

Film and Memory: The Role of Footage and New Worlds from the Cinema in the Construction of Human Memory

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Abstract

*The processes of memorialization are historic, and depend not only on the historical interpretation but also include how memory is mediated. The appearance of new media implies a new form of developed memory. Although the historicity of memory is taken as a given, the role of media is left unattended in these processes. This article highlights the role of media in memory and focuses on a specific type of memory, namely, filmic memory. I argue that filmic memory is more complex and more strongly connected to subjectivity than written memory. In order to achieve that, the analysis will be carried out through the film *Memories of Underdevelopment* directed by Thomas Gutiérrez Alea.*

Keywords: Filmic Memory - Subjectivity - Complexity- Memories of Underdevelopment

Introduction

This paper [1] seeks to develop a new concept of memory that could only appear with the introduction of cinema in the societies. The claim is that cinema transforms the human process of memory as other media have already done. The article has four sections. The first section reconstructs the Husserlian model of memory. The second points out the relationship between media and memory. The third part deals with memory films as a genre. In the final section, this theoretical construct is applied to the Cuban film *Memories of Underdevelopment* directed by Thomas Gutiérrez Alea (1968).

Construction of the Phenomenological Memory

Memory is a process which links the past to the present. In this sense, the past is mediated by memory, and remembering is always remembering from the present. Memory is not in the past, but the cognitive process constructs a particular vision of the past from a ongoing experience and interpretation of it. Thus, remembering is not the process of accessing pure old memories, it is the process of experiencing

the past in the present. This statement seems to be contradictory, since the past cannot be experienced again. The past is already gone. The claim is not that the past is experienced by the subject as it was at the first moment. The assertion is that the process of remembering implies a new experience of that which has been retained from the former experience.

Here, it is helpful to use the distinction of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. He distinguishes three different stages in the construction of memory. He describes in his book "Text for a phenomenology of the inner time" (1985) how the process of memory is carried out from the experience of the succession until the act of re-remember. The first stage contains two processes, namely, protention and retention (Husserl 45). Retention refers to the act of retaining what is experienced "right now" for consciousness, but the subject has not reflected on it. It is the most basic act of memory. Protention means the opposite operation of expecting something to come, but this expectation does not involve any reflection by the subject. Retention and protention are the most basic operations in order to construct a unity of experience. When the subject watches a film, for example, he or she connects what has

just been experienced with what is expected to appear. What has just been experienced is not already the past in a strict sense, but it is “a concrete perception which belongs to a whole continuum” (Husserl 47). This whole continuum is the action which is performed or experienced, and it is built perception by perception since the act is not given as a unity for the subject. In this case, the film will be the unity of experience, since although each particular scene contains a meaning, the subject does not reflect on each scene, but either on the whole film or a larger part than one only scene. The viewers, for instance, do not watch a whole film at once, they observe scenes that the conscious connects one by one through the process of protention and retention.

The scene of an (building) explosion in the famous film *V for Vendetta* starts with the running of the train into the building. The spectator is expecting and following the movements of the train along with the people who are also marching to the building. The former movement is held by retention and the next one is expected by the subject until the building blows up. The whole continuum is the explosion. The process of retention is to maintain the former perceptions from the beginning until the final explosion. The protention is the expectative for each perception. It means each unity is connected to the former (retention) and expects a coming unity (protention) In the case of the film, the unit of perception is the scene.

When this whole continuum is finished, the subject can provide meaning to the action (Husserl 35). The meaning is only reached at the end of the action. Thus, this process of providing meaning to the action is simultaneous to the process of second remembering. This is the second stage. The viewer begins to remember how the totality was played, and the subject connects the past in a specific form through this action of remembering. A complete sequence of the whole building's explosion in *V for Vendetta* can only be constructed by the viewer at the end. In this sense, the meaning of any action is always a meaning of the past, but constructed in the present.

