

Forgetting how to remember: Describing and analysing the ways in which memory is unlocked and exhumed within *The Act of Killing* (Dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) and *Nostalgia for the Light* (Dir. Patricio Guzmán, 2010).

This essay aims to articulate and discuss the relationships between the different ways in which memory is unlocked and exhumed within Documentary, using *The Act of Killing* (Dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012 [Director's Cut]) and *Nostalgia for the Light* (Dir. Patricio Guzmán, 2010) as case studies. To aid my efforts in this articulation, I shall utilise what I have called the 'Model of Memory', a model that distinguishes three themes that help further understand what I consider to be the otherwise difficult and ambiguous concept of unlocking memories. The three themes, *The Site*, *The Action*, and *The Presence* are not mutually exclusive, as will become clear. They are rather integrated and overlapping areas that all work in tandem to conceptualise how documentary films may unlock, process, or exhume memory. Though this essay shall be structured around my model, it should be noted that the arguably most abstract theme (*The Presence*) will be discussed in a deliberately more succinct and brief fashion. This is because I shall primarily focus on the analysis of the ways in which my chosen films unlock memories, rather than the consequences of these procedures – an analysis that can best come from the consideration of the first two themes, as will become clear.

The first theme, *The Site* of memory, denotes the objects and physical locations that possess potential for unlocking memory. These geographical areas forge the topography of a film's 'Site'; the space in which time becomes somewhat malleable. That is, the past, present and future cease to be linear and distinct moments, instead permeating into the realms of one another. To exemplify this, consider the Atacama Desert in Chile, one of the primary sites of memory in Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light*. Here, Guzmán demonstrates the significance of Chilean identity found in the vast desert: Markings of pre-Columbian shepherds overlook the modern roads built on old paths that were once natural routes to San Pedro de Atacama. Meanwhile, adjacently, pioneering astronomers search the cosmos with state-of-the-art telescopes (**Figure 1**). Framing neighbouring environments from such radically different eras in the same shot is just one example of Guzmán poeticising the notion of time and space in his film. As he narrates himself, "[The desert is] a condemned land... where human remains are mummified and objects are *frozen in time*." (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010, emphasis added) At this moment, Guzmán explores *The Site* to bend time, such that the past and present meet.

Patrick Blaine describes how the objects, spaces and items in the film work "as memory anchors... [or] repositories..." (Blaine, 2013, p.128) Describing one scene featuring a 1950's Chilean household (**Figure 2**), Blaine exemplifies how Guzmán visualises the passage of time using the site of memory. This scene, I suggest, even represents memory in a metaphorical way, using stationary close up shots and jump cuts to reflect both the fragmentation and familiarity of his youthful memories.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, too, employs what we may call memory repositories. A river central to the city of Jakarta, the *Medan Post* print house, a closed cinema, and a roof terrace are just a few examples of sites of memory within this film. All of these locations are sites of tragedy and murder, which could arguably be considered repositories or anchors of memory themselves. One instance of *The Site* as an anchor in Oppenheimer's film occurs when perpetrator Anwar Congo says himself about the rooftop terrace; "there's many ghosts here. Because many people were killed here." (*The Act of Killing*, 2012, **Figure 3.1**) These 'ghosts' that inhabit this terrace, I suggest, are exemplary of Anwar's childish anthropomorphising of nightmarish memory. The makeshift garrotte and the body sacks at this site act almost as representatives – or, rather, anchors - of the horrors for which they were used and consequentially, once again, the past permeates into the present, and memory is exhumed. Janet Walker's discussion on the sites in *The Act of Killing*, however, illuminates an interesting crux regarding the relationship between sites of memory and events that take place there. Walker refers to a "Crime Scene," as a site of memory that was not only historically the location of a crime, but a space that "[combines] places and persons to sense, map, trouble, transmit – and in fact constitute" a scene (Walker, 2013, pp17-18, emphasis own). In other words, these sites of memory would not be of any significance were it not for the events that took place there.

It is here, then, that we must consider *The Action* of memory, a theme that refers to the physical movements and activities that create and revive memories. *The Act of Killing* is the most fitting example of memory unlocked via actions, as the core concept of the film is that of documenting the consequences of re-enactment and performance. This is blatantly seen as the 'character' Anwar undergoes extensive reflection of his actions whilst recreating the scenes for his film project. By the final scene in Oppenheimer's film, this self-evaluation leads to Anwar's "body performing the drama of stupefaction." (Walker, 2013, p.16) What I consider to be interesting, however, is how murdering, recreating murder (and watching said recreations, to add another layer of novelty [**Figure 3.3**]), and the repulsion of committing murder are all physical actions that link the past with the present. The pivotal scene, for instance, in which Anwar breaks down after feeling what he considered real terror whilst pretending to be strangled (**Figure 3.4**), features actions that replicate those of his younger self. What I wish to outline, though, is that this scene also embodies a larger



Above; Figures 3.1 – 3.2 Bottom; Figures 3.3-3.4

idea, which is the action of *having a break down itself*: In the very moment that Anwar shakes his hand at Herman, lifts the blindfold, catches his breath and shakes his head, he is physically experiencing the exhumation of memories that had previously remained buried. For an interesting comparison, consider Anwar's action of dancing the cha-cha to defer the unlocking of his regret and guilt. These moments are exemplary of memory being unlocked (or locked) through physical movement and actions.

