

Lives in Limbo: Memory, History, and Entrapment in the Temporal Gateway Film

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which contemporary cinema from a range of different countries, incorporating a variety of styles and genres, explores the relationship to the past of people living in the present who are affected by traumatic national histories. These films, which I've grouped under the term 'temporal gateway', focus on the ways in which characters' experiences of temporality are fragmented, and cause and effect relationships are loosened as a result of their situations. Rather than a recreation of historical events, these films are concerned with questions of how to remember the past without being defined and trapped by it: often exploring past events at a remove through techniques of flashback and mise-en-abyme. This thesis argues that a fuller understanding of how relationships to the past are represented in what have traditionally been seen as different 'national' cinemas is enabled by the hybridity and indeterminacy of the temporal gateway films, which don't fit neatly into existing categories discussed and defined in memory studies.

This thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach in order to draw out the features of the temporal gateway film, demonstrating how the central protagonist, the character whose life is in limbo, personifies the experience of living through the past in the present. This experience relates to the specifics of a post-trauma society but also to a wider encounter with disrupted temporality as a feature of contemporary life. I demonstrate how these films construct a new way of transmitting the experience of living with the past, through detailed analysis of approximately fourteen films from Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, including a detailed study of Lucrecia Martel's work. This formal analysis is developed through the perspective of the historical, political and institutional to show how the films transcend a variety of existing definitions in films studies, to blur boundaries of categorisation.

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Introduction: The Temporal Gateway Film and the Fear of Disappearing Time

The stimulus for this dissertation came from a motif which recurs across film styles and national film boundaries, across films by acclaimed auteurs and commercial directors: that of the central character caught by time, existing in an infinite moment of limbo from which they seem unable to escape. This limbo is a form of temporal entrapment, experienced by characters who cannot understand the past and how it relates to their present and future. This absence of knowledge has the effect of detaching the character from conventional chronology, as the world around them appears to continue, these individuals are flailing, desperately trying to arrest time, to make it material in order to find a space from which to examine the past and move into the future.

These characters include an Argentinean detective investigating a past miscarriage of justice (*The Secret in Their Eyes* [Juan José Campanella, 2009]), a young Jewish woman exploring her past in post-war Poland (*Ida* [Pawel Pawlikowski, 2013]), a documentary film-maker examining the cosmos for an explanation of his country's past (*Nostalgia for the Light* [Patricio Guzmán 2010]), and a daughter discovering the traumatic history of her parents' marriage in post-war France (*Pour une Femme* [Diane Kurys, 2013]). The films' preoccupations with time is a way of transmitting the experience of living with national traumatic pasts at first or second hand, finding a new way to represent the past which neither fixes and memorialises it, or forgets it. Due to this exploration of time as the subject of the films, I refer to this group as temporal gateway films; the focus on time allows the films to address wider anxieties than just the specifics of national histories. The films share a series of formal characteristics in their construction of time which allows the spectator to share the protagonists' experience of temporality as uncertain and indistinct. These characteristics (which are explored in more detail in chapter 1) include the focus on a central character who is searching for something, to establish a truth about a past event which concerns them personally, but which is also linked to the

wider political and historical context (these include the second world war and its aftermath, the Armenian genocide, the military dictatorship in Argentina among others). This structure creates a present/past narrative structure which reinforces the gap between the protagonists and the events they are investigating; a temporal relationship configured through the use of flashback. The protagonists are often writers and artists who are engaged in constructing their own stories about the past which allows the films to represent different approaches to memory. This experience of attempting to discover the events of the past takes on a spatial dimension with the characters feeling trapped in time, unable to move forward, a feeling which is transmitted to the audience, often provoking a haptic response. This representation functions as a gateway into further explorations of memory and historical events.

The concept of the gateway in a cultural or educational context is frequently used to denote a one-way movement from a simple concept to a more complex one, the 'gateway' providing a reassuring approach to other ideas or artefacts which may, if encountered without this introduction, seem too forbidding or difficult. The relationship between the gateway object and the objects it leads to tends to contain connotations of cultural value and a hierarchy of worth; from the simple to more complex. The films discussed here are aimed at festivals which function as a 'gateway' to art cinema audiences internationally, their mix of art house with genre forms can also be seen as providing a link between apparently difficult and more accessible film. The model of the gateway is a recognised educational strategy for introducing students to difficult ideas; it is a threshold concept which leads on to "troublesome knowledge" (Meyer et al., 2006). In *Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project*, Paul Weinstein (2001) examines how the study of popular films can be used as an accessible approach to the study of history, including the attempt to compare the differences between the filmic representations with the 'real' events. In music education the teaching of popular music has been defended as a gateway to teaching students classical forms.¹ The cultural associations of the

