

Couscous is a short video that is structured like a diptych. On the right side of the screen, various clips of family footage are shown, while on the other side of the screen, we see short, linear information about the artist's father and family over a background of the color of hummus. Born into an Italian family that had lived on the island of Malta for over 200 years and then moved to Libya during the Ottoman Empire, the father, Oreste, gets married in 1966 and moves to Rome. The rest of the family does so in 1969, after the Gaddafi coup.

Malta is populated with people from Italy, an island that Ferdinand of Borbon, King of Naples and Sicily handed over to the British Empire in 1816, after the signing of the Paris Treaty in 1814 and the Vienna Congress in 1815. Since Italian was banned as the official language of Malta in 1936, many Italians then moved to Libya. They cross the Mediterranean, as wandering Jews had done before them, with resignation but also with vitality and good intentions. What nobody can take away from them are those times that are their very own, as much as those others of inherited years and centuries they carry in their blood and their memories, and in their homeland, so to speak, the one that has never been a physical place but a mental place. Couscous condenses a memory of happy survival.

French philosopher Henri Bergson distinguished between two memories, or rather two ways of analysing what we call memory or recollection of the past: the memory that comes from, or is stored through, the *mécanismes moteurs* [motor mechanisms], is attained with the effort of will; the memory that comes from, or is stored through, *souvenir indépendents* [independent memories], is a spontaneous recollection, an image that becomes present. Years later, Gilles Deleuze would make a

distinction, from a different perspective, between *mémoire-souvenir* (*souvenir pur*) and *mémoire-contraction* (*souvenir-image*). The first type of memory, which is voluntary, is stored in the brain (matter). The second type is stored in one's consciousness (life, mind).

With the help of perception, the brain reviews or scans the memories-recollections and selects those that are needed for the action of living or surviving. Automatic memory, which is preserved in the body, so to speak, with its automatic reactions to situations that arise in life, has been translated into English as "habit formed memory", "habitual memory" or "pure recollection". This second type is the enduring memory of each person, which consists of their individuality, in the entire mix of a person's past and present. Bergson calls it independent, because the images that are stored in it are always intact as such, regardless of the situation and individual experiences. This is known as "pure memory", a memory that comes as an image that one preserves of oneself, like a contraction that evokes a certain moment and shapes our present.

In his posthumous book *Time Regained* (1927), Marcel Proust said that we also retain the smell and taste of beings and objects of the past, whose memory sometimes lasts much longer, like the smell of madeleines: "Remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection."

In *Couscous*, this edifice of memory is built by Sagona, not just with the memory of what was filmed, the beaches, the streets, the architecture of Tripoli, but also with the sound, the voice of

her father explaining a culinary recipe. The saxophonist Gato Barbieri, in his album *Caliente!* (1976) claims: “The images of memory have a sound. With cinema, we realised that images have music. With music, something older and more intimate happens; when it really touches you, you can invent your own images and dream of things you didn’t know you were going to dream. Music is like a jungle (as is memory); it has limits, but we don’t know them. Music is the memory of dreams.”

The visual diptych in *Couscous* is complemented with an Italian-speaking voice that explains the recipe for couscous. Food is the means of communication through which her father expresses himself: describing or breaking down a recipe he likes is his way of expressing his love and explaining his roots. In every recipe, there is a linear aspect (the number or list of ingredients), but there is also a timeline aspect, the code to combine those ingredients (how to cut them, put them in the pan, and the timing). A cooking recipe is a language that has no other translation than its making. Here, eating (satisfying one’s hunger) becomes food, and food becomes nourishment, loving food, nutrition. This term comes from the Latin word *nutrire*, which is also the root of the word *nurse*, and from the pre-Indo-European term *nutri*, which allows us to swim, to flow.

In the video *Couscous*, in the flow of Oreste’s voice, we watch the pan being filled, not with ingredients, but with experiences. That cooking pot, as a familiar territory, is a sensory place as well as an emotional epicentre. Every nation has limits or it limits, but the place does not. Neither does food.

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