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Trapped in Amber: The New Materialities of Memory

Cultural Memory and Historical Topographies

The New York art critic Hal Foster once observed: "We still find it difficult to think about history as a narrative of survivals and repetition", yet we increasingly have to come to terms with a "continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts" (Foster, 1994, p. 30). Foster does not name film and photography, with *their* uniquely haunting time-warp effects on our conception of history as a linear sequence, connecting effects to causes. But Foster clearly alludes to the relays of countervailing temporalities that the prevailing ubiquity of photographic media has engendered. Cinema, after all, defies time by what I would like to call its *uncanny ontology*: simulacra of life at its most vivid, moving images always document what is not yet dead but neither quite alive. This unresolvable tension between rewind and replay, between presence and absence, between life preserved and the kingdom of shadows has profoundly altered our understanding of what history is, just as the same tension between original and copy, between reconstruction and the replica, dominates our thinking today about the status of art and of historical artefacts, in our post-auratic era that nonetheless craves for authenticity, and for "keeping it real".

Damien Hirst's controversial exhibition, on show in Venice in 2017, called *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*[1] is both a suitably baroque (and bom-

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[1] Reviews of the controversy caused by Damien Hirst's exhibition can be found here: https://hperallergic.com/391158/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-venice-punta-della-dogana-palazzo-grassi/

https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-hirst-created-fake-documentary-venice-show-can-see-netflix-1192922

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/06/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-review-titanic-return

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/16/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-review-venice

bastic) treatment of these topics of the simulacrum, and a slyly mischievous middle finger cocked at the art-world and at academia, for wrestling so earnestly with such questions as the ethics of restoration and preservation, of how to tell appropriation from plagiarism, how to distinguish the reproduction from the copy, the replica from the fake, and what the emotional difference is between the mass-produced souvenir in the gift shop and the priceless collector's item: all categories that – as Walter Benjamin already recognised – had become highly problematic if not obsolete in the age of reproducibility, of which he saw photography and film as unmistakeable harbingers and inevitable disruptions. The implied suspension of epistemic boundaries between different orders of reality and reference has only become more explicit, indeed self-evident with digital imaging and 3-D printing. Yet the questions this poses about truth and verification, visibility and evidence have lost none of their slippery intractability for philosophers, art historians and, indeed, film scholars.

In what follows, I may be doing no more than, yet again, demonstrate this frustrating intractability, as I try to clear a path through what the impact has been of moving pictures on history and memory, as we make sense of obsolescence and nostalgia, document and proof, testimony and traumatic forgetting. I want to start with an observation – or a claim – namely, that the coexistence in the 20th century of cinema and of 19th century historicist consciousness has produced two unsettled but interrelated crises: it has turned into a truism *the spatialisation of time* which was already well under way with Einstein's relativity theory versus Bergson's time as duration, and secondly, it has begun to substitute for our notion of linear causality such terms as *contingency, chance, chaos theory* and *stochastic series*.

Taken together, the spatial turn and the crisis in causation have challenged the hegemony of history – which the 19th century had discovered as the relentless force of destiny (Hegel's world spirit), or had celebrated as the engine driving human progress (Marx). More specifically, spatial time and contingent non-linearity have deconstructed history into competing but also complementing centres of more entropic forms of energy, identified with the *archive and archaeology* as the "materialisations of memory". But there is also *associative memory and dissociative trauma* – what we might call the "immaterialisations of memory".

Given my topic, I want to approach *history as time spatialised* under the heading of *cultural memory,* and *history as the archive* under the heading of *historical topographies*, suggesting that a concept such as obsolescence might combine, or may even reconcile the *locatedness* of topography with the new *materialities* of memory.

