific rigor is not needed to avoid a general disintegration in what can be known as fact and what as myth (neither is Nietzsche), but a general populace fail to realize that what is portrayed to us in our lives as *definitive*, in the historical sense, is still only what ‘man’, in the broader sense of the word, has uncovered. However Nietzsche does not vent onto “the scientific method as such or the historical remembrance, but rather those historians who claim to use the *methods of pure science* and thus pretend to a knowledge they do not at all possess.”  

This lack of “historic sense” ties into man allowing himself to ‘forget’ the unpleasant and not have to dwell on the historic, as just as man does not know all of world history, neither can he supply an exact recount his own.

“There is always one thing that makes it happiness: the power of forgetting, or, in more learned phrase, the capacity of feeling ‘unhistorically’ throughout its duration.”  

Happiness, in this case, is a release from the past not to get lost within the continuum of time.  For example, what separates mankind from animals is the fact that man leads a life in which he is tied to his past, leading a life of remembrance.

To forget in Nietzsche’s own words, is “a property of all action…one who wished to feel everything historically, would be like a man forcing himself to refrain from sleep…”  

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Animals live from day-to-day, instinctively whereas man is self-reflexive (at the mercy of his own mind/emotions). Man sees animals in an envious light as they lack, or so man believes, the capability to remember feeling pain as associated to any particular emotion. Yes, they learn from experience, yet unlike man they do not associate experience with sensation.

The past catches up with man; is inescapable because it is an essential part of our human characteristic (what indeed makes us human), our cognitive approach. “He (man) cannot learn to forget, but hangs on the past: however far or fast he run, that chain runs with him.” Past catches up through self reflection. Nietzsche articulates the need of history for man; it relates to him in three main ways. “In his relation to his action and struggle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffering and desire for deliverance…so far as they can be distinguished” These three main terms he describes as “the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical.” It is these three aspects that relate directly to the desire of pushing himself towards the future by reflecting off the past. As Karl Jaspers describes in his essay on the understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy, man “needs history in order to gain from great examples of what man can do, courage for his present activity, elevation of his nature, and consolation in despair.” Jaspers interprets Nietzsche’s notion of historical consciousness as being integral to man in overcoming and grounding himself within the

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present by reflecting on what has previously existed. “Nietzsche is deeply impressed by the fundamental fact the nature of man, unlike that of brutes, is a product of history, i.e. of unconscious tradition and conscious remembrance.”

History is so integral to man’s existence and being insofar as to say that “without history man would cease to be man”12 The formula that ‘history equals knowledge’ is what Nietzsche essentially challenges. Historical science (noting the irony of this term) that seemed so relevant to the understanding of mankind (especially as a product of the nineteenth and twentieth century a time that Nietzsche became acquainted with) despite it not classifying as a true science Nietzsche draws the line between ‘pure science’ and history as subjective manifestation of cultural understanding, mutable based on socio-political and economic aspects involved during the construction, demolition and reconstruction of events in time. Karl Jaspers further enhances this notion in his reading of Nietzsche. “Historical science is not timelessly valid knowledge of a finished and unchanging state of affairs; rather history as knowledge changes with history understood as a series of actual occurrences within the world.”13 To say that something has happened in the past does not necessarily mean that it is dead and unalterable. “Whatever issued from an authentic source lives on beyond a new present to undergo unforeseeable transformations.”14 Therefore history is at times both

forgotten and revived. It could be rediscovered after having been lost for some time and what could have been seen as merely insignificant may well gain a new ‘impulse’. “After it has long been regarded as insignificant.”\textsuperscript{15} Therefore there is no certain unchanging ground on understanding concretely understanding what has actually occurred in the past. It is difficult, none the less, to preserve the ‘truth’ in history.

“Above all, a total knowledge of anything past is impossible, not because the materials are too extensive to be surveyed or have been added down in defective form, but because of the infinite possibility of each living \textit{Existenz} which can become known only by a memory that generates itself within its own world.”\textsuperscript{16} The underlying problem of man’s use of history is that it becomes a ‘life-giving influence’ in a system of culture. It becomes dominant over man as history substantiates culture as opposed to the reverse. Man is taken up with the past that it dominates him. He is no longer able to ‘live freely in the present’.