The third stage is the process of reproduction of a specific memory. This re-remembering is the act of accessing the memory of what is already

gone, but those memories are not the totality of the experienced. This means that the subject remembers, Husserl claims, “either ... one ray of sight (Blickstrahl) ... where the remembered is still vague ... or a continuum [which] is not complete” (Husserl 37). Moreover, those memories can be modified by the subject. This process is called modification through fantasy (Husserl 45). It allows the subject to introduce new elements in the action. It also provides the possibility to change the seriality of action, in this case, the film. On the one hand, the viewer can link scenes that have been connected in another order according to a new serialization. It means that the scene is represented for the consciousness in a different way than it was presented in the film. It is possible to transform, for instance, the whole scene of the building's explosion in *V for Vendetta*, exchanging the order of appearance of some events. The movement of the train happens simultaneously with the protester's march to the parliament. However, it can be transformed in the process of fantasy, and the viewer may organize the scene in a different way. The walking of the people, for example, could occur after the explosion of the building or vice versa.

On the other hand, the viewer can do this process unconsciously. The subject believes sometimes in a certain organization (serialization) of the film's events that does not comparatively correspond with the order presented in the film. The subject really believes that the order of the scenes represented for him is the same order that the film plays.

These three stages are the steps from the perception to the re-remembering through the process of reproduction and modification. An important question arises here, how is it possible to distinguish among those stages if it is possible through fantasy to introduce elements without being conscious of doing so? How could the subject know that the new memory is not actually an old memory which it does not remember experiencing? Husserl's response (48) is the vivacity of the experience. The most detailed and complete experience is the “real” one. Thus, in the first memory, it is more possible to access some details that the experience provides. Details which are always

there for the viewer during the film. With the passing of time, the memories become weaker, since fewer details can be accessed, and the subject has no certainty of not adding fantasized elements to the memories. This explanation seems very plausible at the beginning, but with the introduction of audiovisual media a more complex explanation is necessary.

Before the relationship between media and memory is introduced, it is necessary to point out that the Husserlian model of memory is also applicable to collective memory. [2] The Husserlian model of memory is only for the subject's experience in principle. It may seem that it is not possible to apply this theory to the process of construction of collective memory. However, the subject accesses the collective memory in the same way that it apprehends the memories of its own experiences. In other words, the acquisition of the collective memory by the subject is always a phenomenological process. Hence, the process of memory is the same either for one's own lived experiences or for the acquisition of older, collective memories. The difference is the dimension of time added by the subject to these experiences. When the subject remembers its recent experience, this memory is closer to or in the present through the operations of retention and protention. On the contrary, collective memories are always in the past. Nonetheless, the modes of production for collective memories are historical and mediated as occurs with the memory of one's own lived experiences by the subject. An examination of how the media transforms the process of memory is valid for both collective memory and one's own experiences, since they are always connected.

Introduction of Media to Problem of Memory: Filmic Memory

The introduction of media in memory's processes complicates the understanding of these phenomena. According to the construction of Husserl, the distinction between experience, first memory and the process of re-remembering is vivacity. It hides a supposition, namely, that vivacity disappears when time passes. Nonetheless, the objective of media is exactly the opposite. The media is constructed to

maintain the vivacity of human memories. Thus, an introduction of a new medium implies a transformation of the memory process.

As the German philosopher Sibylle Krämer claims, the media are not only artefacts, but they are conditions of possibility [3] of human experience (17). The proliferation of the printed book in the 19th century (McLuhan 147) produced a new perception of time which allowed the existence of new consciousness with a stronger link to the past than that of the former societies. This new consciousness of time also produced a new process of memory. The former process relied upon what the subject was told and its capacity for memorizing. In most cases, memory was only possible through orality. Thus, the process of modification described by Husserl was more flexible than with the written word. [4] Since the difference among the stages is given by the vivacity of those memories, an artifact which can maintain this vivacity longer changes the whole process of memory. Diaries, for instance, permit keeping the memories as they were experienced and described in a specific moment. Thus the reader can access a part of these lived experiences again. The vivacity of the experience survives longer using the written word. Printed media, however, still has the problem that the experience must be translated in plain text. It implies that the subject experiences the past in a specific dimension, and must imagine the situation. On the contrary, film offers an experience more familiar to the lived experience of the subject, and it creates a new memory, a filmic memory.