¹ The gateway can also of course be used to connote more negative effects, most obviously in the context of addiction with the idea of a gateway drug. Similar connotations are apparent in anxieties

gateway concept are also seen in sociological studies where places, regions, cities and streets are gateways of migration, a metaphor for the move from foreign to assimilated.²

These diverse uses share the idea that the move through the gateway is one directional, with a return journey either impossible or ill advised. By contrast, the use of the term in relation to the temporal gateway film refers to a relationship of exchange, closer to the concept of the gateway in computing where it provides a router to send messages between positions. The gateway in the context of these films is their focus on temporality, a subject which transcends a range of borders, including the national, in contrast to the requirement of national knowledge about the specifics of a time and place. In this way the temporal gateway films perform an opposite function to Jean-Pierre Jeancolas's (1992) theory of the complicit film as an aspect of national cinema – they are instead non-complicit films, which do not rely on specific cultural, political and historical knowledge to comprehend them. The temporal gateway film's exploration of national traumatic histories suggests new positions in several ongoing debates in film and cultural studies, particularly in considering the role of cinema in the construction of national memory.

The aims of this project are to identify the characteristics of the temporal gateway film which exists across styles and national borders in order to interrogate how these films find new ways of representing past traumatic histories. In doing this, I argue, the films also explore contemporary anxieties around temporality.

Contemporary anxieties around temporality can be linked to an unease about being adrift from a chronological ordering of events, from a temporality which confers meaning and in turn identity. In a present characterised by a perceived increase in the frequency of traumatic events (and their instaneity and subsequent replacement, in a media sphere where trauma is treated hierarchically and

over popular culture; a history of recent examples is provided in *Beyonce as Gateway to Satanism* (McMurry, 2015).

² See for example, Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures in New York's Lower East Side* (1995).

news has a short shelf life) which threaten to make understanding or remembering impossible, the films explore the idea of arresting time to make such events meaningful. Evidence of concern about this state of temporal instability is found across a variety of aspects of popular culture and experiences, from the apparently trivial to the critical. A few examples: in 2016 the BBC advertised its radio coverage of the Olympics by reassuring audiences that they would let us know “when the memorable events are about to happen” a kind of pre-memorialisation, a hard to fulfil guarantee to provide chronology and meaning for future events. A recent advertising campaign for a bank focuses on celebrities talking about time as a commodity which they can’t buy, wanting to possess it to slow down its passing. Computer games – and films influenced by their narrative form³ – rely on the repetition of a player’s actions until they are able to understand the events experienced and move on. Cultural panics about technology are closely linked to the relationship between an individual’s experience of ‘real time’ and the apparently diminishing ability to exist in the present, evident in (selfies and) the recording on smart phones of exhibitions, concerts, expeditions, and other cultural moments rather than experiencing them more directly. Although often considered pejoratively as evidence of a superficial culture, this phenomenon suggests a reaction to the fear of time passing without marking it and is an attempt to capture and prolong it. This is a fear mirrored in the increasing popularity of mindfulness therapies evidenced from apps to magazines (*In the Moment* magazine promises to help its readers “make the most of each day by Living In the Moment”) but also in high culture contexts. The slow cinema movement engages with the desire to prolong or arrest time reconstructing this experience for the audience. BBC4’s season of ‘slow television’ programmes feature footage of canal and bus journeys, shot in real time – usually lasting about two hours - without commentary or non-diegetic soundtrack.⁴ The sense of detachment from chronology is also reinforced by technologies

³ Examples include *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* (Ed Wright, 2010), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2012), *Trance* (Danny Boyle, 2013), *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014)

⁴ *All Aboard! The Canal Trip* (2015) had almost double BBC4’s usual viewership (reaching a peak of 599,000 viewers) and slow television has become a feature of the channel.

such as streaming, which allow media consumption to be controlled by an individual to a much greater extent than before, taking audiences out of a shared order of events. The loss of understanding of chronology and with it reliable memories for the construction of identity are a characteristic feature of dementia - an illness which has become more prevalent with increased life expectancy - and perhaps explains the reason it is often more feared than other terminal diseases of old age. In my analysis of the temporal gateway film, I argue that the film style and themes are a way of exploring this anxiety around an individual's relationship to time.

The Temporal Gateway, Transnational and Art Cinema

The films in this study, co-productions from Europe, Russia, Canada, Latin America and the Middle East, represent a recent development in the field of memory texts which cannot be easily situated into pre-existing categories but can be read through the concepts of transnational and art house cinema, if these are understood as processes rather than fixed categories.