Cultural memory has been extensively studied by Aleida Asmann (Assmann, 2012), but as a particular spatialisation of time it is now most often associated with Pierre Nora and his idea of *lieux de mémoire*, that is: *sites of memory* (Nora, 1984) His seven-volume edition of the memorial spaces of France (1984-1992) has helped to redefine Maurice Halbwachs' notion of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) by specifying public memory's practices in much more topographic and regional

detail, as well as in its various discursive manifestations. Nora has not only shown how cultural memory intersects with the public lives of collectives, but how it *materialises time* as it shapes individuals' sense of origins and 'roots' across shared symbols. "*A lieu de mémoire*", Nora says, "is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by virtue of human will or by the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora, 1996, p. XVII)

These *lieux de mémoire*, (Nora, 1989, p. 7) famously include not just what we would expect to find, namely the built spaces of collective experiences, such as monuments, museums, cathedrals, cemeteries, statues or memorial sites. *Lieux de mémoire* extend also to practices such as public holidays, festivals, celebrations, rituals, and even to proverbs, clichés and common turns of phrase that have been passed on from one generation to the next, and across which people communicate with each other their sense of belonging, or simply their longing for belonging.

Against Nora's intentions, or even in contradiction to his declared aim, the term *lieu de mémoire* has been appropriated by others in at times controversial contexts, making it a rallying cry for a new kind of populist nationalism, when he may have intended it as a warning. Instead of the generally positive connotations the term has acquired, Nora was more cautious and critical, seeing in *lieux de mémoire* – and especially the memory discourses that came flooding in – a potential takeover bid and threat to the craft of the practising historian.

But it has also inspired writers interested in the memory-function of modern commodities and communication-technologies. Those fascinated by the affective power of the common symbols of consumer-society, from classic Coca-Cola bottles to bell-bottom trousers, from 1950s pop songs to tag lines from cult movies, such as *Taxi Driver* or *Casablanca*, have found in *lieux de mémoire* a respectable catchphrase and useful antidote, with which to counter the disparaging associations of 'nostalgia', 'obsolescence', 'kitsch' or 'retro-fashion'. Being located in time, while also marking the passage of time, such a *lieu de mémoire* can become the embodied form of a battle against forgetting, in the very medium of forgetting, namely ephemerality and fashion, popular culture and mass-production, accumulation and waste.

Nora's cultural memory as *lieux de mémoire* allows me to introduce my second critical term, namely *historical topographies*, which has in common with cultural memory the language of sedimentation and layering, of the past retrieved, recalled, recovered and recollected, as the salvage of secrets, of lost opportunities and of sunken treasures. This may seem paradoxical in the case of cinema, now more often studied as an art of touch and transparency, of surface and skin. But consider James Cameron's *Titanic* and Damien Hirst's *Wreck of the Unbelievable*: their blockbuster spectacles dramatise the virtual presence of the past with metaphors that emphasise the materiality of time, whose visual evidence are shells and crustaceans. When not recovered from the ocean floor, buried in sand, or encrusted

with barnacles, it is as fossils come to life, in the shape of embalmed mummies, conserved in peat, like the bog-people, or trapped in amber, and kept intact in permafrost that we experience *history's imprint and trace*, combined with the *preserved materiality and site-specific location of the object* itself.

It is therefore no more than following in the footsteps of André Bazin's "change mummified" (Bazin, 1960) – who incidentally paid as much attention to the cinema as *trace*, as he did to the cinema as *window* – if one were to argue that barnacles, bogs and glaciers are the natural "media" of historical topographies, of which photography and film would be the cultural extensions, in contrast to the usual genealogies of celluloid that start with wax tablets, clay cylinders, scrolls and paper: symbolic notations rather than the preserved imprint of the objects themselves.

To claim that the different tenses and temporal registers of *visual media* (for instance, what Roland Barthes called "the future anterior" of photography) (Barthes, 1981, p. 96) have affinities with the archaeological media of 'freezing' time, such as amber, peat or ice, is to align cinema more plausibly with the material immateriality of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. But it is also a reminder of the oxymorons hidden in terms such as 'cultural memory' and 'historical topographies', when applied to moving images. The idea of cinema as an archaeo-topological medium – one way to come to terms with its uncanny ontology – not only revives debates about stillness and movement and of movement stilled, but also risks the conflation of categories that used to be separate and even opposed to each other, such as 'memory' and 'history'. The same goes for the opposition of 'culture' and 'nature', which the radical egalitarianism of the camera has also levelled – think of Jean Epstein's definition of *photogenie*: "I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction".[2] It is important to note the equivalence that Epstein draws between "things, beings or souls". Even more clearly, the once considered fundamental nature/culture divide has been rendered all but obsolete due to the expanded scale and impact of human activity on the planet. The oxymoronic element in a term like historical topographies, mixing the man-made and the geological, can draw attention to these different kinds and time-scales of agency, and therefore reflect the recognition that humans are henceforth in charge of – and hence responsible for – nature as well as culture: which inaugurates the macro-historical time of the *anthropocene* (identified by the massive statistic increase over the last 100 years of such – more or less randomly chosen – indices as: CO_2 concentration, water use, species extinction, number of motor vehicles, loss of forests, increase in paper use and trans-border foreign investments).

