Doomed To Remember

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF 'MEMORY' IN IDFA'S SHORT FILM COMPETITION PROGRAMME

notes by Mariana Hristova

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Memory is the most faithful of films – the only one that can register at any height, and right up to the very moment of death. But who can fail to see the difference between memory and that objective image that gives it eternal substance?"
André Bazin [1]

Film is a memory vessel that materializes recollections, is what André Bazin seems to imply in the statement above; not solely still moments but also the passage of time through moving images, the very sense of liveness. In his fundamental theory book 'What Is Cinema?', Bazin launches the famous "mummy-complex" concept by linking it to the notion of remembrance and the urge of art to preserve life for eternity, or at least valuable segments of it. Memory registers life while the art of cinema keeps evidence for the records and shares them with audiences.

Upon browsing through this year's International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)'s short film competition, the subject of memory immediately pops-up as a recurring theme, interpreted by nearly half of the selected films. Mankind has piled up so many memories that cinema no longer serves as a

preservation tool alone, but as a recycling and search engine as well, by diving back into the archives and re-think what has been preserved. The recent boom of found footage films is perhaps only a logical result. Some of the short docs that are using archival material are not longer pieces of cinema resembling and preserving reality but were conceived in order to discuss it – its past, present and possible future – by compiling collages of earlier generated images.The film, says Bazin, “is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber.” It rather revises the stored “objectivity in time” and comments on it from a later perspective.

Some other works in the competition additionally analyze the very notion of memory and the way it constructs identity. As the former soldier in ‘Five Scenes from the War in Afghanistan as They Appear in East Sussex’ confesses: “I feel guilty if I let myself off.” Off the war memories in order to relieve his conscience. However, forgetting feels like betraying a segment of one’s life, giving up identity. All seven films mentioned in this essay integrate memory in one way or another and interweave memory’s logic into their narratives or language systems, emphasizing on the interrelation between the cinematic body and the manner we register experiences.

Storing Lives

The documentary essay ‘Our Ark’ by Deniz Tortum and Kathryn Hamilton touches upon the very notion of “mummifying” and archiving life on our planet, which is gradually losing wildlife ecosystems, cultural heritage and analogue experiences in general. They zoom in on a newly invented technology, developed by the Digital Life company, that serves to virtually reconstruct animals, historic sites and even mundane everyday events to the very detail, in order to catalogue and archive them in the endless digital warehouse. It’s a computer program using cameras to create 3D digital clones of all animals on Earth, starting with the ones threatened by extinction. In another storage, dedicated to heritage monuments, views of cultural sites such as the (destroyed by ISIS) Palmyra in Syria are virtually reconstructed through crowd gathered photos. Similar to the Egyptians who were aiming to preserve people and their setting for eternity, Digital Life embalms the physical world in

accordance with the collective overall feeling that it might soon disappear, and convert into pixels.

The sequences of images that are being stored into the company system – a turtle, a rhino, Palmira, forest environment – are accompanied by a female voice-over who elaborates on the simulacrum realm we are heading to, and the virtual world as an artefact. Since we are failing to preserve life in its original beauty, we are creating an electronic back-up, so to silence the guilt of the fact we continue destroying it, and to keep memories of it for our digital successors in the future meta-world – a Noah's ark, prepared for the aftermath of the upcoming ecological, political and humanitarian catastrophe.

'Contents Inventory' narrows down the scope by moving the audience' focus from the planet's downfall to the loss of a private home, which for the people who have experienced it feels equally apocalyptic. Closely following a devastating wildfire in California in 2020, which erased nine hundred homes, filmmaker Irene Lusztig, being among the lucky ones whose houses survived, conducts various interviews with her neighbours: an oral inventory of the vanished private areas — a verbally constructed ark, preserving the memories of forever gone living spaces.

The interviewees share thoughts and life plans after the disaster, but mostly emotions, recollections and psychological tactics they are coming up with in order to cope with the situation. Such as Alice who is so homesick that she ordered herself to not keep memories in her head as they upset her but instead create a binder with the house inventory described.

Once archived, memories turn into mere objects, hence pain is diminished. Or Julie, who threw away all the stuff that remained, since she prefers to start from the beginning instead of living on ashes of the past.