The concept of the transnational suggests a way of moving beyond what Andrew Higson describes as the "limiting imagination of national cinema" (Higson, 2000, p. 63-74) and has been used to analyse the effect on films of globalisation, recognising that to talk about films in a specifically national way is to ignore the interconnections across cultures which arguably affect all forms of film-making. Despite this recognition of the limits of categorising films through reference to national borders it has remained a persistent one. Tim Bergfelder (2005, p. 317) refers to the way in which the apparently transnational category of art cinema is still too frequently analysed as being composed of a series of discrete national entities. Similarly, he argues, the concept of European cinema which does acknowledge interconnected cultures does so in order to create a closed category, a "fortress Europe". He contends that the category of European cinema becomes a supranational one, which "promotes the wider project of an interconnected European culture, and advertises this project

through traditional Western – and frequently high bourgeois – values, and excludes styles which do not fit this model” (Bergfelder 2005, p. 317).

The definition of the term transnational is contentious, leading to debates about what exactly the term means, with concern that it has ended up with on the one hand too loose a definition, in the sense of meaning any film which isn't made in Hollywood, or becomes too prescriptive, with transnational cinema for example referring to films which have themes of exile and alienation in the context of post-colonialism. The concept of the transnational can be a way of addressing the interconnectedness of film makers and the wider film culture, acknowledging the ways in which films are funded across borders, but that they are also received across borders, leading to different local understandings and interpretations. This acknowledgement, though, still tends to be brought back to the concept of the national, asking questions which include: how does transnational production affect specific national cinemas? How does it fit into an anti-globalisation, anti-Hollywood model which will benefit the survival of national cinema and its auteurs? In the contexts of Spanish production, Núria Triana Toribio (2007) has usefully mapped shifts “between the nation and the transnational”, where new conditions in production and distribution determine that national cinema always constitutes a sort of moving target in analyses of the field. Bergfelder (2005, p. 323) suggests that concepts of diaspora, so important to European history, could be used as a way of understanding European cinema as a process “marked by indeterminacy and in-between-ness” which would avoid the “narratives of national containment” often apparent in ways of approaching even the transnational. This understanding of films as being in-between definitions is central to the films explored here which challenge categorisation.

The discussion of the transnational has conceptual overlaps with the definition of art house cinema in its association with European national cinema and non-Hollywood production and distribution. David Bordwell (1979) traces the emergence of art house cinema to the post-Second World War period and argues that it can be defined in its rejection of the classic narrative mode, specifically the

chain of cause and effect events. In this rejection it does not, though, take on the radical characteristics of modernism, still relying for example on psychological causation in characterisation. The in-between state of art house as a mode of film practice is one which allows for shifts and changes in style as it moves between the oppositional styles which define it and which themselves shift meaning.⁵ Peter Lev's (1993) definition of art house cinema moves beyond the characteristics of film style to include reference to the specific high culture audience which art cinema is aimed at, one which is, implicitly, able to cope with the new "form and content" (Lev, 1993, p. 4) crucial to a definition of the art film style. The films included in this project might be referred to as art cinema (e.g. *Ida*, *A Separation* [Asghar Farhadi, 2011], *Nostalgia for the Light*) but traditional definitions of art cinema as part of a high cultural form limit the understanding of the films and their interpretations. The temporal gateway films do have characteristics associated with definitions of art cinema, but these are read in the context of a mix of styles which makes the films much more open and democratic, crucial to their function of exploring temporality across borders and experiences.

Memory studies⁶ has identified a range of films which deal with a society's need to remember the past. These include examples of national cinema such as the heritage film (e.g. *Chariots of Fire* [Hugh Hudson, 1981], *Room with a View* [James Ivory 1985], *Germinal* [Claude Berri 1993]), the history film (often represented by Hollywood films such as *JFK* [Steven Spielberg, 1991] and *Schindler's List* [Steven Spielberg, 1993]) documentaries about traumatic events (e.g. *Shoah* [Claude Lanzmann, 1985], *Battle of Chile* [Patricio Guzmán, 1973]) and examples of third cinema (*Acta General de Chile* [Patricio Guzmán, 1986], *El Salvador: The People Will Win* [Miguel Littin, 1981]) to experimental and avant-garde cinema about memory. These examples are often used in oppositional arguments about how

⁵ Peter Lev challenges the idea that art film is simply in opposition to Hollywood film style, using the work of the critics of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* to show how the relationship was one of "re-evaluation not rejection" (Lev, 1993, p. 10).