Filmic memory has its own characteristics which differ from memory derived from the written word. The process of memory through film works with the logic of audiovisual media has the scene as its unit. Each scene has its own meaning, just as each word has, but each scene is more complex than each word. The scene expresses simultaneously both a unified meaning and a plurality of sub-meanings. Each scene possesses various elements which articulate the whole meaning of this scene, but each element can provide a specific meaning. The music transforms the meaning of the scene, but as an individual element also has its own meaning. This is also true for the image, the

text, the non-verbal sounds, the kinaesthesia, chronemics and proxemics. These new elements transform the process of memory. Since film is more complex than the written word, vivacity is stronger in the film than it is in a book. The diary contains old, lived experiences which the subject has translated into words. It maintains a part of the vivacity, and as a result the memory can access the experience longer. On the other hand, the home video and footages allow the subject to access the elements which were in the background. Landscapes which were not described in the diary, the tone of the spoken word, how far or near the subject was to other objects, etc. The experience of watching and listening to the past makes the experience of remembering more vivacious. This vivacity is the key concept when distinguishing between different processes of memory. The film, as with other audiovisual media as well, maintains the vivacity of the old experiences longer. Moreover, the capacity of producing past is stronger than with other media. [5]

This capacity of film reduces the possibility of modification by the subject. Since the scene is already given to the viewer, it is not necessary to imagine it. Film provides a image full of vivacity which can be accessed at any time. It forces the viewer to experience the situation as it is presented. Modification is always possible in the process of remembering, but this modification can always be tested and compared with the film. Thus, the film can record the event and resrepresent it as well. It is important to highlight that the film does not only record the world, but many events of the collective past are represented. This means that the original experience was not recorded, but the film resrepresents this situation. The film possesses different possibilities to present the past. Although filmic memory has a specific logic which operates in any film, there are differences about how filmic memory works depending on the way former events are presented.

Ways of Experiencing the Past in Film

One main distinction to be formulated is the difference among genres in presenting the past. In this sense, the categorization developed by

Philip Drake is very useful. He distinguishes between three genres: history, period and retro film (187). Darke defines history films as “indexical to a referential past, measurable against the memorialized knowledge of a particular event or person and individual recordings and accounts of them” (*ibidem*). In other words, history films refer to historical events which belong to the legitimated historical knowledge. Drake uses *Nixon* (1995) or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as examples of this genre.

The period film “describes a film that is indexical to historical past, [but] it does not deal with a publicly memorialised event or figure” (Drake 187). Those kind of films are not linked to a specific historical event, but they introduce a fictive character in a determined context. The film *Flawless* (2007) narrates the problems faced by Laura Quinn. She is a smart woman working in the diamond industry in the 1960s after a robbery that she planned with the janitor of the building, who is seeking revenge for the death of his wife in the 1930s. Laura tells the story to a reporter in the 1990s. The film represents three different periods in the 20th century, which can be recognized by the viewer through the aesthetics of each period, but no historical event is linked strongly to the events represented in the film.

Finally, he designates a third category, namely, retro films. This kind of film “mobilises particular codes that have come to connote a past sensibility as it is selectively re-remembered in the present” (Darke 188). Films such as *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are examples of retro movies. Those films do not attempt to recreate historical periods as accurately as possible, but they use codes from certain periods to establish a context for the story.

According to him, those are the three categories which construct memory. However, it is important to add footage, regardless of its characteristics (home videos, news, documentary material, etc.), which constitute a specific form of memory construction. Furthermore, it is necessary to underline that some films are a mix of these categories. There are films that describe a specific historical event introducing both fictional characters and historical footage as the film that will be analyzed in the following section.

Memory films, as this article designates this set of films, are also embedded in a specific context of circulation and in a special historical frame. The process of the construction of memory does not only include the relationship of subject-film, it is also influenced by the coherence between the story of the film and the former historical frame. This encounter is mediated through the vivacity which includes an affective characteristic. Vivacity can only be understood by referring to the affective, i.e. how film produces the experience of the perception of the past. The viewer can experience those scenes deeply. It allows the subject to experience this past as present. Therefore, the distance between past and present becomes shorter. It means the past is relived in the present.