But the *anthropocene* might well include what Harun Farocki once identified as one of the effects of filmmaking, and in particular, of documentary in the age of

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[2]   Quoted in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 314.

surveillance, namely: "cameras circling the globe that make the world superfluous" (Elsaesser, 2004, p. 189) – pointing to a sort of mutually determining loop of creative destruction, where what cameras capture and preserve, they also downgrade to the status of the prop or pretext. Such preservation cannot but destroy what it sets out to rescue, because when the world opens itself up to ubiquitous visibility, people and places risk existing merely in order to end up as images.

The cinema as cultural memory and historical topography could therefore be regarded as a kind of "transitional object", a comfort blanket that eases our transition from humanism to post-humanism. The uncanny ontology would be the uncanny valley of the "humanist" side of the divide, while what I just called cinema's archeo-topological definition looks at the same transition between Holocene and Anthropocene from the heights of algorithmic cinema – each indexing the different relations we now have to the world, following the end of 'grand narratives' and other Enlightenment teleologies of progress, and thus also of history as we commonly understand it.

Being less the 'first draft' and more the 'small change' of history and also the ruin of these grand narratives, cinema as cultural memory comprises all kinds of micro- and macro-histories, many of which tend towards 'traumatic' narratives, for instance, making the Holocaust the most emblematic (and problematic) of cinema's historical topographies, as Farocki's *Images of the World and Inscription of War*, and Georges Didi-Huberman's conflict with Claude Lanzmann over four Sonderkommando photos have shown (Didi-Huberman, 2004).

Another effect of the demotion of history, this time less through cinema as cultural memory, and more as a consequence of the culture/nature collapse, is the revival of the belief in all manner of non-human agencies, now going under the name not of God or Manifest Destiny, but – to quote Quentin Meillassoux once more: the philosophical "necessity of contingency" (Meillassoux, 2008) or technological singularity – pointing in the dystopic direction of a seemingly inevitable bio-digital fusion.[3]

One is reminded of W. G. Sebald's musings on the latency effects of the bombing raids on German cities in the last months of World War II, published in English under the suggestive title *On the Natural History of Destruction*.[4] Sebald's name, of course, stands for the very idea of cultural memory and historical topographies in contemporary literature, at the interface between writing and photography, the map and the walk, the archive and the archaeological excavation. It will be remembered that Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* forged a new compound of nature and history, "exploring places and setting them in time",[5] re-mapping Norfolk and Suffolk,

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[3] For an account of different kinds of agency, see Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

[4] W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2003).

[5] http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/m/memory-maps-about-the-project/
paraphrasing W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (New York: New Directions, 1996)

with his own body, which has become the medium of elation and fatigue. By walking, as well as by deploying his bookish erudition, Sebald discovered everywhere the memory traces of past histories, broken off trajectories and signs of small or momentous human endeavours that may or may not have begun in an abandoned, forgotten, or unrecognisably transformed patch of land.