⁶ Contributions to the field of memory studies will be considered in detail later in the chapter but see for example the work of: Radstone (2008b), Sobchack (1996), Higson (1996), Walker (1997), White (1996), Staiger (1996).

the past should be remembered and what function this remembering has for contemporary audiences, arguments which often draw on mass culture debates. In *Travelling Memory*, Astrid Erll (2011) argues that the interdisciplinary field of memory studies has developed a flaw which, drawing on work from transcultural studies, she discusses as the trap of “container culture” (Erll, 2011, p. 7), a self-limiting, closing down of cultural memory so that it becomes homogenous and rigid rather than diverse and mobile. The initial call in memory studies for a form of cultural memory where memories of those outside of an official history would emerge – and be examined – through a range of cultural practises has now, she argues, been narrowed. Instead of a diversity of memories produced by cultures, cultural memory has come to mean proscribed, official memories of specific cultures. To have any meaningful expression, cultural memory needs to rediscover and reinterpret the idea of travelling memories, of memories beyond borders in a transcultural context: “Memories do not hold still – on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement. What we are dealing with, therefore, is not so much (and perhaps not even metaphorically) ‘sites’ of memory, *lieux de memoire*, but rather the ‘travels’ of memory, *les voyages* or *les mouvements de memoire*” (Erll, 2011, p. 11). Erll reinforces this argument, stating that memory is fundamentally transcultural: “No version of the past and no product in the archive will ever belong to just one community or place” (Erll, 2014, p. 178). The “transcultural turn” (Bond & Rapson, 2014) in memory studies was an argument against the “methodological nationalism” which Erll argued had long characterised memory studies when memory “is first and foremost not bound to the frame of a place, a religion, a social group” (Erll, 2011, p. 10).

The films discussed here deliberately disrupt the established categories of film form and style, such as classic realist and art film as well as categories of place. The hybrid forms and ambiguity of style include the conjunction of the open image⁷ of Iranian national cinema with a thriller form in *A Separation*, *Ida*’s imitation of an international art film aesthetic from fifty years ago, and *The Secret in*

⁷ The concept of the open image in relation to Iranian Cinema has been developed by Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, (2003) and is discussed in chapter 1.

their Eyes' juxtaposition of European art house themes with a Hollywood aesthetic from film and television.⁸ Several of the films (*Pour une Femme*, *The Dust of Time* [Theo Angelopoulos, 2008], *Even the Rain* [Icíar Bollain 2010]) feature film-makers as central characters, foregrounding concepts of film as memory and the slippage between the two, in a variety of ways. *Nostalgia for the Light* disrupts the categories of different types of documentary, combining witness testimony and historical evidence with an essay film style of poetic reconstructions of memory and philosophical questions of the experience of temporality. In this way the film-maker, Patricio Guzmán, becomes an intercessor: in Deleuzian terms a character who moves between fiction and nonfiction, revealing the constructed nature of truth and storytelling. As will be explored in chapter 3, the films of Lucrecia Martel draw on characteristics of global melodrama while subverting Latin American cinema tradition of *testimonio* in examining the effect of the past on the present of the Argentinean middle class.

This erosion of boundaries between established film styles is one of many ways that these films suggest different experiences of the past, recognising the representation of the past as one of several versions rather than a definitive one. This mix of styles is reminiscent of the historical disruption to the movement-image films identified by Gilles Deleuze (1985/2005), with the emergence of Italian neo realism and the French new wave at a moment of crisis and mutation.⁹ The mix of different forms works to disturb the filmic coherence of a unified narrative form. This is a disturbance which culminates in the disruption to temporality for characters in the film and for the spectator, a representation of the experience of temporality as political, a way of challenging the official version of a nation's past. The sense of disruption to an established ordering of events suggests a break with the past, reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's (1968/1992b) thesis that changing experience of

⁸ This is a style which has caused controversy in the film's reception as Argentinean national cinema and is discussed further in chapter 1.

⁹ Deleuze identifies these movements as characteristic of a period of faltering – or transition between the movement and time image - evident in the concept of the trip/ballad film (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 13), which *Ida* in particular, with its emphasis on travelling, episodic narrative and a road trip, can be linked to.

temporality is a product of political and cultural change. It is at this moment that the films represent those individuals who are no longer able to experience temporality as others do; it is a period of violence and disruption which means that time is experienced differently.

This experience of temporality in the temporal gateway film is conveyed to the viewer as a form of entrapment through the positioning of the protagonist caught in time. The film style continually contrasts the experience of the past as fragmented and at a remove, with the desire to capture and order it. On the one hand this creates a form of infinity, an endless search for meaning in a past which cannot be reached, in co-existence with the feeling that it might just be within one's grasp. This positioning is in part constructed through mise-en-abyme and allegory, forms which emphasise the lack of fixed meaning but also entice interpretation.

