

Memories are Forever: Transhumanism and Cultural Memory in *V for Vendetta*, *Oblivion* and *The Giver*

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Abstract:

*The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain.
It's the loneliness of it.
Memories need to be shared.*

– Lois Lowry

A conceptual revolution has taken place in the 20th century, one that has radically altered ways of thinking about the Sciences, Philosophy, Linguistics and the Arts, giving birth to a new holistic worldview. The world has become a mutually interactive whole, with each part connected to every other part (K. Hayles, in Wolfe). However, the efforts made to combine these disciplines seem to address the future rather than the past, which is very often forgotten or ignored.

Since the 1980s, more than becoming an essential part of daily life, technology - the concrete manifestation of human obsession with the Future - has penetrated the human body in such a manner that it has redefined the concept of Humanity, forcing us to reexamine the boundaries between humanity and technology, organic and mechanical, authentic and artificial.

By resorting to conceptual tools borrowed from Posthumanism and Transhumanism Studies, I will try to understand whether, in a world driven by the persistent need to develop, update, upgrade and relentlessly move forward, there is still a place for cultural memory. Through the analysis of the presence/absence of memory in several Sci-Fi films, namely *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Oblivion* (2013) and *The Giver* (2014), which dwell on the subject of human

improvement by scientific methods, I will set myself to acknowledge the relevance of cultural memory in *human* evolution.

Keywords: Transhumanism; cultural memory; utopia; the Humanities; identity.

As opposed to most inventions, which become tools and end up being put away in sheds, the cinematograph escapes this prosaic fate. The cinema may be reality, but it is also something else, a generator of emotions and dreams. All the testimonies assure us of this: they constitute the cinema itself, which is nothing without its spectators.

Edgar Morin

Introduction

Never before was there so much scientific and technological advancement as in the last decades. Since the 1980s, technology has become an essential part of daily life, even penetrating the human body in such ways that we are now forced to re-examine the boundaries between organic and mechanical, authentic and artificial. Our worldview is so bounded by the constant urge to evolve, develop, generate and advance that the so-called “Technoscience” seems to force us to focus our undivided attention on the future. Technoscience, as Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway perceive it, suggests that, in today’s environment of transnational capitalism and globalized politics, the traditional distinctions between “pure” science and “applied” technology no longer hold (in Hollinger 232-233). This constant need to “apply” knowledge to daily life in a way that its fruits, advantages or consequences become immediately recognizable to society has left the Humanities, the Social Sciences and the Arts in a disadvantaged position when facing the *scientificness* of the Hard Sciences.

Accepting from the start the importance of technology today, I however intend to demonstrate how fundamental the Humanities, the Social Sciences and the Arts are to our contemporary “science-driven” society. Through the analysis of three science-fiction films (*V for Vendetta*, *Oblivion* and *The Giver*), I hope to make clear the major role that understanding and respecting the past holds in building a future worth living.

Transhumanism & Science-Fiction (Sci-Fi)

In “Science-Fiction and Posthumanism”, Veronica Hollinger points out that recent scientific and technological breakthroughs demonstrate that the gap between sci-fiction and sci-fact, i.e. between literary imagination and technoscientific realities, is being bridged (233). This means not only that science is advancing tremendously, but also that literature can stimulate scientific development. Furthermore, when aligned with utopianism, commonly through a dystopian discourse, Sci-Fi can become a powerful mediated entertainment, specifically orientated to the masses. The appeal seems to be its sense of wonder, the estrangement effect¹ that *the alien* (the strange, the new) can provoke in our imagination. Once this wonder is combined with the almost limitless power of technology, *it reveals essence*.

Narratives of estrangement are themselves a critical genre: through thought-experiment and the invention of other worlds, they become the vehicle for severe criticism of the present world. The criticism is complemented by the use of technology to provide possible answers to the worlds’ problems. The quest to solve Humanity’s problems through the use of technology and the hard sciences has been led by Transhumanists, who “envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth” (1st Point of *the Transhumanist Declaration*). This desire for self-directed evolution and the suppression of natural limitations has been portrayed in Sci-Fi narratives since the genre’s inception and no other genre can provide the tools to better depict this urge to reject biological limitations.