Sebald is the inspiration behind a project by the British writer and academic Marina Warner, on *Memory Maps*, at the University of Essex and the Victoria and Albert Museum. To quote from Warner's prospectus:

> A new genre of literature has been emerging strongly in recent years. Writers combine fiction, history, traveller's tales, autobiography, anecdote, aesthetics, antiquarianism, conversation, and memoir. Mapping memories involves listening in to other people's ghosts as well as your own.[6]

Warner identifies a number of general concerns which she sees focalised in the memory map, each sedimented and fragile, each persistent and ephemeral: she singles out the concerns with "identity and belonging" and those of "ecology and stewardship", both of which "are inter-connected through memory and through the stories we use as compass bearings".[7]

A similar but earlier foray into "cultural memory as historical topography" was undertaken by Simon Schama, with his 1995 book *Landscape and Memory*. Schama kept the two sides in focus: how much landscape has shaped human history and indeed human society right up to the present, and the inverse, how much of 'nature' as we perceive it today – and as poets and painters have celebrated it for the past 500 years – is actually the product of centuries, indeed millennia of human intervention and the shaping power of farmers, warriors and civil engineers (Schama, 1995).

The Sun Island

On a much smaller scale both temporally and geographically, but partly inspired by Nora, Sebald and Schama, I tried in my film *The Sun Island* to reconstruct, but in the end also to invent, what might be called the memory map of an "*île de mémoire*", based on an actual island located not far from Berlin, where – to quote Marina Warner, "ecology and stewardship" were "interconnected with memory and stories".[8] This particular *lieu de mémoire* appeared to the eye as a site of seemingly pristine nature but turned out to be a site that bears its own scars and traces of lived history. It is a place to which the phrase 'natural history of destruction' applies, just as it confirms Simon Schama's case of a landscape that has shaped several

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[6] Marina Warner, 'What are Memory Maps': http://www.vam.ac.uk/activ_events/adult_resources/memory_maps/what/index.html

[7] ibid.

[8] Marina Warner, 'What are Memory Maps' (see above)

generations of lives. Their relentless work was dedicated to making nature into culture, but in nature's name, recycling city waste in order to gain land and make it fertile, even as nature *unmade* and reclaimed this cultural topography once more, thanks to its own relentless work upon human structures, once the humans had been forced to leave the land they had so assiduously cultivated.

In the course of plotting these slow cycles of regenerative destruction, I discovered several other cycles of value creation and value destruction, binding together nature and culture, and – to my surprise – it turned out that the photographs, the letters, the administrative records and home movies from which I had to piece together the story of the *Sun Island*, in fact prolonged this transferral of decay and regeneration, insofar as especially my father's home movies and my grandmother's letters gave another twist to the human history/natural history interface, when I began to restore decaying film stock and to decipher Gothic script. Digitising both the images and the letters added another layer to the value exchange. The gain in legibility was a loss in authenticity, but as we shall see: it is invariably the intervention of a new technology that confers added value to an object's obsolescence.

The Sun Island as a *lieux de mémoire* is intimately linked to another historical topography: Berlin. It has engendered its own cultural memory, made up of images and music, buildings and ruins, clichés and discoveries, fiction and critical discourse. As almost everyone writing about Berlin notes, it is a very peculiar kind of chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981). In fact, ever since the 19th century, Berlin has been a city of multiple temporalities, and of diverse modalities: virtual and actual, divided and united, created and destroyed, repaired and rebuilt – for instance, if one looks at the Potsdamer Platz in 1925, in 1945 and again in 2005. Living in a perpetual mise-en-scène of its own history, a history it both needs and fears, it both reinvents and disowns, Berlin is a city of superimpositions and erasures, full of the ghosts and 'special effects' that are the legacy of Nazism and Stalinism, obliged to remember totalitarian crimes while still mourning socialist dreams.

Mindful of these peculiar temporalities, some of which only apply to Berlin, my project was eccentric in two distinct ways: it situated itself geographically at the very boundary of the city, while nonetheless unthinkable without its proximity to the city, and secondly, unlike Berlin, reinventing – in stone, glass and steel – the memory it has of itself, my island chronotope had to remain a ruin-in-progress. Rather than use the living memory preserved in the movies as a blueprint for its physical restoration, the project was always intended to be imaginary, in the precise sense of treating the images as the primary reality, of which the actual site, the island such as it exists as I visited it, was now no more than a 'sediment' or material residue, however lush and verdant the island vegetation, and however fresh and teeming with fish, the waters that surround it.