The Configuration of Temporality: Versions of the Past

In making temporality – and the differing perceptions of it – the focus of films about historic, traumatic events, the temporal gateway film avoids a conventional narrative construction of the past which, in Hayden White's definition, functions as a "neutral container of historical fact" (White, 1997, p. 393). Time as subject matter subverts one of the central definitions of narrative realism, where time is subordinate to events which are presented in a cause and effect relationship. In doing this the films explore the effect of historical events through a commentary on the attempt to remember, rather than by providing a truth about the past. The films challenge the narrativity of historical discourse through foregrounding the multiple experiences of the past as simultaneously subjective and official, specific and intangible. In *Nostalgia for the Light* for example the representation of the universe as infinite (another contested 'truth') provides an allegory for the ultimate unknowability of the past, *The Secret in their Eyes* contrasts the personal memory and reconstruction of the past through the memoir form with the official version of history. The focus on temporality as opposed to narrations of history is an alternative response to the challenge of representing the past in film, one in contrast to more familiar strategies such as the anti-realist techniques of modernism.

The concept of temporality has been a central feature in the discussion of narrativization within debates around historical discourse. White (1980) has argued that fixing time has been essential to the construction of historical narrative, where it is a vital part of the moral function performed by narrativizing discourse: “the historical narrative....reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished’, done with, over and yet not dissolved, not falling apart” (White, 1980, p. 23). The desire to define events of the past through an apparently inevitable ending is one of the problems that White uncovers in his analysis of narrativizing historical discourse, one of the ways in which historical construction has been accepted as ‘real’ through a coherent form which “we ourselves lack” (White, 1980, p. 23). This reconstruction of the past in a chronological, cause and effect plotting is, White argues, part of a need for consolation and reassurance, and not because it is an accurate reflection of events. In contrasting this with the relative emptiness of the annals of Saint Gall, a record of events of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, White notes the ability to leave gaps, to accept the emptiness of years in which “nothing happened”. By contrast, narrativity, “strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time” (White, 1980, p. 15). The desire to master time as a defence against loss can also be read in mainstream films’ classic narrative form, one of the defining features of which is that “time is subordinated to the cause and effect chain” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2002, p. 76), performing a similar function to historical narrative, that of reassurance of the individual’s control of events. As will be further shown, the temporal gateway films deny the possibility of controlling time and in doing this provide new ways of representing the past which rely neither on narrative fetishization nor anti-narrative techniques.

The films’ representations of the experience of time is reminiscent of both Deleuze (1985/2005) and Benjamin’s (1968/1992b) analysis of temporality as one of constant struggle provoked by the desire to make time material rather than abstract. Benjamin’s conception of the present as *jetztzeit* (Benjamin, 1968/1992b, p. 252-3), or “now time”, is a way of shattering the conception of the past as empty and neutral, foregrounding it instead as historically contiguous, populated by discourses and

structures which organise the present world. Deleuze (1985/2005) demonstrates how film captures the experience of temporality through characters that are caught in the crystal-image, a series of doubles and mirror images which confuse the distinction between the real and imaginary, actual and virtual images. The crystal is a trap in which life is suspended, but it is also vital to the beginning of life. Deleuze argues that the cinema's unique expression of time is due in part to the fact that it is inherently a crystal image; the relationship of doubles between past and future, actor, character and image is fundamental to film, and to the constitution of the crystal-image. Hence Deleuze's conception of the crystal-image as the site of infinitely reversible images in a circuit, where characters can only break out into the future by disruption and disintegration, can be applied to the narratives of the films under discussion, with characters only able to enter the real through recollection, which becomes the key to their future. All the central characters in the films are involved in some way in an exploration of their past which in turn connects to issues of national trauma and identity; the weight of past events means that they are unable to progress in a conventionally chronological way but are instead stuck in a kind of stasis, where the past is a physical force in their present. The films explore the characters' attempts to configure this past and make it material, to be able to examine it, an attempt which is continually undermined, becoming a process of entrapment by, but possible release from, history. This theme is articulated through the formal structure of the films which contrast movement and stasis through the characters' thwarted attempts to move forward.