Without attempting to explain away the phenomenon of memory needlessly, I wish to briefly diverge from the primary focus of the discussion to consider the significance of human cognition in relation to unlocking memories by performing actions. Citing psychologist Allan N. Score, Mette Kramer notes that

“Once an experience has been repeated several times, it is then stored in the brain, often as an unconscious memory, and is likely to be reactivated by similar tactile, acoustic and/or perceptual cues.” (Kramer, 2018, p.255)

Kramer uses *Pappa Och Jag* - a short documentary telling the story of director Linda Västrik connecting with her father - to showcase how such reactivations can be triggered:

“...the director, in her on-screen interaction with her attachment figures, is reconstructing and reliving these relational moments as she seeks to communicate to the viewer how she experiences her relational world. In this way, Linda and her father... are performing roles as social actors by replaying and responding to a model scenario of their previous and present life,” (p.256)

I argue that this analysis is congruent with our discussion on Anwar's memory. As seen in Oppenheimer's film, Anwar quite literally reconstructs and relives relational moments by recreating (and later re-viewing) a model scenario of his previous life. The tessellation of Linda and Anwar's

exhumations lies in the “similar tactile, acoustic and/or perceptual cues.”(p.255) By this, I speak of how Anwar repeats the action of murder and consequentially reactivates such memories. For an example, consider the scene in which he describes the murder that is “the source of all [his] nightmares” due to the victim’s eyes never closing (**Figure 3.2**). Anwar details how he “spontaneously” beheaded a victim, before recreating the noise of the victim exhaling for the last time and mimicking the action of his falling and shuddering. Here, visual, auditory and kinaesthetic cues evoke hauntings for Anwar. In fact, he even questions whether these nightmares are the result of “the vengeance of the dead” (Theatrical Cut only). This sequence also works as a useful illustration of the relationship between *The Site* and *The Action*. As I alluded to earlier, the three themes within the *Model of Memory* are not distinctly separate, and indeed overlap, as demonstrated by this scene’s paradox: Without any actions taking place, the site would be of no significance, but there can be no action without a site for it take to place in. This evidences the dialectical approach needed to grasp the fluidity of these themes.

Recalling actions in *Nostalgia for the Light* may help further elucidate this relationship between site and action. I take the two most appropriate examples of action in this film to be (A) the searching for bodily remains and (B) the operation of the telescopes and study of astronomy. The literal exhumation of human remains reflects the notion of performing physical activities in order to explore the past. Likewise, one astronomer likens his research to that of a geologist: “They know that the deeper they dig, the older the things they’ll find.” Another man, a survivor of political imprisonment who was forbidden from studying the stars, uses actions to remember the exact layout of his prison quarters. Such similarities illustrate quite literally how physical activity leads to the past becoming the present once again. Moreover, both A and B further epitomize the cyclical relationship between *Site* and *Action*; the site of the Atacama desert would not be of any significance were it not for the actions that took place (and continue to take place) there. Both films unlock memory by exploring physical locations *and* performing actions – interviews, in particular, should be noted as both films employ this technique; Oppenheimer and Guzmán use testimony through talking head interviews at the site of tragedy as another means of performance to, once again, unlock memory. But what can be said of the very significance of these memories?

Such a question leads me to the final theme of my model; *The Presence* of memory. This rather vague term does not refer to a *method* of unlocking memory, rather the ontology (the existence and the very being) of memory within the context of space and time. As such, *The Presence* additionally relates to the subjective experience of time, an experience that materialises upon exploring a site and performing actions. In addition, socio-political discussions can be addressed here. Both *The Act of Killing* and *Nostalgia for the Light* seek to expose or call attention to the immobility of the nations that they focus on, both questioning the historicity of their nations’ stories by criticising their governing bodies’ refusal to acknowledge their actions. Guzmán’s film refers to the “paradox” of

Chile's ignorance towards its recent history despite possessing great astronomical and scientific promise, referring to the marginalisation of the nation's native Indians being "practically a state secret" as an example. Oppenheimer, by proxy of his subjects, exposes the tyranny and injustice of impunity in Indonesia by openly documenting the perpetrators bullying local ethnic Chinese communities into paying them money. *The Presence* is a theme that pertains to the ignorance the perpetrators in Oppenheimer's film, as it describes the *subjective* experience of memory, the effects of which are seen in Adi Zulkadry's, philosophy of "finding the right excuse" to not feel bad about one's past, and in Anwar's idea of changing the placement of a film's scene, making it a "time tunnel" in an attempt to create sympathy for his character. Similarly, both films are highly stylised, featuring extensive use of non-diegetic music and staged moments, poetically exploring the tragedies of the nations' recent past. Guzmán, more directly so, achieves this by opening his film referencing his childhood years, a time when "Chile was an era of peace," beginning the dialogue regarding the vicissitudes of pre/post-dictatorial Chile – an effort that, in the words of Patrick Blaine, has "[significantly contributed] to the creation of *a living memory* of struggle." (Blaine, 2013, p.129, emphasis added). Further conversations regarding the past and present states of international relations could be had too, but I must omit these here.

To conclude, it is apparent that memory can be unlocked and exhumed via different methods within the realms of documentary. What I have hoped to achieve here is an outlined approach that can aid our understanding of these methods and the significance and consequences of their usage. By investigating the exploration of *The Site*, the necessity of *The Action* becomes apparent. Upon such a reflection, one recognises the significance of memory's presence in daily occurrences, captured and unlocked through visiting locations and performing activities. By framing such a discussion within the study of documentary, one may hope for a future where such atrocities fail to exist unjustly, as the power of film continues to capitalise on its ability to capture memory to its fullest capacity and keep memories of the past alive in the present.

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