

Malleable Memories and Dictatorship in Two Latin American Documentaries

Memory is diverse, malleable, educational, essential, and emotional. These aspects of memory come together to form history, shape worldviews, and tell stories. Those who tell stories from the past using memory hunt for memories that suit their narrative. The observers must ask themselves how reliable the presented information is to an accurate portrayal of circumstances. When considering this accurate portrayal, one must recognize the limitations in phenomena such as collective memory, the faults in an individual's memory, and certain selective inclusions of memory. The concept of memory being seen in such ways is well represented in two Latin American documentary films on the aftermath of State Terrorism in Argentina and Chile, *M* (Nicolás Prividera, 2007), and *Nostalgia de la Luz* (Patricio Guzmán, 2010).

In *M* Nicolás Prividera constructs a timeline of his mother's personal and political history in search for answers regarding her disappearance. In 1976, the Argentine president Isabel Perón was deposed and a three man military "junta" took her place. During this military dictatorship, the government seized an estimated 30,000 people who were never to return. Democracy was regained in Argentina in 1983 ("Dirty"). As Prividera's mother, Marta Sierra, was one of 30,000 people who were taken, tortured, and likely killed, the director hopes to find closure through a series of personal searches and interviews. *M*, then makes reference to Marta, *muerte* (death), *memory*, and Montoneros, the clandestine leftist armed group in which Marta Sierra may or may not have taken part.

The initial interview is that of Nicolás Prividera himself and his brother. There, Prividera describes the absence he has felt in his life while, on the other hand, his younger brother states that he has not felt any loss. Consequently, this interview shows how two people who experienced the same event, their mother's disappearance, remember it with completely different emotions. This constitutes the perspective that comes with memory. One cannot recall a memory without the bias of perspective hindering the factual recollection. As Primo Levi

states, “almost never do two eyewitnesses of the same event describe it in the same way and with the same words, even if the event is recent and if neither of them has a personal interest in distorting it” (Levi, 23). In this case, what is hindering the memory with the bias of perspective is that of age. Elizabeth Jelin touches on the factor of age with memory. When age is associated with memory, it is usually in coherence with one forgetting with age. However, as Jelin states, people experience historical events differently based on age. For example, “living through war at age five, twenty-five, or sixty produces very different subjective phenomena” (Jelin, 90). Age contributes to the reliability not only in the ability to remember factual events, but also in how the event was relevant to the subject at the time of its occurrence. As is seen in the interviews in *M*, Prividera’s mother was consistently present in his life and made an impact on him day to day. In the case of his brother, a baby at the time of disappearance, he was at an age where the mother had not yet had the opportunity to do this. Therefore, the age at which both people experienced the event had a very relevant connection to the memory that had formed. This must be taken into account when choosing interviews and stories when attempting to piece together a story of a piece of history as Prividera attempted in his film.

The volatility of an individual’s memory is further exemplified by a later interview with a woman who chooses not to remember. Without the subjectivity of emotion and trauma taking part, the interviewee should be able to objectively remember the factual situation that she experienced. However, when she is prompted by Prividera as to what she remembered about the situation that was applicable to his mother’s disappearance, she insists she cannot remember because remembering is too traumatic for her. This is common to those who suffer from trauma and the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. A step in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder is the treatment of dissociation. Realization is a vital component in treating dissociation, “which is defined as developing personal awareness to reality as it is, accepting it, then reflectively and creatively adapting to it” (Ford, 147). Even if one does not fall victim to this disorder, individuals often forget in search for “some happy remission in their

private life” (Reiff, 55). In this case, the woman interviewed believed she was better off without this memory. The memory is completely blocked out due to the trauma because she has not reached the acceptance or adaptation that is required with bearing memories that hold so much weight. Her inability to remember speaks to the malleability of memory: the fact that memory can be shaped depending on how difficult the event was to experience. If Prividera were to ask someone else who had a less personal connection to the events that took place, he may have been able to obtain a more accurate portrayal of true events. It’s interesting that Prividera chose to still include this particular interview in his documentary. He gained no information from the interview with this woman, and the observer gained no knowledge of the framing of the events that affected his mother. I believe he included this interview strictly to demonstrate the vitality of emotion in memory. It is through this personal connection with specific memories, such as the lack thereof with this woman, that bias of memory is truly shown.

Though the woman believed she would live a better life without this memory, it must be acknowledged that if memories are cast aside simply because they are difficult to deal with, the world will be left in a state of historical denial.

The denial of history, and memories that are difficult to hold true, remains a direct tie to the issue of collective memory, or collective failure of remembrance. Collective memories are defined as, “shared representations of a group’s past based on a common identity”. In modern times, this is applicable to those who claim themselves to be Holocaust deniers. David Reiff asserts that “a collective failure of remembrance is often presented as if it were an invitation to a moral or political disaster” (Reiff, 55). This relates to shrinking the moral obligation each individual carries to hold onto terrible memories and stories, as to keep the past true and to prevent it from happening again. Those who deny the Holocaust generally are doing so to distort the view of European Nazis from that of what would form when one is presented with historical facts, which would be an extraordinarily negative view (“Holocaust”). In this case, collective memory is essential to telling the accurate story of the Holocaust. In connection with

Prividera's documentary, those who deny the telling of the facts, are contributing to the current veil that rests over the truth.

