

IN THE FABRIC OF TIME

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SUMMARY

The article follows the traces of memory, time travel and the representation of time limits through a number of essential modern cinema films and its connections in contemporary audiovisual forms. Using as analytical tools the figures of amnesia, memory trauma and post-mortem states, the present text explores the links between those fictions of identity collapse and its parallels through the tradition of science fiction, specially focusing on issues related to ruptures of meaning and space-time limits raised by the cinematic *mise en scène*.

KEY WORDS

History, Film, Aesthetics, Science fiction, Image, Time, Memory, Amnesia, Reminiscence, Post-mortem, Time travel, Parallel universe, Trauma

ARTICLE

"Memory is the only paradise from which we cannot be driven; memory is the only hell to which we are condemned even when innocent", says Godard's mournful voice in *Nouvelle vague* (1990), a film about the eternal return, about the story? of a man who comes back from the past as Alain Delon /Roger Lennox. In some ways, it is the film-portico in which Godard, until then a filmmaker of the present, resorts to the imperative of the memory for a special treatment of the dead, with whom he struggles in order to save them from oblivion. *Histoire(s) du cinema* responds fully to this requirement of anamnesis. With the aid of a stock of images in reserve and via a certain degree of "theology" in the montage, Godard goes back in time, his and that of the history of the cinema to reflect upon suspended reminiscence and unforeseen memories and to redeem the past by means of the resurrection of the bodies and of the gesticulations emulsified among the history-palimpsest of the cinema.

For the purposes of psychoanalysis, the memory is organised on a void that cannot be sutured. Analytical experience indicates a subject anchored in a shortcoming weaved on the unconscious memory and the oblivion that characterises it. As for Walter Benjamin in that quarry of vestiges of history that was *Paris, capital of the XIX century: The arcades Project*, he precisely opposed the concept of "Erlebniss" (the cruel, traumatic event that leaves the memory blank) to "Erfahrung", an experience that crosses memories with the ability to leave a mental wake, a momentary flash and to preserve the rememorization in the form of writing or of representation¹. Around these singular processes of elaboration or rejection of the past, in the commotion brought about by the contention or the sprouting of the memory in its struggle with the bodies and identities of the subjects, an important area of contemporary cinema is concentrated.

Amnesia, or memory loss, is one of the mental disorders to be most represented in the cinema. As a theme, it is associated with *film noir* and the melodrama of the 1940s and 50s, with its dark areas and social backdrop related with anguish and the scars of the Second World War. Most of these films condense desires and deliria in their protagonists concerning sexuality, hence the replay of the past is established on the basis of a flash-back survey that restores the jigsaw puzzle or a psychoanalytical cure that acts to solve the case (Hollywood variable of the therapeutical procedure used by Breuer and Freud from 1880 to 1895 which consists of making the patient evoke and relive the traumatic events to which the pathogenic affection is linked). Welles – *Citizen Kane* - Hitchcock – from *Spellbound* to *Vertigo* and *Marnie* - but also Lang – *Secret beyond the door*, -, Ophüls – *Letter from an Unknown Woman* - and Mankiewicz – *Suddenly, last summer* – among others, have exploited the mystery of the memory and amnesia presenting sick patients who, despite their initial

¹ El libro de los Pasajes. Akal ed. Madrid 2005

opposition, end up recalling the forgotten past freeing themselves by doing so of all of the ghosts of guilt in a kind of final catharsis that connects with the happy ending.

In modern cinema, amnesia or memory loss is linked to a personal or a collective trauma. Bergson in his reflections on the instant, intensive time and the reactivation of the memory and Freud in his studies on symptomatic activity which bring into play both the processes of reminiscing and those memory gaps we call oblivion guarantee the folds and abysses of memorization². Alain Resnais and Chris Marker have elaborated much of their work based on these conflicts, on the evocation of the tracks, the cyclic memory and frozen time, the fragmentation of the layers of the past and the constitution of a memory-world³. Much of the so-called "new German cinema" of the nineteen sixties (Kluge, Syberberg, Fassbinder, Farocki...) is founded on the relationship between the memory and oblivion in the individual and the collective imagery. Likewise, in many of the films by Bergman, Fellini and Buñuel, the past and the present are moulded capriciously into a reminiscent flow as corresponds to their condition of "oneiric filmmakers", each in his own way.

But if anamnestic work and the frontiers of the memory are an intrinsic part of the major debates of modernity and of its cinematic poses, it does not seem so evident that this debate on "the future of the past" will perpetuate in the post-modern era, when precisely one of its ideologies is to close the past and install itself in an increasingly restrictive present. But the hypertrophy of the memory is also an opposite of the ancestral panic of oblivion, as is suggested by University of Columbia professor Andreas Huyssen relating the excess of memory with the regimen of the musealisation of the world and with the multiple postulates as to the End (of History, of art, of the subject, of meta-narratives) ⁴. In any case, there are several reasons for this apparent aporia, but all point towards the idea that the cinema has some difficulty wrestling with time, precisely because it is infected in its genes of value-time, because it is recorded in the fabric of time even beyond its own will. Velocity, entropy, retrospection become crucial even at a time already situated at the dawn of the post-cinema.