Since genres are subjected to history, they should be read as “documents”, testaments to the circumstances in which they were created. According to Darko Suvin, “Born in history and judged in history, the novum [the fantastic element of Sci-Fi] has an ineluctably historical character” (in Parrinder 76). Lincoln Geraghty proves this by drawing a timeline of the genre and relating each period in the US’s recent history to major Sci-Fi productions. He concludes that the large majority of the narratives react to its sociopolitical context: in times of prosperity, Sci-Fi presents more favourable visions of the future, exploring for instance possible ways for human enhancement and extra-terrestrial ways of living; while in times of crisis, it offers extreme, bleak visions of the future. Since the beginning of the new millennium, especially after 9/11, we have observed an effort to use “nostalgia and history to recover from the wounds inflicted in 2001” (Geraghty 17). And what we will see by examining the three films are elegiac visions of the future: three narratives whose

essence, though they are set in the future, lies in their nostalgia for the past and their lost identities.

Sci-Fi & Cultural Memory

In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Tom Moylan claims that “dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century” (xi). Indeed, a hundred years of exploitation, repression, violence, war, famine, ecocide and depression provided more than enough fertile ground for both dystopian and sci-fi imaginations, which offer specific cultural artefacts that negotiate the processes of historical perception and social change. This means that Sci-Fi allows us to apprehend the present as history and project the future - consciously or not - based on our perception of the past.

Retrovision is the term used to describe this process. According to Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter, retrovision is “a makeover of history”, “an imagined future based on intertextual references to their generic predecessors and the visual look of the past” (7). Sarah Neely adds that retrovision implies “an act of possessing the ability to read the past, in the way that one would possess a prophetic vision” (in Cartmell 74). The examination of retrovisions in Sci-Fi films is particularly interesting to cultural memory studies. Cultural Memory being “the interplay of present and past in social-cultural contexts” (Erl 1), the reading of the dynamics between present and past in the projection of futures is especially rich in these films.

OLD SINS CAST LONG SHADOWS: Representations of Memory in Futuristic Societies

In *V for Vendetta* England is under a totalitarian regime, built upon the motto “Strength through Unity | Unity through Faith”, that reminds us of political propaganda widely spread in fascist regimes during the 20th century. The first word we hear the narrator say is “Remember” and the first scene is a reference to the Gunpowder Plot and Guy Fawkes, the man forever associated with treason against England. However, V, the protagonist, proposes a different reading of this historical episode deeply embedded in British cultural memory. Instead of portraying Fawkes as a traitor, V tries to understand the man behind the myth and his pursuit of freedom. V lives hidden away in a place that very much resembles a graveyard, *a graveyard of history*. In this “shadow gallery”, as he calls it, V sets a revolution in motion by

alluding to historical episodes and resorting to symbology, eloquence and superhuman strength. Employing these methods, V passes on collective memories that society has been forced to forget in order to reveal a major plot against the nation.

The rebellion begins with the destruction of the Old Bailey at the sound of Tchaikovsky's *1876 Marche Slave* and a captivating speech inciting questioning first and revolution later. V's destruction of old monuments may seem counter-productive to my argument, in the sense that he appears to be destroying memory instead of reviving it. However, what happens is exactly the opposite. During Sutler and his government's dictatorship, monuments have become redundant; they have been emptied of significance: the Old Bailey does not represent the justice system, because there is no justice anymore. By exploding it while playing a musical piece used as a call to resistance in 19th century Serbia, V is revising collective history and construing collective memory.

After this shocking show, in his speech, V not only calls attention to the fact that "there is something wrong with the country", but he also calls England to arms, so that she can repossess her past and decide her future. This would be achieved by another symbolic act: the explosion of the Parliament in one year's time, on the following 5th of November. Once again, by destroying the lost symbol of democracy, democracy would be established again.