Prividera also displays collective memory in real time. Near the end of the film, there is a public gathering to remember those who disappeared during the Argentine military dictatorship . This gathering is honoring the collective memory society has of this event, and also Prividera's personal memory of losing his mother. Those who gathered to share stories at the event discussed certain collective memories. These are memories which they feel connected to, but were not necessarily present for, such as different actions of the government at the time. In this gathering, a memorial is shown with a short description honoring the memory of the disappeared. By creating this plaque and the description, they are making the memory of the lost last forever. One who reads it, even not knowing anything of the political situation, or Prividera's broken family, would sit and remember the disappeared; tapping into the memory they never experienced themselves.

Nostalgia de la Luz, on the other hand, focuses both on current research to explain the impacts of Chilean dictatorship (1973-1990) and past memories. Similar to Prividera's *M*, *Nostalgia de la Luz* contains personal interviews. However, the film also addresses memory visually through research, images, and new findings.

One example of the film's visual address of memory would be the list of names on the Chacabuco concentration camp wall, written by the prisoners. Chacabuco was a nitrate town in Northern Chile until 1973, when it was turned into an internment camp (Vilches). This was due to a military dictatorship taking control of the government on September 11, 1973 through 1990. During Augusto Pinochet's military regimen, human rights were violated, market systems reforms implemented, the press began to be censored, and political parties were prohibited ("Military"). By displaying the wall of the camp, the film is recreating the memory through personal reflection and remembrance, as well as a visual manifestation of the memory itself. By showing the names, the observer gets a sense of reality that was unfounded in the interviews of

M. The story telling taking place in this setting and Luís Henríquez, a survivor of the camp, touching the physical names that were carved in the wall gives the recount of his story additional credibility. Memories can often be tied to objects, places, or smells that create a detailed memory in one's mind when interacting with them first hand (Roemer). The film shows raggedly carved names that'd been mostly worn away with time. To those who didn't know what it said once upon a time, it would be illegible. However, since there is a man being interviewed who saw the carvings take place first hand, he was able to recall what the completed names were. If Henríquez had simply been sitting in a room and asked who he had remembered from the camp, the names would hold much less meaning. He may not remember as many names as he was able to, or his testimony would not have conveyed as much emotion. The addition of the visual in the film amplified the experience of his memory to the viewer.

Through interviews, alongside video clips and images, *Nostalgia de la Luz* shows the ability objects have to shape memory. The film focuses also on a group of women in the Atacama desert who have been relentlessly searching for the bones and human remains of lost loved ones. One woman in particular was interviewed about the loss of, and her attempt to find her brother. She recalled finding the remains of his foot during a one on one interview. She said she remembered him wearing that shoe in her house. Finding his foot, along with the shoe, triggered this memory. In this case, she is experiencing an episodic memory. An episodic memory is "usually related to a specific place and time, and often include a representation of oneself as a participant or an observer" (Samuel, 57). However, the problem with episodic memory is that unless the memory is constantly rehearsed, the memory becomes rapidly blurred or distorted (Samuel, 57). This validates her shared memory, as this woman is out daily looking for remains of her loved one. This memory is constantly rehearsed, and most likely extremely accurate. This memory being included in the documentary adds credibility to the stories that other loved ones that search in the sands also choose to share. The film continues

to tell that the human remains are likely to be out in the desert forever, due to the lack of humidity. This type of time capsule makes the memories of these lost loved ones timeless.

Though the memories of loved ones are immortalized with the scattered remains, it leaves a lack of closure for these women that can only be found in the burial of loved ones. There is a reason that a ceremonial burial is common amongst many cultures. It provides closure that can otherwise be unfounded when someone close is lost forever. In an analysis of South African indigenous cultures, a study found that death rituals which included the remains of the deceased were performed in order to “pacify the bereaved family”. When such healing rituals were not performed, the general perception is that the relative of the deceased has not had their spirit psychologically healed (Musehane, 54). In this way the Chilean government took away a basic human right that should be standard across the board: the right to bury your loved ones and find solace in their burial.

In the beginning of *Nostalgia de la Luz*, narrator Patricio Guzmán recalls his childhood perspective on what is thought of as the present. He claims that as a child “only the present moment existed”. This shows how memory can be flexible in its significance. As a child, Guzmán claims that the past was not important in his daily life. However, currently looking back on his childhood, now only memories, they represent the innocence he once had and has now lost. Though insignificant when they were recently formed, as his memories aged, they found a new level of importance. Including this memory in the beginning of telling of the story of *Nostalgia de la Luz* sets the precedent that not only is it important to focus on the present to live a meaningful life, but to additionally reflect on and appreciate the occurrences of the past, despite the fact that some of those past memories may be painful or saddening.

Nostalgia de la Luz also focuses on astronomers. Though it may be unexpected to associate memory with the stars, that is exactly what this documentary does. The stars, constellations, and planets are referred to as glimpses in the past, right in front of your eyes. It takes light years for some light to reach the earth. In that way, when you look at a star, the star

is already in a different place in the universe. This is something that is nearly impossible on earth to see in the same way. Astronomer Gaspar Galaz speaks of science and its constant search for facts and concrete answers in the data. However, often more questions are found in the effort to piece together the past while headed into the future. These astronomers are looking at the sky's memories. They get bits and pieces of what once happened and have to put them together into a story. In this way, astronomers are much like the family members piecing together bodies, or Prividera piecing together interviews.

Memory is unpredictable, elusive, tactile, and real all at once. Though these words seem to contradict each other, both *M* and *Nostalgia de la Luz* manage to convey all of them as simultaneously true. It shows memory to be strong, important, and meaningful. Whether it is how the world remembers an event, or just one person, each memory holds something of value. Memories can be useful in storytelling and investigating, at times simultaneously. Though not always reliable, memory is always telling of a certain point of view. These films in combination display the ever-evolving mystery that is memory.

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