In other words, the project was the exact opposite of an act of nostalgic recovery and re-enactment, and more a way of testing the limits of the evidentiary truth that historical films and photographs now claim for themselves. If images are the

tangible record of a physical site, as well as evidence of a moment in time, then old movies, with their now intensely felt materiality, are also a lure and a ruse. They have, for the past century, created and fashioned, fortified but also falsified memory and turned it into our history – from which there is no escape back into mere books or written documents. Quite problematically, as cultural and political artefacts, some film clips have assumed a separate reality-status, often becoming iconic – the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, the Rodney King beating, student protests at Tiananmen Square – that is, more palpably real and authentic than the place and the moment to which they owe their existence. The fact that sometimes they confer a *reality of presence* to events and places which without the photographic record, might never have 'existed' – the reverse of what I said about the world existing only to end up as 'image' – this precarious presence gives their preservation (and by extension, their interpretation) a special, ethical charge.

Such an ethical imperative Marina Warner calls "stewardship" and it applies with special force to film, one of the most physically fragile and yet imaginatively powerful archives of such 'presence'. It raises further ethical dilemmas, to do with stewardship as a form of trust, nowhere more so than in my particular instance, where some of the materials that I depended upon for the *Sun Island* film do not belong to the public domain, but are in every sense 'private property': not only is the island private property – and the present owner might still sue me for trespassing – but the home movies and amateur photographs, which I complemented by drawing on personal correspondence, love letters and poems, concern public persons at moments when they were at their most intensely private selves.

Yet the realities they document also belong to a collective 'history', insofar as these letters and movies, these literary and photographic tokens of friendship and rivalry, of courtship and passion, tragedy and trauma, are also the only extant evidence and testimony to an 'experiment in living', a project of sustainability and of the circular economy that was meant to be emulated, propagated and made public. In both inspiration and implementation the island experiment decidedly belongs to the history of Berlin modernism, to the point where one family's filmic memories become themselves a historical topography.

From History to Memory and from Memory to Trauma

Notions such as the *lieux de mémoire* , the memory map, and the chronotope are symptomatic of the way cultural memory in the form of amateur movies, found footage and family photographs has become so popular, but also why its inflection towards the personal and the subjectively felt, is such a conspicuous challenge to history. If 'history' is what takes over from 'memory' precisely at the point where the past is no longer embodied in a living substance, but only accessible through the material traces that an event or a person has left behind, then the emergence of recorded sound and moving images since the beginning of the 20th century has confronted this conception of history with the conundrum with which I began:

namely that recorded sound and moving images are both more than mere traces and less than full embodiment of past events. They have the power of conjuring up living presence, while also remaining mere echoes and shadows of what once was. In the cinema, the past is never really passed, so how can it become history? Moving pictures, whether fictional or documentary, whether whole or in bits and pieces, are both lost to life and yet survive the death of what they display. Their ghostly presence and after-life is intimately linked to what we understand by memory today. Indeed, as mentioned, I would go further and claim that historical footage, especially found footage and amateur film, is by its very nature closer to trauma, experienced as a past event that will return, unannounced, with the full force of the lived instant. The suddenness of the encounter with such a past, brought back to life, requires its own kind of "working-through" – be it in the form of montage, as in the found footage films of Bruce Connor, Peter Delpeut, Bill Morrison or Peter Forgacs, or be it by way of personal narratives, as in the films of Ross McElwee and Alan Berliner.

These once marginal avant-garde practices have increasingly moved to the centre, occupying – as on-line *video-essays* or essay film – an increasingly important place in teaching, filmmaking and installation art. More than a passing trend, it suggests yet another coping strategy: For could it be that our tendency to now privilege memory over history, as more authentic and truthful, and to associate memory invariably with trauma, is in fact our way of "working through" not only the many man-made disasters of the 20th century, but also coming to terms with the fact that any history of the 20th century must henceforth dig into the archives of its mechanically and electronically produced sounds and images? Archives for which we are only beginning to find the narratives that make sense of their holdings, narratives that can speak to the losses and integrate the gaps, but also narratives that 'manage' the often haphazard accumulation, and 'filter' the sheer abundance and diversity of the film materials that have survived and been passed down to us.

