

The Taste of a Name

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Abstract: *Remembrance* is analysed in relation to memory as data, as nostalgia, and as cinema. It is argued that the film presents a view of memory that is personal, embodied, and resistant to co-option, exemplified in Alfred's demonstration of the difference between memory and remembrance.

Keywords: memory, cinema, data, nostalgia, synaesthesia, remembrance

'What does my name taste like?', Aurora asks Alfred in the final moments of *Remembrance* (Shot 152b). Alfred experiences the world through a form of synaesthesia, although he does not specifically name it, describing it in the following way: 'I can't see something without tasting it. I can't hear something without seeing it' (Shots 92-3). His description coincides with synaesthesia as it is popularly understood: as an overlapping or confusion of the senses. In reality, there are more than 61 different variations of synaesthesia (Simner 2012: 1) and the vast majority of these involve only two senses: 'in almost all cases it is a visual sensation caused by an auditory stimulation' (Harrison 2001: 3). It might be assumed that Alfred's synaesthesia is a self-reflexive commentary on cinema itself as a sensory experience, and it is certainly possible to regard the cinema as synaesthetic. As Barker notes, the cinema is audio-visual, but 'in lived experience, the senses have a way of skirting the hierarchies and divisions we use to define and explain them' (Barker 2008: 237). The cinema is not truly synaesthetic, but synaesthesia works as a metaphor for the way in which some films foreground senses beyond those of sight and sound, and *Remembrance* is one of these.

In the opening and closing credits, words appear against a background of blue fabric. The weave of the fabric is visible and colour variations in the thread can be seen: this is tactile. In the film itself, touch is also foregrounded. There is a close-up of Alfred's and Aurora's hands as they grasp each other in greeting (Shot 36), and another of Alfred touching his own hand afterwards as if startled (Shot 38). Later, the camera shows Alfred's anxiety as hands touch him to remove his jacket in the club (Shot 49), and when he dances with Aurora, there are close-ups of her touching his shoulder (Shot 130), him touching her waist (Shot 131a) and their faces touching (Shot 134). Beyond touch, the overwhelming and disconcerting nature of Alfred's synaesthesia is expressed in the club by heightened auditory experiences like the snap of a clasp (Shot 87), brightly coloured lights shining on the singer, tilted camera angles, and rapid pans between shots.

Alfred's synaesthesia appears to be cross-sensory, which is unusual. Its association with memory is even more unusual. He claims that his synaesthesia is the reason why 'I remember everything ... Since the very first day' (Shots 108, 109). In fact, he appears to be unable to forget a single detail about his life. I would argue that Alfred's synaesthesia is not the film's central concern. Rather, synaesthesia provides an interesting angle from which to

explore memory, especially the relationship between memory and perception. The following paragraphs will discuss the film's exploration of memory under three categories: memory as data, memory as nostalgia, and memory as cinema.

Aurora asks Alfred out for a drink with a view to asking him to participate in a covert intelligence operation that is taking place at a nearby location. This location may have been modelled on the Special Training School No. 103, nicknamed Camp X, a secret camp used to train Canadian and Allied spies, commanded by the British Security Coordination, and associated with MI6. Alfred is faced with the prospect of having his memorising ability used by the State. Indeed, it is implied by Aurora that he should feel morally compelled, like her, to use his talents to serve 'the cause' (Shot 103). The personal and ethical consequences of being able to access an individual's complete set of memories has been explored in the *Black Mirror* episode 'The Entire History of You', in which characters have 'grains' implanted that allow them to play back everything that they have seen and done. In this episode, one character demands to be shown another character's private memories, revealing his own wife's adultery (Welch 2011). In the real world, research has been conducted on the possibility of using functional MRI to detect 'individual memory states' and 'past experiences.' Although the results have been inconclusive, the potential implications for 'forensic investigations and legal proceedings' have been acknowledged (Rissman, Greely and Wagner 2010: 9849). These fictional accounts and this scientific research pose questions about privacy and ownership in relation to memories. It seems like a drastic invasion of privacy to have one's personal memories shown to another person or organisation without consent. And yet, the State already requires access to an individual's memories in court testimony, if those memories reveal aspects of a crime. The ending of *Remembrance* insists on the privacy of memory, implicitly rejecting the demands of the State to use Alfred's brain to store and retrieve information. Alfred's decision to follow Aurora seems to be made for personal reasons, rather than a sense of duty to the State, and is based on his response to her question, 'what does my name taste like?' (Shot 152b). His unique experience of her given name has been foregrounded by his inability to say it at his show, calling her Ms. Isaacs instead (Shot 27). At the end of the film, the answer to Aurora's question is concealed from the audience, suggesting that the privacy of at least some memories must be respected.