In a noteworthy text published in the journal "Trafic", Eric Bouillot invoked the importance of the figure of the post-mortem in quite a number of contemporary films affected by a time loop idea: "Inventing a contradictory temporality which mobilises disappearance and transformation at the same time, amnesia reminiscence, mourning and survival, the figure of the post-mortem displays a labile

² For an analysis of the memory-trauma and its evaluation in the cinema, from the classicism of Hollywood to modern aesthetics, see Maureen Turim "Flashback in Film: Memory and History". New York and London Routledge 1989.

³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze: "La imagen tiempo" Op. Cit. Pages 158-168

⁴ Andreas Huyssen: "Twilight Memories: Making Time in a Culture of Amnesia", Routledge, New York 1995; and "En busca del futuro perdido. Cultura y memoria en tiempos de globalización" Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires 2002.

status of the cinema, designating a bifurcation between the two obstacles: on the one hand, its strict, museistic, cinephilic conservation (...) on the other its abolition in benefit of a "post-modernism" which would entertain no dialectic relation with its own story"⁵. Narcoleptic evocations and black holes, the existence of parallel worlds, the anticipatory and the retrospective, the accident and the coma, swinging identities... form the networks of an aesthetic system that plays with bodies and stories to end up negotiating a resurrection from amnesia – as a subject and as a metaphor – in contemporary cinema touched by all of the reflections of the *post*.

Beatriz Vera has spoken at length as to the variety of amnesic conditions which, though having a common alteration in the processes of the memory have different characteristics in accordance with their cause.⁶ The most important condition continues to be retrograde amnesia or the inability to remember the past, but there is an increasing importance of anterograde amnesia or amnesia of fixation to forget happenings at the same time as they occur. Finally we could speak of a programmed memory or a memory induced artificially on the base of the experimental programming of memories.

There is a contemporary mainstream with a recent predilection for the latter section. The voluntary manipulation of the memory forms a part of the principal phantasms on the technique that have nurtured science fiction cinema in recent decades. From *The Time Machine* directed by Georges Pal in 1960 to *Time after Time* by Nicholas Meyer (1979), conquering space had given way to time travel. In "La invención de Morel" written by Bioy Casares in 1940, a condemned fugitive confines himself on a deserted island which soon becomes inhabited by intruders who appear in the narrator's field of vision in the form of projections by a machine that projects images duplicating real beings. The extraordinary prognoses of this Argentine writer reasoning a utopia around the cycles of time, the role of the archives of images for the survival of the dead and the reproduction of life make "La invención de Morel" an immediate work of reference for the modern cinema of the 1960s, especially in the pilgrimages in time and the archipelago of the memory of Resnais - *L'année dernière à Marienbad, Je t'aime, je t'aime...*- and Marker - the virtual trajectories begun with *La jetée* (1962), in which a man obsessed by a memory of his childhood was used for a mental journey in time only to end up discovering that the end of his journey was his own death, and continued with *Level Five* and *Immunity*. But also in a blurred source of inspiration for post-modern cinema in its insistence on the eternal return, the existence of parallel worlds and the step from the real to the virtual (facilities and video games exist which owe their plots to the novel by Bioy).

⁵ Erik Boullot: "le cinema est une invention post-mortem" Trafic n° 43 autumn 2002.

⁶ "Imágenes de la locura. La psicopatología en el cine". Calamar ediciones Madrid 2006 pages 117-151

In the essay "Yo ya he estado aquí: ficciones de la repetición", Balló and Perez establish a curious homology of *La jetée* with the television series *The Twilight Zone* created by Rod Serling and produced in the same years by CBS. A series of episodes with different actors, stories and directors, who have one same device in common: to create a parallel world related with oneiric activity, a world of time travel, of the transfer of limits, of visits to other planets, of second opportunities, of agoraphobic or claustrophobic worlds, in short, of universes where, as one character of *The Last Flight* in the episode written by Richard Matheson says "time can be measured in eternities"⁷.