For a whole year, collective memory seems to hang by a thread between recovery and dissolution, as Sutler's regime faces an overwhelming tension between preservation and loss. For a year, V fights to punish the country's traitors and steadily awaken the people to the horrors perpetrated by the regime leaders. During this time the spectator understands how burdened by his past V is. Freud obsessively pointed out how loss may be an event that defines the subject as a subject. At one point in his studies, he explained that without the experience of radical separation from a prior state of "narcissistic self-sufficiency", the subject truly has no understanding of the intricacy and necessity of its own finitude (cf. Boulter, 1). Derrida, on the other hand, perceived the subject as "a topos of loss". In other words, the subject becomes an "archive", where loss is maintained and nourished (*idem*). V (and, as we will see with the other heroes of these films) is a combination of these two notions: he becomes who he is due to a disaster and he becomes a vessel where the memory of that trauma is contained.

Due to illegal experiments on humans with the intention of fabricating a biological weapon sanctioned by Sutler, V suffered immunological mutations that made him a superhuman - a transhuman - reborn by fire after an explosion. From then on he survived underground amongst lost relics: paintings, old books, artefacts, works of art, music, old films. Absorbing all these memories, and being inspired by lost values such as honour, courage, chivalry and justice, V becomes a transhuman version of Edmond Dantes, seeking vengeance for himself, for Valerie, and for every child that had died because of the regime. V's body is a traumatised space, continually marked by its relation to the disaster that preceded it and provided its foundations and ground. The burns hidden behind his mask are testament to the regime's atrocities and England's trauma. He became a spectre, "a ghost of Christmas past". Therefore, in order for a new England to be born, V has to disappear within the remnants of the old one: The Houses of Parliament. His actions and his example will however certainly live on, inspire and become a fundamental part of the collective memory. They will attain the status of a founding myth.

A similar situation occurs in *Oblivion*, though with no such profundity. Jack Harper is the hero of this post-apocalyptic blockbuster and, we later understand, one of several clones sent to invade the Earth by an extra-terrestrial species. The film is narrated in the first person and begins with a depiction of the protagonist's dreams, which are in fact commander Jack Harper's original memories. Drawing on immediate perceptions and flashbacks, Jack the clone pushes his brain to its limits in order to understand the meaning of these images that are memories of commander Jack and his wife at the top of the Empire State building in pre-war times. Jack the clone believes these images are dreams because 5 years have passed since the mandatory memory wipe and all life before then should have vanished, and yet... he questions... he wonders... He and his partner Vika are supposed to leave in a few days to Titan, the only safe place for humans after the war, but he, unlike Vika, resists - Earth is still his *home*.

Jack is a melancholic figure, but, contrary to V, this is not a conscious feature - it is something he simply cannot avoid. His nostalgia for a lost way of life is made clear by his curiosity when holding *Lays of Ancient Rome* and his need to build a secret refuge. As V, but in a much smaller scale, Jack surrounds himself with memorabilia: old books and records, toys and clothes. This sensitivity to *human* things makes him unique, and, although he perceives himself as artificial, a copy of the original Jack Harper, his melancholy for a past that is not his own makes him *human*.

Unlike V, Jack is not the initiator of the resistance, but he becomes its major force, its “weapon”, as he himself says, when, after being captured by humans disguised as alien creatures, the *scavengers*, he learns the truth about himself. Pretty much like V, Jack sacrifices himself to save the world and the human species. Unlike in *V for Vendetta*, however, there is a new clone that realises who he really is and has a happy ending with the wife of the original Jack Harper and the daughter of the first clone.

No memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts. From the people we live with and from the media we use, we acquire schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experience (cf. Erll 5). Now let us imagine a society where memories, emotions, even colours have been erased from people’s lives, except from ours. The burden, the responsibility, of that privileged position weighing on our shoulders. That is the premise of *The Giver*.

The film starts with Jonas, the young protagonist, on the verge of having his fate decided by the Elders of the community. At a young age, every teenager had their lifelong job assigned to them depending on their character traits; these jobs would give them purpose and they would have no choice whatsoever but to accept them. Facing this crucial moment, Jones finds himself lost. He says he always felt like he saw things differently, things that other people did not see, but he never said anything, because he did not want to be different in a society that enforced sameness. However, he was indeed different and, during the job assignment, he was put aside: he was special. He would become the next receiver. A great honour, he was told.