The political and social climate at the time in which he was writing affirms Nietzsche’s theory. The ideological notion of learning from the mistakes of the past to better the future, for the happiness of all mankind could perhaps reflect notions of a pre democratic age, centered on such ideologies as socialism and communism, where the community is valued over the individual voice. This aspect is particularly highlighted when Nietzsche mentions that man’s “goal is happiness, not perhaps his own, but often the nations, or humanities at large: he avoids quietism, and uses history as a weapon


against it.” Monumental history is a manifestation of exactly this idea as it heightens the notion of the development of humanity. The great and pivotal moments that have happened in the past (ie. Nietzsche’s preoccupation with the doctrine of the ancient Greeks, the great thinkers of the Renaissance, perhaps extending it to the ancient civilizations) are what affirm modern man’s appreciation of the so speculated ‘greatness’ of humanity. Man is egotistical in his interpretation of history. Nietzsche asks himself the question of “what is the use to the modern man of this “monumental” contemplation of the past, this preoccupation of the rare and classic?” Criticizing modern man’s egocentricism in his self reflexive relation to time, the idea that something great existed in the past, it must be possible for it to exist in the current day; speculated greatness is yet again achievable. It may well be that modern man’s arrogance in considering himself to be living in a modern time that is more technologically and epistemologically advanced in comparison to his predecessors is what heightens this assumption. For instance, if something great was achievable a century ago with the advancements and technology devised since then in modernity would it not be possible to achieve the same greatness if not better, in the present.

Modern man does not have the right to judge times that are prior to him because “ages and generation have never the right to be judges of all previous ages and generations”\textsuperscript{19}, which suggests that one can only be a “judge” if one is superior to what he or she is judging. Karl Jaspers quotes Nietzsche in this fashion in “the fact that, we would rather live in this age than any other is the credit of science, and surely there

never existed for any generation such an abundance of noble joys as we have.”

Secondly, it is in man’s nature to want to record the past of the self. That is a singular being wishing to be remembered for their ideas and contributions to history. However, this leads to notions of power and grandeur in “not (to) become the gravedigger of the present, we must see clearly how great is the “plastic power” of a man or a community or a culture. The power of specifically growing out of one’s self, of making the past and the strange one body with the near and the present, of healing wounds, replacing what is lost, repairing broken moulds”. Some men can be physically and emotionally destroyed by trauma. By ‘turning the past to the present, man has the ability to reconstruct and use the past from his own perspective, with the experiences that he has had in life, to amplify his understanding of his situation. The irony is, at some point in ‘time’ man must have been entirely free from historical references.

The ‘unhistorical’ explains man’s experience in present day in which he is free from historical references. An animal lives instinctively; it does not dote on the past as its existence is felt day-to-day. Humans feel bound to the past because of their conscious and emotionally cognitive self. Emotions such as remorse, nostalgia which essentially link man to his past are uniquely human. Nietzsche explains the ‘life destroying effects’ of historical science, yet “inspite of his unveiling of the ruinous effects of the self isolating historical consciousness and despite of view which sometimes sees the past as merely a chain, we find a passionate adherence to history at

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the core of Nietzsche’s challenge.”

In agreement to Karl Jaspers’ interpretation of Nietzsche, I feel that he is terrified of the possibility that we could lose the appreciation of a genuine past. We must look upon history with compassion for aforementioned it is inevitably what makes man who he is. Therefore despite criticizing such as Proust, in writing his novel ‘The Remembrance of Things Past’ as a potential example of man who cannot let go of and is caught up within his own past. He also acknowledges such an action as necessary for the sustaining of man’s character.