Filmic Memory in Action: *Memories of Underdevelopment*

Filmic memory works different in regard to the genre of memory film. *Memories of Underdevelopment* is a Cuban film directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea which narrates the experience of a bourgeois character (Sergio) who decides to stay in the country after the Cuban revolution. The film from its title seeks to describe the events which occurred in Cuba from the triumph of the revolution until 1962. The particular experience of Sergio's decadence also becomes the decadence of what he and the characters related to him represent. He remembers the years before and during the revolutionary campaign. Thus, the viewer can also experience the contradictions lived by Sergio seeking to understand the revolution from his present. In this sense, the film does not only attempt to describe and understand the recent past, but it also tries to develop a specific frame of history. The film refers to the events of the past, but it also shapes the coherence of the past.

The dimensions of time are distinguished through the supporting characters. His friend Pablo and his wife Laura represent the past, and the analysis of his former relatives are the memories of underdevelopment. The film shows the process since the change from the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista up to the

Cuban revolution. These memories are not only from this lost past of the dictatorship's time, but they also include the transformations and the denouncement of the persistent elements of the past in the revolutionary present.

Sergio has a new girlfriend during the revolution called Elena. She is a poor woman dreaming to become an actress. Elena represents the former ordinary people who do what they are told to do, not the new revolutionary people (Kabous 85). Although Elena actually represents the revolutionary people, she embodies the pre-revolutionary people at the same time. Elena is the past who persists in the present which must eventually disappear. The memories are not only written about the past, they also describe what has survived of the old underdeveloped society in the new developed one. These memories are both memories and diaries for the observer in the future. Thus, the present is still connected to the past, and the memories of underdevelopment are also about the transition from this underdevelopment to the new revolutionary developed society. Perhaps, it is this transition which allows many interpretations of the film: Is it a critique of the revolutionary regime? Is it a critique of the bourgeoisie and the old society? Here appears the filmic memory. Memories of underdevelopment allows the viewer to access to this past. Gutiérrez Alea maintains the vivacity of the moment and its blurriness, not only through the contradictions of the characters, but with the use of real recorded footage of events and locations of this revolutionary Cuba (Gutiérrez 00:14:05-00:15:35).

One of the main features of this new filmic memory conceptualization is that it points out these complex frames of time. The scene about the burning of the famous mall "El Encanto," for instance, illustrates the particular form in which the filmic memory is produced. The scene begins with instrumental music and other sounds, while the building is burning. Afterwards, Sergio speaks about the loss of Havana's charm after the destruction of the building. Meanwhile, tropical music sounds in the background. "The Paris of the Caribbean," he says, and adds, "that is what tourist and whores claimed" (Gutiérrez 00:15:58-00:16:10). Then the instrumental music sounds again and faces

with reflexive gestures are shown. The subject again experiences the burning, the gazes of the people and the architecture of that time. The scenes are presented in black and white, though Sergio speaks in the present. As the German researcher Gabriela B. Christmann claims, the use of black and white in images links the viewer to the past. Thus, the film affirms the past of the present with the colours of the scenes. Although Sergio narrates his story from what seems to be the present, it is the past talking to the new present and coming future producing the feeling of a paradox of elements from the bourgeois past in the present. The black and white highlights that Sergio is talking in the present, but his mind is located in the past.

Although this scene uses recorded footage, the film is not a mere recording, but also includes the sounds, the music, the speeches and a subjectivity. The latter is the most relevant aspect of the production of memory through film. Although an omniscient narrator exists, the film always connects the viewer through a subjectivity. Sergio, Laura, Elena are subjectivities who embody the feelings, hopes, expectatives, gestures and movements of a person's model from a specific time. It is the capacity to subjectivize an idea that allows the film to maintain the vivacity of the past. Although images, scenes, footage and clichés are important to develop a representation of the past, it is the subjectivization that is the crucial aspect to create this re-enactment of the past.