But in the proliferation of films of the post-modern era dealing with the memory, a substitution of the object of fascination or anguish has occurred: the time machine has been cornered by virtual reality. And on this track echoes the name of Philip K. Dick who inspired, directed, or indirectly, in the form of influence or of non-recognised vampirization, the best proposals of the genre (the mysteries of duration and of the memory shape one of the nuclei of *Blade Runner* constructing a disturbing and quasi Borgian paradox as to who we are). Among such proposals of the virtual adventure, close to the demoscopic visibility of video games, it is worth recalling a few names: *Total Recall* directed by Paul Verhoeven in 1990 based on Dick's short story "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale". The main character, Douglas Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a construction worker who lives a sort of "topographical amnesia" like that indicated by Virilio for the new technologies of the image and the unstructured dispersion to which they subject us⁸, discovers in the advertisements of a company selling simulated holidays, Memory Call, the possibility of going on a mental journey to Mars assuming the identity of a secret agent. An unexpected problem in the realization of the programme forces Quaid to flee the virtual reality company and after a perilous pursuit among hi-tech architecture and underground escalators (imitating Wenders' *The American Friend*) he decides to use the resources of this virtual fiction machine to travel to a world which he is determined to imagine, to return to Mars to find his past and reveal an old alien mystery. At first, the film was in the sights of David Cronenberg's, who shares an interest in the problem of virtual reality and the degeneration or deliquescence of bodies within, but disagreements with Dino De Laurentiis meant that Paul Verhoeven was appointed, following his success with *Robocop*.

Contrasting with the "memory implants" of *Total Recall*, in *Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* (2003) by Michel Gondry scripted by Charlie Kauffman, the possibility is offered of erasing the memory of painful sentimental memories. Joel (Jim Carey) undergoes therapy to forget his painful relationship with Clementine (Kate Winslett), a sort of brainwashing consisting of creating a map of memories in the brain and a computer programme will take care of removing this sentimental

⁷ Jordi Ballo/Xavier Pérez: Jo ja he estat aquí. Ficcions de la repetició". Empuries edic. Barcelona 2005. Page 208.

⁸ J.P Telotte speaks at length on the relationship between Virilio's virtual simulation complex and the cinema of Paul Verhoeven, notoriously *Starship Troopers* and *Total Recall*, in "Film Quarterly" vol. 53 nº 2 (2000)


cartography and will allow him to live a new life without the anguish of his recollections (a process of manipulation that refers to the film by Resnais cited above, *Je t'aime, Je t'aime*, in which the protagonist is subjected to regression in time in order to question his amorous relationship with a woman who led him to commit attempted suicide). Finally, in *Dark City* directed by Alex Proyas in 1998, humanity is the vast field of some endangered aliens that steal memories, mix them up and re-implant them in others, thus providing each one with a false past. John Murdoch (Rufus Sewel) wakes up in a hotel bathtub suffering grave amnesia which prevents him from recalling his past (barring slight remnants of an idyllic, sun drenched beach where he spent his childhood) and finds out that he is wanted by the police for a series of ritual killings and that the city is an experiment for a mysterious group called the Strangers, an alien race using human corpses as hosts to be able to move about the city. The city is a fascinating collage of influences but also the film is a vampirization of other works (*Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, *Hellraiser* and even some episodes of the television series *The Twilight Zone*).

The titles mentioned share the paranoid clairvoyance of Philip K. Dick, highlighting among the wealth of his productions the hallucinogenic novel *Ubik*, written in 1969, which deals with a future society in which cryogenized corpses are capable of communicating with the living, of offering advertising advice and of dying once more. The *Matrix* diptych by the Wachowski brothers, is influenced by the issues in *Ubik* and its vertiginous events; and it cannot be ruled out that Alejandro Amenábar gains inspiration from this work for his film *Abre los ojos* (1997) with implanted dreams and the cryogenization of its protagonist, played by Eduardo Noriega, and the temporal disorganisation and paranoid recreation between appearance and truth.

In that complex time machinery of post-modern cinema in which the future and the past seem to become entangled, few titles appear related with anterograde amnesia and with the inability to learn and memorise new things. One of the most recent examples of this subject corresponds to *Memento* directed by Christopher Nolan in 2000. The film journeys through the mental labyrinth of Leonard Selby (Guy Pearce) who suffers a strange memory deficiency which makes him forget things that have happened recently at the same time as he can recall perfectly a previous life in which his wife was raped and murdered. Incapable of storing new memories, he takes a Polaroid photograph of each moment he wishes to remember, takes notes of unconnected memories or tattoos the information on his body. The Nolan brothers, director and writer, try to make the most of this amnesic condition developing the film backwards, inverting the temporality: each new episode precedes the one that has just developed, with a kind of decreasing memory. Amnesia and time reversal connect, once more, with the regimen of the post-mortem, which is so common in recent American cinema.

But, without a doubt, it is the contemporary films about memory that do not belong to the genre of science fiction that best explore this specific medium of the cinema, the art of the times, in order to make the viewer sense the real at work within the memory process. Among a broad mass of proposals, one need only think of such titles as *The man without a past* by Aki Kaurismäki, *Spider* by David Cronenberg and *Mullholland Drive* by David Lynch. These three different films are linked by the common denominator of the memory and the void of identity between revenant protagonists who structure their behaviour via a certain narrative obsession. In fact, they are characters off course who need an identity as a dossier of survival and who will not be able to return to their orbit when the story ends in the form of a loop; transparent bodies that are born with the film and thanks to which they will have the chance of living a second life.

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