I personally feel that it is important to restore the balance between objectivity and emotional subjectivity in viewing the past. I understand the importance of what Nietzsche says when he mentions that the past becomes ‘swayed and driven by a strong passion’, therefore man’s judgment is flawed as his emotions stray him. “He is blind to everything behind him, new sounds are muffled and meaningless; though his perceptions were never so intimately felt in all their colour, light and music, and he seems to grasp them with his five senses together.” Nietzsche sees this as man’s judgment of values changing for the worse. On the other hand, he also recognizes that this is the condition, although it is seen as being ‘antihistorical’ not only of “unjust action, but of every just and justifiable action in the world.” For without emotion or passion no artist will create works of art, no poets will write their songs and no battles would be won. I appreciate this sense of romanticism in reflecting upon history for so

long as it is written, experienced, and created by man it will always be filled with emotion and subjectivity.

Thirdly, Man’s historical knowledge is limited. He supposes that his experiences are original when they are in fact a repetition. He has a ‘learned past’, rather than an ever learning present. “A knowledge about culture is his substitute for culture”.\(^{25}\) This man would have little or no experience in his modern life, because he has not given himself time to learn bout his own time. His own historical sense has killed instinct and his ability to experience something in its pure essence. Technology is not what heightens us in history but is what distances us further from what Nietzsche considers as being the great points in written history. Again Nietzsche is in reference to the ancient Greeks. “The machine represents a destiny: it changes the world in which we live; we become indifferent to the objects with which we deal.”\(^{26}\) similarly to what philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin writes in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. Despite praising the technological capabilities of the machine which render art to be reproducible he shares a similar idea to Nietzsche in the impersonability of machinic reproduction as he states “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking one component: it’s presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”\(^{27}\) Mechanical reproduction jeopardizes the subject/object because “the authenticity of a thing is the


essence of all that is transmittable from it’s beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”28 It strips away humanity, because the machine “removes any basis of pride in a piece of work, removes its individual goodness or faultiness.”29

We become a slave to technology as capitalistic economy goods are no longer a symbol of mutual esteem and solidarity, but represent an acceptance that the ‘common man’ acquires mass produced objects as ‘a la mode’. For example many would buy the same style of dress to accept an idea that is simplistic and does not require craftsmanship or talent. Attention to detail is lost. Something that has no sense of history becomes it through technological manipulation and sheer acceptance. “Another man with far more judgment and learning will fail in comparison, because the lines of his horizon are continually changing and shifting.”30 Therefore, since he has more ‘history’ to absorb into his conscious, which is continually changing as it updates itself, the learned man fails, whereas the ‘simpleness’ of technology removes the need for the more formal articulation and advanced production techniques of individuals rather than the language of machines.

In relationship to what was previously discussed about man using monumental history for the happiness of mankind. It is precisely that sense of history that renders history as being mediocre. We have already established that modern man is unworthy of judging ages and generations that are previous to him; this sense of unworthiness when

Nietzsche mentions “…history (which) takes the great popular movements as the most important events of the past and regards the great men only as their clearest expression, the visible bubbles on the stream”. The quantitative as opposed to the qualitative construction of history through the decision of the masses poses a problem for Nietzsche, for the highest and noblest does not affect the masses in any way. Again Karl Jaspers parallels this notion of ‘age as determined by the masses’ “This today belongs to the mob. Great mediocrity is the danger of our age, it is no longer capable of assimilating the knowledge it inherits.” The analogy he uses is that of a well in which “everything falls into the water, but nothing falls into deep wells anymore” The water is shallow and universal; easily attainable. The well is a symbol of those men Nietzsche refers to as ‘highest’. Great things are no longer unique to those of great standing or nobility, but greatness is extended to those who, perhaps, do not deserve it.