In *Memories of Underdevelopment*, the viewer can access this feeling of uncertainty and contradiction through historical footage, but the crucial element is to experience the uncertainty and contradictory expectations of the characters. Sergio asks in the scene of "El Encanto", "what does life mean for them? And does life mean for me? But I'm not like them" (Gutiérrez 16:56-17:06). The viewer accesses the contradiction experienced by Sergio not through the collective, but through the contradictions of the whole system in an individual. The contradiction is embodied by a character. In comparison with other media such as a book, which could introduce social contradictions through concepts in abstract, film highlights the contradictions within and among societies through either

the subjectivity of the characters or a speaker (enunciator of the contradiction). Although the latter could claim the contradiction from the objectivity, the viewer can recognize that the claim is uttered by a subjectivity who provides a different tone, kinesthesia or acceleration of the speech. These changes transform the meaning of the claim, though it is the same claim in abstract. In this case, it is Sergio. In other cases, Elena represents those uncertainties and contradictions.

It is this subjectivization along with the other important characteristics of the audiovisual which provide the conditions for the possibility of the existence of a new memory, the filmic one. When the memories are subjectivized in the film, the viewer cannot distinguish easily among the three Husserlian stages mentioned before. Since the subject experiences the past, it is a new present. This new experience is not a re-remembering through the film. The process of retention and protention carry out again the connection between the former and following still. The process of a first experience and remembering at this stage are not distinguishable. It is only at the second stage where the subject can distinguish between lived experience and past experience. This second stage is, however, modified by the film. The vivacity of the former processes is always accessible. Thus, a clear distinction between the process retention-protention with the process of reproduction is not possible, since the vivacity was captured by the film.

This feature of the audiovisual produces a newly emerged memory which depends not only on the discursive. Although the discursive construction of the film allows a specific construction of the past, it is the medial characteristics which produce a new memory. The limitations and possibilities of each media are the basic conditions to communicate any message. Thus, those medial characteristics are relevant to research the human experience.

Memories of Underdevelopment is a remarkable example of this specific construction of the media. The discursive strategies of the film allow the transmission of this feeling of uncertainty, but also shape how this feeling is communicated and can only be understood by

the specific medial characteristics of film. Thus, a perspective of memory films based not only upon discursive strategies extends the filmic sub-genres which Drake claims. It is not only in the representation of historical periods or events that film constructs memory, but it is the way in which the audiovisual logic shapes the discourse and aesthetics that produces a specific process for memorilazing both subjective and collective.

Conclusion

The article focuses on how film produces memory. This process of memory is historical and highly dependent on media. Thus, a new media implies a new process of memory. In order to conceptualize this process of memory, the Husserlian model of memory was described. With the introduction of audiovisual media this model seems to be incomplete, since it does not take into account the key role of media in the construction of memory. The second section describes how media and memory are related, as well as claims that the media is a condition of possibility for any human experience. If memory is examined, the media that co-constructed this memory must also be examined and vice versa. Cinema does not construct memory in the same way in all films. It is necessary to distinguish among sub-genres of memory films using the pre-existing categorization developed by Drake. However, this categorization only focuses on how the discourses presented in memory films recall memory, and not how audiovisual media shapes the processes of memory. This theoretical approach is contrasted with the film *Memories of Underdevelopment*. The main remarkable point of the film is its possibility to communicate the uncertainty which the inhabitants of Cuba experienced in the 1960s, and the specific way that the film produces memory about this period.

Endnotes

[1] This paper is written with the support of the "Colombian Group of discourse's Analysis" at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

[2] Although "collective memory" is always a difused concept which most of the time corresponds to false generalizations about the past of some collective, the term is useful in order to name the phenomenon of shared

memories of a collective. The problem of what is preserved is not examined.

[3] As conditions of possibility are understood the conditions which make possible the existence of a phenomenon. An examination of these conditions was a proceeding inaugurated by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his major work "Kritik der reinen Vernunft" (1917).

[4] It is not the intention of this article to develop a description of how other media has transformed the human memory. In this text, I focus only on audiovisual media.

[5] In this sense, although film introduces new elements into the process of memory, other media already kept the vivacity of the experience.

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