If the historians' working cycle moves from testimony and living memory to history with a capital H, there is another cycle – one that includes these sound and image archives – that moves from history back to collective memory, and from collective memory to individual trauma, that is, memory which displays the symptoms of trauma: the non-linear persistence of unprocessed experience.

Obsolescence

In the confrontation with the sensory overload of mechanical and electronic images, but also in the face of traumatically disruptive technologies, the term 'obsolescence' has made an unexpected re-appearance as the code word for the undead-ness of moving images and other phenomena that refuse to join the natural cycles of decay and renewal.

What is unexpected about this re-appearance is that 'obsolescence' has not only caught the attention of digital media historians, but also of the art world. In the process, it has significantly changed its meaning, enlarging its semantic and evaluative range. From being a negative term within the technicist discourse of 'progress through creative destruction', it became a critical term in Marxist discourse, when designers and marketing people advanced the principle of planned obsolescence, while critics of consumerism in the 1950s, such as Vance Packard, attacked such built-in obsolescence as both wasteful and immoral (Packard, 1960).

As both a cover for an all-too-readily assumed (and consumed) nostalgia for several kinds of pre- or proto-cinematic golden ages, and as an expression of more conflicted ways of coping with the utter presumption of the new, obsolescence might seem at first glance to fetishise the 'first machine age' of cinema (i.e. its apparatus side), in a gesture that melds the superiority of hindsight with the secret envy of lost innocence.

However, the meaning of obsolescence has once more shifted: it has entered the realm of the positive, signifying something like heroic resistance to relentless acceleration, to the tyranny of the "new", just as "glitch" is now the name for resistance to relentless digital perfection. In the process, obsolescence has become the badge of honour of the no-longer-useful (for capitalism, for profit, for a purpose), which furthermore associates the obsolete with the "disinterestedness" of the aesthetic impulse itself. Just think of the many obsolete media technologies that now fill our galleries, the way that sculptures of nudes used to fill museums 100 years ago![9]

As the cycles of updates, upgrades in the field of consumer electronic and software have speeded up, obsolescence increasingly connotes or implies the digital as its negative foil. This is also reflected in one of its current definitions:

> Obsolescence is the state of being which occurs when an object, service, or practice is no longer wanted even though it may still be in good working order. Obsolete refers to something that is already disused or discarded, or antiquated. […] A growing industry sector is facing issues where the life cycles of products no longer fit together with life cycles of components. […] However, obsolescence extends beyond electronic components to other items […] obsolescence has been shown to appear for software, and soft resources, such as human skills.[10]

The last part of the sentence is telling, since it spells out the antiquatedness and includes the obsolescence of what are here called the 'soft resources', i.e. human skills and by extension, human beings: a point I shall return to, at the end of my talk, since it hints at our own anxieties of not being able to keep pace with

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[9] For examples of sculptural treatment of projectors, celluloid or the editing table, see the work of Tacita Dean, Rodney Graham, Rosa Barba, Gibson and Recoder.

[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obsolescence (last visited: 19 May 2018)

the accelerated life-cycles that technology is imposing on human life-cycles. As a consequence, obsolescence can also be the rallying point for sustainability and ecological awareness, while nonetheless taking its stand for the object-oriented philosophy and the new materialism of self-sufficiency of being. Yet this should not make us overlook how, in respect of film and photography, obsolescence can give expression to the grieving and mourning, the denial and disavowal of what is lost and gone forever, while at the same time, nurturing an insane hope, bordering on hubris that we might be able to bring this embalmed past, back to life.

Sarah Polley's Stories We Tell

A good example of both the hope and the hubris, of the dilemmas of how to deal with the images that have come down to us, and of the almost inevitable turn to memory as trauma, is the 2012 film by the Canadian actress and director Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell*. Polley weaves her very personal, and as it emerges, traumatic narrative around the home movies that mainly feature her mother Diane as a vivacious, energetic, but also scatty and flirtatious 30-something, taken by her husband, and the father of her four children. This mother died tragically young of cancer, with Sarah the youngest of the siblings, but the one who most closely follows her mother's career as an actress. What makes the film symptomatic is not only that Polley, faced with her father's home movies of a mother she barely knew, constructs a narrative in the form of a quest and a self-interrogation, in which all the family members, siblings, friends and colleagues are interviewed and cross-examined. What only gradually emerges is that Polley illustrates many of these reminiscences, anecdotes and recalled moments with re-staged scenes, using actors, made up to look like her mother, father and their friends, who are then filmed with the same equipment that her father used for the original footage.

