

Paper

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From Recollection to Recapitulation: Situating Time, Memory and Dotage in “Vortex” and “Amour”

Keywords

Memory studies, Time-image, Michael Haneke, Gasper Noe, ageing, death

Abstract

This paper aims to read Gasper Noe’s *Vortex* (2021) and Michael Haneke’s *Amour* (2012) through the lens of Deleuze’s Time-image theory. Penetrating *world slices* encapsulate the non-linguistic spaces of expression that use a Bergsonian monologue of images. Both films portray perishing, disabled bodies in broken ruptures of (mirror-)images, each dealing with an idiosyncratic temporality of preliminary senses. In other words, the reality of the image moves beyond its impressionistic (self-conscious) optical realm. It unfolds into reproduced actuals, enabling the cinema of the seer rather than the agent (Deleuze, 2). My paper examines this dichotomy between ‘time as freedom’ and ‘time as an inventory of images (Deleuze, 5) that corroborates through the extension of the re-placed body. It situates the mutating self in the conquest of a continuum (Deleuze, 109), an obscure movement that is only possible through duration rather than depth. The interaction of temporal planes occurs through the exchange of virtual sheets of the past that tend to (corrosively) deform, dilate and dominate the spatial progression of memory. The paper tries to interact through these diffused recollections, juxtaposing its infiltrated montage with the cinematographic act of ageing (in real-time). As and when a singular certainty completes the template of mortality, it is the role of the time-image to commence with a permanent crisis or bring upon a sublime death in every evocation of that pre-fixed reality. Oscillating between the naive tenor and an autonomous vehicle, the paper tries to locate the elisions, secrets and lost narratives that guide the past into inexorable progress in cinematic witnessing.

Paper

Moving from the socially defined ‘fact-image’ of Italian Neorealism, Andre Bazin adopted an aesthetic criterion that reproduced fragmentary, ephemeral and missed encounters. It outstripped the cinematic moment from its sensory-motor ‘re-actional’ or responsive quality and intended to *record* (report) the “*dead force*” of the subject body. The complicit indexical or *syncing* of the *actual* limit situation is gradually replaced by what Deleuze calls the *opsigns* and *sonsigns*. The Eros of the filmic narrative is a tale of internalisation where impressionistic idle spaces are inverted into an abstract inventory for the seer, pointing to a disparity between the spectacle and the spectator.

Michael Haneke’s *Amour* (2012), borrowing selectively from the ophthalmic absentia of the French New Wave, talks about ‘impossible’ love. Anne Laurent, an octogenarian retired piano teacher, silently suffers a stroke and poignantly circumscribes into a euthanasiac state by refusing all medical aid from her dutiful husband, Georges. The climax of her death is apparent from the opening scene, a loud crash, followed by a muted ambient noise when emergency officers break into the apartment only to find a tranquil corpse-strewn on a bed of flowers. The disquiet of her death (event) is cancelled out by the intrusive spirit of the close-up

shots; dialogues are streaming in as de-signifiers or quotidian sounds of no consequence; excessively foreground ‘still-life’; manifested sounds of silence like a running faucet, razor’s buzz; or by a corrupted narrative time in a ringing phone or a dream-sequence. The revolting slowness of movement often demands stealthy eavesdropping from the audience, who divulges the weight of sounds into the banality of ‘*reduced listening*. Georges, her husband, is afflicted by the ‘turns and returns’ (Leibniz) of memory through signaletic disturbances. For instance, he hallucinates the impossible ‘sound’ of Anne washing dishes or dreams of a flooded hallway where he is gagged and woken by his scream.

This monotony is reprised in Gasper Noe’s *Vortex* (2021), which hauntingly resonates with a post-pandemic quarantine. However, in this case, the house arrest is due to the incurable dementia of the protagonist Elle, a former psychiatrist who lives with her decrepit husband Lui, a character whose heavily accented French and meta-theatrical work on Cinema exhibits his drive for achievement. Even though the most delicate and dimmed nature is projected to be the demented Elle, it is ironically Lui, her husband, who dies first of a heart attack. The surrounding void emphasises the anticipation of a frail ending. The endless repetition of the compositional objects like the long-lost trophies and a lifetime of books shrink into a ‘still time’, acting as its container. The ‘visual reserve of events’ is acted out through an indefinitely loitering time. It is restrained in repetitive objects that change with time when time does not change. Breaking away from its retinal habits, the narrative anticipates a forceful disintegration, acted out not only through the deafening silence of the film but also through the dichotomy between dementia and a throbbing heart, between forgetting and remembering.



Fig 1- *Amour*



Fig 2- *Vortex*

The ethics of care is thoroughly questioned in both films, where the increasing enfeeblement of the characters is caused more due to the endlessness of time rather than a mutation caused by illness. In *Amour*, the caretaking husband causes a rupture from the unbearable ‘*literalness*’ of his responsibility by acting out the murder of his paralysed wife, eventually suffocating her. But this act is entirely devoid of its brutality as Georges, before ‘letting her go’, narrates a tale from her childhood, writes her a long letter and releases the pet pigeon from the cage - all deliberate acts of positive freedom and hope. Anne’s release from her pain is enacted through a love which frees her from life. As soon as the determined present is released from its claustrophobic space, memories are redirected to *chronosigns* and *lectosigns*. Time becomes a continuous perception that can be caught only through discrepancy (Burch). The world *shrinks*, the music stops, and the only visit is to a friend’s funeral.