The motif of characters caught in the crystal image is one of the ways in which the temporal gateway films further explore space. The notion of non-delineated space in modernity has been conceptualised around a negative, a product or reflection of alienation, but also as a liminal place of transformation: poles of meaning which are fused in the films under discussion. Both interpretations of space in modernity rely on a conceptualisation of identity which is either useful or constricting. The former is evident in Siegfried Kracauer's (1963/1995) essay on the meaning of the hotel lobby. Here he conceptualises a society which is characterised by a loss of meaning and purpose, due to people's changing relationship to space, an idea which, as we will see in chapter 3, is articulated in Martel's

films. Here, the sense of aimlessness, of a group adrift from connections, is represented through the construction of a meaningless space in film. Kracauer defines the purposeless space of the lobby in opposition to the meaningful space of a church, where people also gather, as guests, but where they are defined through a common purpose and connection to each other. In Marc Augé's (1995/2008, p. 83) view however, the non-place can be viewed as a liberating one: "A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver. . . . The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude". This ambiguous space is characteristic of the position of limbo of the characters of the temporal gateway film, the uncertainty of space a reflection of the disruption of chronology, of meaning, created by historical trauma. The resulting exploration of themes of subverting established categories in the present to construct a more tentative response to the past and memory is discussed in the next section.

Crossing Borders and Disrupting Categorisation

The style and subject matter of the films subvert the attempt to categorise in multiple ways, not least in their focus on the inherent damage caused by a range of attempts to pin down and categorise, to try and make definitive. In the context of the films in this study Laura Mulvey's (2002) concept of the travelling film would be a more useful description. Here the films' mobility throughout the stages from production to consumption mirrors their themes of migration and diaspora; this includes the historic and contemporary attempt by states to categorise, define and circumscribe groups – by race, ethnicity, politics or religion - and the resistance to this categorisation. This focus on the damage caused by limiting and dividing arguably takes on renewed resonance with the resurgence of populist political movements in Europe and the US who campaign for a return to closed borders and greater isolation. The complexity of the films' multiple forms which often co-exist with a popular-appealing, at times melodramatic content, moves us on from the simplified opposition of art versus popular

culture found in many of the debates in memory studies around the 'correct'¹⁰ way to represent the past. This point is further explored in the 'Literature Review' section examining memory studies, below.

The latter discussion is often cast in the context of the construction of national identity and memorialisation through remembering trauma. Indeed, the political contexts of change for the countries of production of each of the films share some similarities. Argentina, Poland and Chile all have recent pasts marked by national trauma of dictatorships and occupation, and the aftermath has provoked arguments over the desirability of remembrance and reconciliation. These debates are complicated by the context of ambiguities of guilt and innocence, the effect in the present of memorialising the persecution of one national group by another in the past and the effect on the individual psyche of recognising the passivity of individuals in moments of crisis. While attempts at memorialisation and recognition have taken place in all the countries, this is an unfinished process and as such a detailed examination of the political and historical contexts of each, it needs to be noted, is outside the scope of this project.¹¹

The identification of the term temporal gateway is the result of the rejection of existing categories for this grouping of films, based on the understanding that their subject is not primarily an historical account of national pasts. The form and content of these works suggest the way that film can function to work through trauma for an (art house) audience who are unlikely to have experienced the specific traumatic events, and who may not even have previous knowledge of the historical trauma referred to. In contrast to the idea that films about the past may function as what Alison Landsberg (2004) calls

¹⁰ See for example the work of: Radstone (2008b), Sobchack (1996), Higson (1996), Walker (1997), White (1996).

¹¹ Work that has been undertaken in these areas includes: Anessi (2012) and Misiak (2009) on Polish cinema in its social and political contexts: Falicov (2007), Page (2009) and Andermann (2012) examine Latin American cinema's relationship to the region's past. The role of cinema in working through national trauma is explored in a range of essays in Broderick & Traverso (2011), and particularly relevant is Traverso (2011).

prosthetic memory, these films give few concrete details or provide explanation of the causes of historical events for the audience to be able to place themselves within; the impossibility of returning to a past event and the unreliability of attempts to remember it are integral to the content of the films. The focus uniquely in these films is on the contemporary individual's relationship to the past, the foregrounding of the processes of remembering and forgetting, rather than on the historical reconstruction of the events themselves. Here, it needs to be stressed, the use of the individual protagonist and techniques of audience alignment in a psychological context is not apolitical, as the realist and anti-realist dichotomy would suggest, but is instead used to disrupt and explore the experience of temporality, of representing history itself. What follows is brief outline of how each chapter elaborates on these central ideas.