I was struck by the way this Super-8 camera, in its precariousness and obsolescence, became a talisman and fetish (in the anthropological sense) charged to document and to uncover what the actual surviving images so carefully hid and concealed, namely the mother's extra-marital affair, of which Sarah turns out to have been the not altogether welcome love-child. It is as if the re-staging and faking is best understood as Polley's own "working through" and "acting out" of the trauma of her paternity, for which the Super-8 camera itself as an object becomes both the instrument of truth, and the guarantor of authenticity, in the very act of filming the un-filmed, and thus restoring what is missing in Sarah's life-narrative.

But this desperate act of recovery is only possible or credible because of what I hinted at earlier: we have become so saturated with images that we now assume any event worth being remembered or important enough to enter history must have been caught by a camera. Yet this in turn is such a tragic mistake, such a fatal illusion, that only a narrative revolving around family melodrama and personal trauma can rescue its underlying assumptions, by making them provocatively

problematic. Here an orphan of the cinema (the found footage of her mother) quite literally begets a narrative about an orphan: Sarah. Having lost her mother, Sarah is suddenly forced to look for her biological father. In other words, the default value of what is 'real' has changed, with the obsolete technology retroactively standing in for the historical gap between the 1970s (and amateur filming as an emerging practice) and today (where everyone carries a camera), so that the fake footage both fills and fails to fill this gap. A similar strategy characterises Polley's way with words: in order to be truly authentic, her father's testimony needs to be mediated, and the most intimate parts of his narrative are filmed in a recording studio, where he reads the lines from a script, and repeats them when Sarah is not satisfied with his delivery. Here then, "mastering the past" not only involves digitally re-mastering damaged analogue footage, but to re-staging and re-enacting the past, now in the idiom of obsolescence.

One reason why this way of 'mastering' a family trauma through re-enactment that includes fake footage and obsolete technology, resonated so strongly with the public, may be that it also speaks to the broader trauma we all seem to be caught up in: our obsession with not only *revisiting* but *rewriting* and *revising* the past, because of our inability to imagine a world different from the one we currently inhabit, making us all orphans – of utopia. As in the film *Back to the Future*, we seem to have landed in repetition compulsion, disguised as nostalgia for a "better and more complete past" (since we cannot have a better future), which may even take the form of time travel, but unlike *Back to the Future*, our collective re-turn vainly hopes to *undo* what has already happened, as if to try and make amends for sins we are not even sure we have committed, as in the case of *Stories We Tell*.

The Loop of Belatedness

The fact that obsolescence thus associates both utopia and time travel would confirm the point I started from, namely that we have not only lost our faith in a better future, but also our belief in "learning from history", which is why we can deconstruct it so easily into memory and topography, into trauma and the archive. Obsolescence is therefore also the code word for "history at a standstill", to vary Benjamin's aphorism about the dialectical image.[11] But as arrested history, suspended time and reversible in its flow, obsolescence is also the placeholder for renewal and revival, biding its time.

This would be the grounds for positing a "poetics of obsolescence" whose theoretical elaboration can also be traced back to Walter Benjamin and his

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[11] The original phrase is: "an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical." Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

reflections on the surrealist object (Elsaesser, 2016). Freed from utility and market value, even the industrially made commodity can reveal an unexpected beauty and display a fit of form and function that speaks of ideals present as potential even when still unrealised. At the same time, when reclaiming the discarded, preserving the ephemeral and putting to new use the newly useless, we may indeed be right to feel virtuous: for are we not paying our tribute to ecological sustainability and renewability, even if only in the form of the symbolic act that is art?