Remembrance is a nostalgic film. It is a lush and joyful depiction of life during World War II, in the costumes, setting, music, and its characters which include soldiers and spies. In the 1960s, Foucault articulated a cynical view about retro-films, arguing that they conduct a 'recoding of popular memory' that works in favour of the bourgeoisie: 'people are shown not what they have been but what they must remember they have been' (Foucault, 2000: 162). Recent criticism has been more positive about 'heritage films'. Higson argues that such films may bring about 'prosthetic memories' (Higson 2014: 148), memories of events that its audience members have not directly experienced. Such memories can cross ethnic, gender and racial divides, and may have a positive social impact. *Remembrance* adopts a different perspective than either of these critical views. Although the film is nostalgic in its depiction of wartime Canada, Alfred himself is incapable of the selectively positive perspective that nostalgia requires. He must remember everything; both good and bad, in an extra-sensory way. This is why he projects such anxiety, particularly around the threatening soldiers, and

admits to being 'afraid' (Shot 112). Moreover, his experience is not a communal one as nostalgia usually is – a sentimental recollection of a shared past. On the contrary, his synaesthesia gives him unique memories than cannot be fully understood by anyone else.

Does the cinema itself replicate the total recall experienced by Alfred? Benjamin identified the importance of the ability to rewind and re-view film, and argued that film 'lends itself more readily to analysis' than previous art forms because 'it can be isolated more easily' (Benjamin 1969: 15). The shot-by-shot breakdown that accompanies each issue of *Short Film Studies* illustrates how a film can be replayed, parsed and analysed in minute detail. Radstone notes that memory has been posited as cinematic, the cinema has been presented as memory, and various intersections between the two have been demonstrated (Radstone 2010, 236). *Remembrance* overtly replicates memory in its formal structure. Shots 1-7 exemplify the cinema as memory. They shift between Alfred standing on the platform, as he does in the film's final scene, and flashbacks of his conversations with Aurora. Alfred's flashbacks are flashforwards for the viewers, who have yet to see their meeting. This makes the structure of *Remembrance* circular, reflecting memory and its non-linear nature. At the same time, we see memory as cinema: how individual memories can be laced together to form a narrative, like shots in a sequence. What has yet to be made clear in this opening scene is how memory is inextricable from perception. Indeed, according to Bergson, memory *is* perception – it is always embodied and always sensory. The reverse is also true: 'there is no perception which is not full of memories' (Bergson 1911: 24). Each 'new' perception is informed by previous sensory experiences. Bergson argues that this is true for everyone, but the nature of memory as sensory perception is amplified for Alfred, for whom a woman's dress sounds loud (Shot 96) and music 'tastes like blue paint' (Shot 88).

Remembrance explores memory as data, memory as nostalgia, and memory as cinema, rejecting memory's ownership by another, its communality, and its correlation to cinema. Instead, the short presents memory as personal, and in doing so it keeps its most intriguing insight hidden even from the audience. Moreover, it is memory that is connected to the body by the senses; senses that are mixed and heightened for Alfred. Finally, it is memory that can be actively chosen rather than passively recollected. Memory can be a vast and amorphous crowd of sensory experiences, even without synaesthesia. On the contrary, a remembrance is decided upon; it is actively willed, as when Alfred overcomes his total recall through a private, embodied act of remembrance, ensuring that only he can know the taste of a name.

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