The chief elder mentions four attributes needed to be the receiver: intelligence, integrity, courage and “the capacity to see beyond”. Yet, in a society where all collective memories have been erased for security reasons, becoming the receiver is more of a punishment than a privilege. Being the receiver has its perks, such as the permission to ask any question and to lie, but it also has major disadvantages such as never discussing the training with anyone else besides the giver, and “holding in the pain”. The purpose of the receiver is to provide advice, guidance, to the Elders by using memories of the past, by looking back to the time when there was “more”. By examining the History of the world, the receiver should offer wisdom, advise decision-makers and shape the future.

The relationship between giver and receiver is the driving force of this Sci-Fi film and it evolves from a mentor-pupil relation to a father-son relationship. This kind of bond accentuates a sense of passing on experience, making the receiver a better vessel/person than the giver. To do that, when passing on memories and experiences, the giver tries to protect Jonas from the pain of the mistakes committed by human beings. Nonetheless, involuntarily, the giver passes onto Jonas a memory that utterly traumatises him: the slaughter of animals for financial gain. Afterwards, images of war are passed on, as well as the execution of a baby within the community by Jonas's father. It is clear that his father is not aware of the crime he is committing; therefore, the episode raises the question of responsibility. If the person who is committing the crime cannot be made accountable for it, who should be? For Jonas, since they are aware of the ethical issues at stake, the wrongness of the situation, they are the ones responsible. Thus, they have the obligation to put an end to it.

Jonas, with the Giver's help, conceives a plan to bring collective memory back to the communities. Surrounded by History in the giver's home that resembles a mausoleum and encouraged by centuries of knowledge, Jonas decides to pass through the Boundary of Memory, an actual geographical barrier that protects the communities, and by doing so he would bring memories back. With memory would come colour, pleasure, the freedom to choose as well as the responsibility of those choices.

Conclusion

“Une science empirique privée de réflexion comme une philosophie purement spéculative sont insuffisantes; conscience sans science et science sans conscience sont radicalement mutilées et mutilantes...”

Aujourd'hui, . . . science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'homme.”

[An empirical science without reflection, as a purely speculative philosophy, is insufficient; conscience without science and science without conscience are radically mutilated and mutilating...]

Nowadays, . . . science without conscience is only the ruin of man.] (Morin 11; my translation)

By examining these three films it is possible to say that memory seems to be an inescapable strand in science-fiction, even when our attention is focused on the future. As Huxley once suggested, the quality of life is to be achieved, not by simply updating, upgrading our bodies and technologies, but by evolving as responsible, conscious human beings. Morin explains as well that, besides studying the sciences, human beings need to pursue the knowledge of literature, poetry, music and art, since in them are embedded all the human passions, emotions and contradictions. They enable us to recognize beauty, kindness and harmony, and should not, because of that, be considered a sort of secondary knowledge. Thus, the combination of the Humanities, the Social Sciences, and the Arts with the Hard Sciences is fundamental in the projection of a more constructive, sustainable and just future.

Indeed, science-fiction shows us how prospective futures are shaped by our perception of past and present circumstances and how forgetting them can be the end of us as a civilization and even as a species. Its uncanny ability to regenerate, evolve, and rejuvenate proves it to be a fertile genre for us to explore. In a time when History, cultural heritage and memory have been under attack and a conspicuous lack of knowledge concerning recent History appears to prevail, it seems necessary to reflect on the Past, the consequences of past social, political, economic choices, and the need to take them into account when making decisions, because memories should remain within us forever.

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¹ *Estrangement*, in the formal sense an "imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment", alludes to existing ideas about speculative fiction, fantasy and scientific romance. The term derives from the Russian formalists' concept of *astranenie* and Brecht's *Verfremdung*, and it was firstly applied to science-fiction by D. Suvin (Parrinder 39).