At this point it is worth recalling Marshall McLuhan's tetrad of media effects:

> What does the medium *enhance and amplify*? What does the medium *discard* and make *obsolete*? What does the medium *reverse* or how does it *flip* when pushed? What does the medium *retrieve* that had been discarded? (McLuhan, 1988)

With only minor adjustments – for instance, by inverting the direction of McLuhan's causal arc from old to new, and allowing for the discovery of the new *in* the old medium, and not only the effects of the new *on* the old medium – the current interactions between the art world and the cinematic archive are holding all these parts of McLuhan's tetrad in suspended animation: whether we think of art historian Rosalind Krauss advocating the post-medium condition as the 'new medium specificity' (Kraus, 2000), whether we take the museum space as the site at the intersection of enhancement and retrieval, or whether we study artists like William Kentridge , pushing the old medium to its extremes in the full awareness of the digital having effected a kind of figure-ground reversal.

Remaining within Benjamin's frame of reference, we can cite his messianic conception of *Jetztzeit* or Now-time, and say that "the past is always formed in and by the present. It comes into discourse *analeptically* in relation to a present, but since it is read from the standpoint of the present, it is *proleptic* as well, in that it forms 'the time of the now'" (Tamblin, 2001, p. 4). This analeptic-proleptic relationship I call the "loop of belatedness", which is to say, we retroactively discover the past to have been prescient and prophetic, as seen from the point of view of some special problem or urgent concern in the here and now. Much of our work as film scholars and media historians is, for good or ill, caught in this loop of belatedness, where we retroactively assign or attribute foresight and agency to a moment or a figure from the past that suddenly speaks to us in a special way.

But here is the rub: if one of the strategic uses of obsolescence is that it can serve both as an *aesthetic value* and as an *ecological virtue*, there is still the fact that, being a term that inevitably associates both capitalism and technology, it implicitly acknowledges that today there can be *no art or nature* outside capitalism and technology. This would be the term's political dimension, since the dialectics of (technological) innovation and (capitalist) obsolescence has in some sense become the fate of the contemporary world, keeping us in a loop of our own historical belatedness, whether as Europeans or as a species.

It suggests that obsolescence, as I have been trying to sketch it, is also the recto to the verso of the now definitely lost ideals of progress and enlightenment: through obsolescence we negatively conjure up the ghost of progress past, making it the token or fetish of a future we no longer see other than as the recovery of a past: a past that may be trapped for us – but possibly also trapping us – in the translucent amber of our celluloid heritage.

This leaves us pondering the trade-off I have been suggesting: namely that one way to salvage *history* from cinema's (and not only cinema's) uncanny *ontologies*, is to open historical thinking up to the archeo-topographies of cultural memory, and especially to its traumatic remainders and apparently obsolescent values. It gives the past – more and more recalled and present to us only through moving images – the kinds of *locatedness* and *materiality* that, far from making the world superfluous, establishes for it *a new ecology of sustainability*. Re-establishing a cycle that isn't just a loop, it would ensure for mankind's many pasts the possibility of fashioning the future, rather than foreclosing it in the post-human life scenarios of bio-algorithmic or bio-digital fusion.[12]

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[12] For bio-digital fusion, see for instance, https://www.richardvanhooijdonk.com/en/4th-industrial-revolution-fusion-physical-digital-biological-worlds/

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Trapped in Amber: The New Materialities of Memory

The term 'obsolescence' has in recent years re-entered the vocabulary of the art world, memory studies and new media historians. In the process, it has significantly changed its meaning and enlarged its semantic and evaluative range, even signifying something like heroic resistance to relentless new-ness or superficial novelty, even becoming the badge of honour for all that is no longer useful (for capitalism, for appropriation, for instrumental objectification). Anyone engaged with 'found footage' films, with home movies or our analogue cinematic legacy knows that the strategic use of obsolescence lies in the fact that it is a term that inevitably associates with both capitalism and technology. Hence obsolescence is of special interest in the context of contemporary cinema, since it provides a counterweight – the materiality of memory, and the methodology of media archaeology – to the *im*materiality and virtuality of the digital. But the obsolescence of celluloid also gives us a kind of 'fossil record' of what has become of the filmic 'medium' when we see it in the broader context of the 'geological' time of media, and as part of the 'archival' turn that memory studies have taken in the 21st century.

Keywords: memory studies, obscolescence, media archeology.