In chapter 1, I define the characteristics of the temporal gateway film through close analysis of the following films: *Pour une Femme*, *Even the Rain*, *Ararat* (Atom Egoyan, 2002), and *The Dust of Time*. I then demonstrate the way a form of global, art cinema hybrid has developed which explores the traumatic effects of the past on the present and how the present shifts the conception of the past, emphasising its malleable status. Focusing on narratives centred on film makers, the films use mise-en-abyme and allegory to explore the impossibility of remembering a particular version of the past and the ways that memories of the past are shaped by the filter of cultural references. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1963/1998) analysis of allegory, this chapter explores how the films materialise the feeling of being adrift from meaning and uncertainty for the characters and spectator, constructing an infinite structure of layers which simultaneously seems to lead the character within it towards meaning while demonstrating the impossibility of reaching it. This structuring form is also an allegory for the experience of temporality; the contrasting structures working to trap the protagonist in time. The films therefore represent a way of responding to the historical at a time when its link to the present starts to slip away; a way of constructing a memory text which moves beyond the identified restrictions of what Erll as referenced above calls "container culture". In identifying the central

narrative of mise-en-abyme and allegory in the films I also consider how the films can be considered as forms of postmemory (Marianne Hirsch, 2012).

Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze (1985/2005) and Walter Benjamin (1968/1992b) chapter 2 examines how the temporal experience is used as a way of exploring past traumatic events; the focus on temporality becomes a different way of representing the past, one which relies neither on realist reconstructions of the event, nor on experimental disruptions. In the chosen films, which include fiction and documentary forms including *A Separation*, *Ida*, *Nostalgia for the Light*, *The Secret in their Eyes*, the focus is on the way in which characters struggle to find a position in the now, engaged in a constant struggle between the attempt to prevent time passing and to reconcile the past in order to move into the future. In this way, the films question assumptions about the possibility and desirability of investigating the past, suggesting the dangers of limits and closure in understanding and articulating different aspects of time experience. I demonstrate how the films can be understood through a transdisciplinary engagement with analysis using approaches from philosophy and art history within the context of the reception and interpretation of films as both 'national' and transnational.

The final chapter of the dissertation is a case study on the films of Lucrecia Martel whose work - *The Swamp (La Cienaga)* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001), *The Holy Girl (La Nina Santa)* (Lucrecia Martel, 2004) and *The Headless Woman (La Mujer sin Cabeza)* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008) - explores temporality and the ambiguity of memory. The focus on Martel draws together the different strands of the dissertation, examining how her films function as examples of memory texts which deal with the traumatic national history of Argentina through an exploration of the characters' experiences of temporality. I argue that Martel is a transnational filmmaker working within a hybrid form of melodrama and art cinema who helps to transmit an understanding of trauma as ongoing rather than post-, as not something which can be easily recovered from. This experience is constructed in part by subverting the expectations of the Latin American testimonio tradition; exploring the reasons for and effect of what isn't seen. Analysis of the films is specifically informed by Giorgio Agamben's (2005) concept of gesture to demonstrate the characters' responses to trauma through a disruption to time.

This focus on temporality is a way to transmit the experience of trauma to an audience outside of the experience itself.

Literature Review

Memory Studies: Arguments over Discipline, Theory and Methodology

This literature review develops the areas set up in the Introduction by exploring the context of key debates in memory studies and contextualises the transdisciplinary approach of this project. Focusing on the way memory studies has framed key questions about the increased interest in the past, I demonstrate the impasse in the field's understanding of how films about the past function due to the continued reinforcement of divisions between high art and popular culture, realism and anti-realism debates.

The field of memory studies has at its centre a conceptual paradox, that is, how to explain the increased interest in memory and history – evident in cultural products – at the same time as experiencing the perceived loss of the historical object. This is one of a range of oppositions which propels debates about the relationship between historical events and representation, an area which the temporal gateway film, with its focus on the protagonist's search for meaning in the past, illuminates. Further oppositions in the field include arguments around the 'right' and 'wrong' way to represent history and memory (e.g. realist versus anti-realist techniques) on film. This conflict is part of a debate in memory studies which is drawn up along personal and political lines, with the field of memory studies often defending against the charge of being too personal in ways which have had a fundamental effect on the development of the field. In her overview of the state of memory studies, Susannah Radstone (2008a, p. 33) summarises this relationship:

An emphasis on the cultural, public and social realms of memory arguably militates against the consignment of memory-related issues to the domains only of the private and the personal, emphasizing, at the same time, that where memory is concerned, the personal *is* political.

The films which are the focus of this study exist in the interconnected space between these positions in memory studies, being defined as simultaneously art house and anti-realist, but also mainstream and conventional, dealing with national traumatic histories through personal stories, but stories which are removed from the event itself. This remove, which is explored through the narrative and form of the films, provides a gap in which even the more 'conventional' films studied (*The Secret in their Eyes*, *Pour une Femme*) are able to foreground processes of memory.