Though structured in a monotonous talking head sequence, the combination between the personal confessions creates a dynamic, even poetic atmosphere of therapeutic intimacy which opens conversations about the immaterial value of material loss and the way in which people get defined by their homes and the memories within. Reactions vary depending on each character's connection with the place. For some, the frustration can be measured with the wasted time and energy in ordering and decorating a space that has disappeared within hours. For another character, it is a symbolic, inexorable loss since the house witnessed the days of five family generations. She compares it to war, in which her life has exploded. The participants are introduced solely by their name and the number of years they lived in the house, as a single defining characteristic. The longer they lived there, the more traumatized they were. And even though some are trying to forget, so as to be able to go on, they all agreed to contribute to the documentary and build up a memory vessel for testimonies, revealing the sacred relationships they maintained with their homes.

Clement Boland, the protagonist of 'Five Scenes from the War in Afghanistan as They Appear in East Sussex', is in a more complex relationship with his former temporary home: the battlefield in a faraway land. Serving in the British Army for ten years, he has been trying to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder by gardening. His fragmented and emotional memories reflect the mixed feelings he has about being there, as he remembers nature in a pleasant way but also the caprices of its weather he's been exposed to. Walking through a park, he recalls a similar place back in Afghanistan which was destroyed by his military unit. While passing by the church, his mind unburies the face of a shot Afghan man who looked like Jesus.

Those memories immediately evoke haunting guilt about the enormous damage caused by the political side he was defending. His body returned safe and sound, yet his mind and soul have been wounded forever. The trauma that grew inside him is linked to durable memories that somehow associate the

fresh green Sussex land with the dusty fields of Afghanistan (“biblical” as defined by Clement and showcased in the film through private archival footage). Also, English cows call reminiscences with a minotaur figure he had a vision about back there. Although legally serving a job duty ordered by the state, Clement’s conscientious memory whispers he was acting as a perpetrator. While actually being a victim of a rotten political system.

Rethinking Histories

Further down and deeper into the guilty past reaches ‘Dixie’ by Caroline Rumley, a dreamy black-and-white journey through the film’s author's own family history. Rumley uses the random choice of her dog’s name (Dixie) as a starting point: a name that sounded good to her daughter, but also once caused an embarrassing encounter with an African professor. Since Dixie actually was the nickname for the Confederate States of America, uniting the Southern US states that wanted to keep legal slavery labour, it unconsciously refers to a shameful period in time. Then the narrative goes back to her parents’ story, garnered with a mix of archival and contemporary images that flow like a road movie landscape scenery through the same Southern states. In another flashback, she unveils her grandmother’s tale whose relatives insisted on being close to someone “special” and were apparently proud of touching the fame of a general and a militia officer from the Confederate States with controversial political reputations from nowadays perspective. The most significant discovery she makes is that her grandfather’s grandfather was an owner of a plantation called Pleasant Valley, which supposedly lived largely on slave labour.

In descending order towards memories about events from two centuries ago, Rumley manages to scuffle some archived remnants of her family genealogy up until USA's first settlers, so as to learn where she actually comes from, although the discoveries made might not make her particularly happy. In this regard, 'Dixie' blends in an ongoing process by former colonial Western countries of recycling and rethinking their violent past in order to come to terms with it.

Not by coincidence, 'Dixie' was paired in joint screening slots with 'Nelly's Memory', in which Nicolas Wouters uses a similar approach of digging into his family history and its connection to colonialism. The film constructs a narrative out of old pictures, dynamized through stop-motion and computer animation. His journey through the past is way more traumatic as it concerns a pretty recent period: the last decades of colonial presence in Belgian Congo, which ended in 1960, and where Wouters' grandmother Nelly spent several years with her husband and kids. To reconstruct those times, the filmmaker opens the Pandora's box of the family: an actual cardboard box with family photos, super 8 home movies, letters and several souvenirs from the time his grandparents lived in Belgian Congo. He also collected and inserted in the film oral testimonies from other Belgian women who lived in the colonized territories, as he wanted to give body to this period "which triggered nothing in my personal memory but had a hold on me".