It is at this point essential to clearly distinguish between the concept of ‘time’ and ‘history’ as being two completely different things. Firstly, history concerns the study of the past events and developments in relationship to the present and the future. Time, on the contrary, is the past, present, and future considered as on continuous whole. Nietzsche attempts to link to time and history through an idea of -‘The Eternal Recurrence’-

This failed theory of Nietzsche implies that, (from the understanding and basis of the knowledge of the universe of his time) as time is infinite, yet space and energy are

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not, then space and energy must repeat themselves to fit within the eternal. Karl Jaspers states it simply as “being is not an endless becoming of novelties, for everything occurs in extraordinarily great periods of time… All that is has existed countless times and will return countless times.”\(^{34}\) He goes on to point out in a side note that this idea of recurrence has occurred multiple times from various philosophers. Not only philosophers from his and Nietzsche’s time, but again and again over several millennia covering the globe. This attempt by Nietzsche to link time and history, I believe, are subtle unconscious efforts on behalf of Nietzsche to validate the need to study history, in an attempt to save himself from denotations of what people expect of history. If any situation had reoccurred, then it would not be the fault of any man, least of all him if they were wrong in their assumptions of the world. Even in a world based on chance rather than a preordained ‘God-ordered’ universe of Nietzsche, there is the tiniest possibility of this occurrence. However as our knowledge of the Universe, time, space, and energy have expanded, as the universe has, the likelihood of this occurring has actually exponentially decreased.

Yet when Nietzsche speaks of the ‘trust of youth’ before it has been tainted by informational sources, to live by what one has experienced. He states “ I trust in the inspiring power that directs my vessel instead of genius; I trust in youth, that has brought me on the right road enforcing from me a protest against the modern historical education ,and a demand that the man must learn to live, above all, and only use history in the service of the life that he has learned to live.”\(^{35}\) What I believe he is suggesting is


because he believes there to be these repetitions (if only recurring patterns) throughout history, what is they need of learning a past history if the chances are that in ones life, one will learn the same aspect from experience. Only through rebellion can we experience history how those from an earlier time experienced theirs. One is challenging mass produced community notions of history as on is thinking as an independent. Yet if there are an abundance of rebellious individuals, then they will become the new majority or mass. The quote also suggests that you should not allow history to mediate your life, but vice versa. What one experiences in life, as your own version of history, is how one should judge a life.

Returning to the preface of his essay, he states “In other words, we need it (history) for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid life and action, or to excuse a selfish life and a cowardly or base action. We would serve history only so far as it serves life, but to value it’s study beyond a certain point mutilates and degrades life…”\footnote{Nietzsche, Friedrich. “The Use and Abuse of History” in \textit{Thoughts Out of Season II}, transl. A.Collins. Edinburgh, London: Foulis, 1909. p. 3} This suggests that man in his current state uses history ‘as an excuse’ for his avoidance of specific actions, not allowing it to perpetrate his opinions and way of life in a positive way. Nietzsche does not regard history as being entirely degenerating to man so long as he uses it as a referencing point; secondary to his inner self in appropriating and understanding his own experience. He believes that our personal experiences should inform history on a larger-scale, and not in its reversal. Man’s experience at present, is being corrupted by history because he allows himself to adhere to principles in which experience is ‘learned through historical discourse.’ This is Nietzsche’s mind is the notion of differentiating between the terms ‘learned history’ and ‘experienced history’ in removing man from his presumptuous position. Moreover this
helps to explain why Nietzsche considers the Greeks to be of ‘high virtue’ for he states, “Greek idea, as against the Roman, will be discovered to him, the idea of culture as a new and finer nature, without distinction of inner and outer, without convention or disguise, as a unity of thought and will, life and appearance.” The Greeks were able to organize the ‘chaos’ which lurks within man, and were able to create a balance between ‘moral character’ and knowledge. This is for Nietzsche, the true ‘unity of thought in its victory and triumph, in which the prevailing of the sincerity of experience against the ideals of education is what leads mankind one step closer to ‘true culture.’