Fig 3 - Amour



Fig 4 - Vortex

In the first scene (that ropes in the trope of memory), they return from a concert only to find that the front lock has been damaged, presumably by a burglar. Their immediate reaction to Anne is, “Imagine we’re in bed and someone breaks in,” while Georges is indifferent, “Why should I imagine that?” As a consequence of this comment, Georges proves, for the entire movie, that outsiders can never ‘break the cocoon he must create for his beloved’, even if it’s their daughter. It is a kind of *deja vu*. George doesn’t let the illness take over his wife, but he takes over his wife’s illness, a.k.a. her life.



Fig 5 - Amour

In *Vortex*, Kiki, Elle’s grandchild, loudly stumps his toy car on the table as if protesting against the confined space’s mindless melancholy. In reaction to this unprecedented disruption, Elle weeps with a breakdown. This *punctum* (Barthes), the punctuation within the assimilated boredom of events, is followed by a smile from the patient, the only affirmative shot in the entire movie. It is evident from this short narrative utterance that time is often constricted within a syntagmatic conjunction of relative units. At the same time, its motion is *paradigmatic*, comparable only through its absent branches. The disturbance is the measure for clarity. Prolonging death is a revolt against the indifference of the shot. Semiological transformations occur here on two fronts: the analogical reduction of the image in a picture and the codification of these analogical signs to discover their underlying language systems. Silence gives a performative convergence to cinematic time while the movement-image of reality can only ‘speak’ through the ‘still’ life. This plastic mass of non-syntax materiality is not amorphous. Here, the perception can always start from degree zero. The camera tries to see the image of a character who is seeing through his perception-image. It becomes an icon of composition, a potential montage, a time matrix free from any linkage. Thus, the cinematographic image presents an infinity of openings, not confined to the strictness of worldly motivity but acted through the recollection that is substantially distanced from all bodily movements. *Amour* is heavily influenced by Resnais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), whose viscosity of personal death is haunted by the ‘casualty’ of war. The flashback can be a

displacement through this silence or an intertextual resonance. In the film, Anne Desberandes, a French actress filming an anti-war sequence in Hiroshima, invites her lover to kill her symbolically.

Lui - “I wish you were dead”.

Elle - “It is accomplished”.



Fig 6 - Hiroshima Mon Amour



Fig 7 - Amour

Silence takes on a form of borrowed time in cinema, while, as Godard said, the present never exist there. Georges, too realises that it is only through quickening or provoking death, by killing Anne mercifully, that he can keep the promise of protecting her. Gasper Noe has also borrowed the names of his characters from Resnais, and it is evident how recapitulation enables his cinematic language, not through the dependence of time on movement but through the compulsion of the action-image (*executed* move) to proceed through the perception-image (*received* training). The present is so complete that memory tends to be jeopardised with each obstacle, distance or encompasses. The sensory-motor schema is shattered, and the non-human cognisance overtakes.



Fig 8 - Vortex

Death is an anticipated hope, and the pure optical-sound image swallows this hollow depth. It embraces the force of time through the limitation of shots, thus fixing time in '*sensible*' indices. But what is formed through this association is only ambiguity, an abstraction in representative quality only revealed through a detour from the concrete object of death. Hence, we can say that even though sensory-motor illusions are richer in both films, it is through the exasperating elision, the deliberate omissions, that a rare optical image is formed. Thus Deleuze writes :

"Sometimes montage occurs in the depth of the image; sometimes it becomes flat: it no longer asks how images are linked, but 'What does the image show?' This identity of montage with the image itself can appear only in conditions of the direct time-image. Tarkovsky says that what is essential is the way time flows in the shot, its tension or rarefaction, 'the pressure of time in the shot'.

But this is only a superficial appearance because the force or pressure of time goes outside the limits of the shot, and montage itself works and lives in time."



Fig 9- Vortex

The recollected memory (*description*) is adopted through erasure (*selection*) that provisionally gives materiality to the expired spirit. It can be called deeper strata of reality or progress of attention which can dynamically posit both creation and destruction, affection and tension. In *Amour*, Georges repeatedly looks at the dusty piano to drive his thoughts towards the image of a once-flourishing Anne. At the same time, in *Vortex*, the once-persuasive psychiatrist, is now being counselled by her husband in a reversal of roles. Since entrapment in contingent reality is unavoidable, it is through flashbacks that we move forward in time. The dissolving link is so extrinsic that one has no option but to situate a story that cannot be told in the present. Fragmentation of reality is perpetual in subjectivity; thus, progression is embedded in its deviation, dispersing the enigma while instilling deeper ones anew.

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