The setting resembles a spiritual séance in which Nicolas is calling his dead grandmother's spirit through photos, challenging her to tell the true story that lies behind the illusory smiles frequently captured by the camera. Back then, cameras

were a forbidden toy (or tool) for local Black people. Preserving memories was a right given to their “white masters” only, who were fully aware that crimes were being committed. Nicolas masterfully reconstructs not only personal and momentary experiences of his family but also reflects on the colonial ideology at the time, to which all Belgian citizens back then were a subject to. In the common guilt feeling for all silent witnesses of colonial crimes, he finds possible answers about his grandparents’ post-Congo depression, the hidden abuse within the family, the estrangement of his aunt and the alienation of other members. By obediently participating in a criminal regime and keeping silent about it, Nicolas’ ancestors were morally shaken, hence subconsciously passed their suffering to next generations and scarred them with a heavy burden of collective guilt.

Silence causes complex feelings and suffering for hereditary generations even when it comes from the side of the perpetrated. Departing from a beautiful first love story and naïve but straightforward child questions that never receive proper answers, ‘I Am Trying to Remember’ gradually reveals facts about thousands of secretly sentenced and killed people, ten years after the Iranian revolution. Iranian actress, filmmaker and activist Pegah Ahangarani, being a subject of political persecution herself, builds a poetic narrative around the disappearance of family friend Gholam to whom she felt a special affection. Drawing from childhood memories she subtly conveys an intuitive suspicion that something has gone inevitably wrong. Ahangarani too uses family pictures and footage together with Gholam’s documentary video recordings from the days of the revolution. In the only picture she could find with him, his face has been scratched in an attempt to erase the memory about him, presumably out of fear that his relatives might face the same fate.

“Do you know why Gholam has been erased?” is a striking and innocent question of numerous meanings that Ahangarani keeps asking since her childhood. She made this short documentary looking for answers. Using a very personal life etude as a starting point, her work eventually turns up to be a memorial for the approximately four thousand political prisoners who were executed and buried in unmarked mass graves in 1988. Both Wouters and Ahangarani are looking for

significant missing particles from the past to reassemble a more detailed and comprehensive though also more cruel picture. Though they perceive the process as a therapy method, telling those stories to (new) audiences is also a matter of moral duty.

Recognizing Identities

The most peculiar film among those seven from the program talks about an even more peculiar disease and the way in which one of its victims copes with it. Prosopagnosia is a cognitive disorder, also called “face blindness”, which impairs one’s ability to recognize familiar faces, while intellectual functioning remains intact. Through an audiovisual collage of stop-motion animation and photographic images played on fast forward, cassette tapes recordings, sketchbooks, photos, and diary extracts, ‘Prosopagnosia''s author Steven Fraser showcases the therapy instruments for combating his disturbing condition. Fraser draws sketches of people’s faces; those he met but whose appearances never stick. While describing the anxiety and the troubled communication he experiences due to this memory issue, Fraser also admits he remembers selectively and that he sometimes uses his “disability” to avoid people he does not like.

In an eloquent way, ‘Prosopagnosia’ implies that memory function and the act of remembrance is an inseparable part of one’s identity. Faces are windows to personalities, while our capability to distinguish their features define us as social beings. Therefore, as a defining mechanism for past live trajectories and personal identities, memory can be a curse too.

Living side by side with it is a challenge that should be constantly dealt with. The most common risk is to get stuck in the past without being able to go on — a traumatic consequence that Clement from ‘Five Scenes from the War in Afghanistan as They Appear in East Sussex’ is trying to overcome, and an outspoken reason for which Nicolas Wouters made ‘Nelly’s Memory’. Or having to live with the painful recollections of a lost loved person, whose life was violently taken, which is the case with Gholam in ‘I Am Trying to Remember’. Overcoming the trials that memory places ahead, helps us mature and grow.

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[1] Bazin, André, What is Cinema?, chapter “Cinema and Exploration”, University of California Press Ltd., London, 1967

© Images

1 ‘I Am Trying To Remember’ (Pegah Ahangarani, 2021)
2 ‘Our Ark’ (Deniz Tortum & Kathryn Hamilton, 2021)
3 ‘Dixie’ (Caroline Rumley, 2020)
4 'Prosopagnosia' (Steven Fraser, 2021)

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