To continue, in exploring the theme of ‘history as pastiche’, and how it applies to museums/visual culture, it is perhaps relevant to provide the example of The British Museum. In the time of the British Empire, a fascination grew of the histories of its conquests. As a general view, as the ‘British’ believed they were superior both in technology and thought, any other form of culture should be studied and it’s history examined, to be judged (and therefore ‘rubbished’) against their own to ratify their beliefs of superiority. This fascination spread to the public, thus came a period in time where objects were gathered from all over the world for collections. Most now reside, it is thought, in museums, where they are used in an attempt to make sense of Britain’s colonial history. Britain is reconstructing its own “history” through the looting of foreign possessions, using and ‘abusing’ that which was taken from a people at the peak of their powers, and used to display, (no matter how guiltily or how objects are labeled) a civilizations’ eventual downfall.

Another misrepresentation on the subject of labeling is that of ‘Prehistory’. Does this refer to a time period which is prior to the start of written history? In that case is it not

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based on speculative and assuming characteristics? Breaking away from the need for a scientific vigor in the illumination of what is ‘true’ in any history. Is Prehistory the name that modern man gives to the period before man developed cognitive/conscious thinking? The turning point at which (if we were to believe in the theory of evolution) apes (which were instinctive beings not much different from animals), transcended ‘that boundary’ and crossed-over to humanity?

For another example, a recent exhibition at the Barbican Centre, “In the Face of History” – a rather grandeur title which suggests that we are not only perceiving documented history through the photograph (the specific medium of the exhibition) but that history in it’s turn is judging us just as we are judging it. But aren’t we by Nietzsche’s standards constantly living in relation to history? Why this title now? Categorizing and sweeping photographs under time periods, ‘WW2, 1960s Pop Culture’ and generalizing events is ‘skimming’ over what truly happened during these times.

Just like other mass media today, we receive what we would now see as the most shocking aspects of any given culture. Alien to ours, yet, in the time of taking, these photographs would have demonstrated ordinary daily life. Deleuze cites “In history culture takes on a sense which is very different from it’s own essence, having been seized by strange forces of a completely different nature.”38 The critic and historian imposed their ‘learned’ knowledge upon the work through the exhibition, attempting to influence the cultural understanding and learning of their own cultural heritage and future. Who are they to critique and judge a work of art created by a person who had a completely different existential background, living in a different time and being removed from the critic? Art historic criticism in visual culture is not un-unique in

that it is a patching up of secondary, even tertiary sources of information. Also, the curators and organizers of the exhibition refer to the last part of the exhibition as, “The End of History.” Is this not Pretentious and shocking naming? Just what and when is the end of history? Is this the end of written history? Or the end of the fluctuation and expansion of history that destroyed the afore mentioned ‘learned’ man. Surely so long as man is an emotional and conscious being, whom has a desire to relate to the past whether self-reflexively or through education, there can be no end to history, and no end to the learning thereof.

The essay title of ‘Thoughts out of Season’ is relevant because it represents going against the philosophical/ historical canon of the time in which he writes. Yet, ironically, his thoughts are thought to be ‘in season’ at this current point in time because we consider him as one of the greatest canonical figures within philosophical history.

Does this then mean that history has mutated as predicted it would through-out time, in which now great writers who contradicted the masses are now being justly appreciated. Or on a more frustrating scale has he become the mediocre milestone inn which we look back upon philosophy. He has himself become victim of the category ‘history as determined by the masses’ that he was so attempting to avoid.

Within the research of this essay I have come to understand Nietzsche’s concept of history learned knowledge and pastiche. There has been so much written on Nietzshe that he as a subject has been exhausted. There are many contrasting view points that describe Nietzsche’s philosophy and other philosophers who have referenced him pick what is most relevant to their own thought establishment and the use of secondary information for myself becomes all the more confusing as I am having to ‘patch-up’ many of these sources to get a rounded figure of Nietzsche. Some are similar and some
contradict. I myself am so far removed from the time of Nietzsche and the ideals of Communism and Socialism and German life in the nineteenth century that I am only able to create a portrait of Nietzsche in my mind based on the secondary sources I have accessed. I am what Nietzsche typically describes as the modern day youth who’s knowledge of history is a learned one informed through education as opposed to experience. I feel that the both the possibilities and problems of history will be a contested area within museology and visual culture for many years to come.