Memory studies refers to an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary¹² field spanning differing approaches, arguments and definitions but which shares certain aims: how to explain the marked contemporary cultural characteristic of an interest in the past, how to analyse and interpret those texts that exemplify this characteristic, and how to use this explanatory process as a way of addressing disciplinary deadlocks in film studies, literature, cultural studies and the humanities. This is particularly evident in the response to the crisis of referentiality, with an apparent split in theoretical approaches to memory and fantasy or memory and history. Related to this are the approaches which see memory texts as personal (particularly within the area of trauma culture) or political, often defined through the analysis of conventional and experimental forms. One of the major challenges for memory studies has been the status given to memory texts as either literal reflections of a fixed memory or constructed texts which can be read from a variety of positions and interpretations. Memory studies provides an interdisciplinary context to the analysis of the role of cinema in constructing identity, particularly the relationship between subjectivity and national identity. Key concerns addressed include, what is - and

¹² The definition of memory studies as interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary is important as it suggests the way that different disciplines approach memory studies. For Radstone (2008) the transdisciplinary is often problematic as it leads to trauma becoming a floating concept which is never properly tested in any field.

isn't - being remembered in film, the form and style of the representation of historical events and the reception and interpretation of those events by the audience. It also considers the wider context of the role of memory and history in contemporary society. Paul Grainge (2004, p. 5) identifies the "past-present relation" as central to memory studies' analysis of film. This includes analysis of form (how the past and present is represented), the political and cultural significance of what is represented by and for a society, and how the representation is understood (as influenced by the spectator's own historical context and present consciousness).

While the specific concerns of memory studies are often referred to as if they are clearly delineated (memory and history, memory and fantasy) there are inherent overlaps. All the areas of inquiry refer to the paradox encountered when the crisis of referentiality means that 'there is no there there', while simultaneously they look to uncover a theories of the past as disappearance and/or reappearance, as well as to explain the specific function of individual texts which deal with memories. Susannah Radstone (2008b) aims to integrate some of the seemingly oppositional approaches in memory studies. In this account memory/history encompasses one approach which can be seen to privilege an external or outer view of the relationship between memory and events, where memory refers back to a specific event as it must have happened. Challenges to this strand of memory/history approach are evident in the development of postmodern theories where "history becomes negatively associated with the authority of master narratives, with the 'public' and with 'objectivity', [while] memory has become positively associated with the embedded, the local, the personal and the subjective" (Radstone, 2008b, p. 84). Radstone points out that memory research in history "is not untouched by psychoanalytic ideas" (2008b, p85) but still believes that the focus on memory and history has meant the field has lacked a way of focusing on memory as a form of mediation rather than reflection: "what can fall out of the picture in the disciplinary shift that pits memory against history, rather than against fantasy, are those forms of memory formation and mediation specific to psychoanalysis" (2008b, p85).

The relationship between memory, history and fantasy is often explored in the gaps, absences, “traceless traces” (Elsaesser, 2001, p. 194) and inconsistencies of memory texts in both the fields of memory/history and memory/fantasy. In an approach which would be categorised as belonging to the field of memory/fantasy, Janet Walker (2001) analyses a range of films which she believes provide a feminist subversion of the patriarchal dominance of history through a ruptured, fragmented, autobiographical film style. In approaches such as this, which prioritise psychoanalysis over history, the acceptance that fantasy plays a crucial role in the construction of memory performs a challenge to dominant histories. Rather than simply an opposition between memory/fantasy and memory/history in memory studies, the divide is structured around inner and outer explanations of the past where the inner is subjective and non-chronological, and the outer is apparently objective and linear. The films in this study blur these definitions and oppositions in their exploration of the variety of influences on memory construction. This is particularly evident in the films about film-makers and film-making (*Ararat*, *The Dust of Time*, *Even the Rain*, *Pour une Femme*,) which suggest how cinema both represents the past in the present but also how the history of cinema becomes a referent of history; memories of films shape memory of the past.

Memory and History: Cultural Memory

The debates in the field of memory studies are propelled by definitions of memory and history which are seen by different theorists as either discrete and oppositional or overlapping and contingent on each other. The intersection of the two is the site of cultural memory; a negotiation of official memory and personal history represented through popular media such as cinema and television. When the relationship between history and memory is seen as one of conflict, this tends to be construed as personal memory in opposition to and often subdued by official history. Pierre Nora (1989, p. 8) argues that “Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition”. This is evident in their different temporal locations: “Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past”. Michel

Foucault's (1989) division between memory and history is an explicitly politicised one where memory is a political force, a popular and unofficial recounting of events which is a form of resistance in the face of an official history which threatens to subjugate it.

In response to the divisions between history and memory, Maria Sturken (1997, p. 5) refers to the two as being "entangled, rather than oppositional". Sturken identifies cultural memory as something distinct from both personal memory and history. It is a field composed of contested meanings and interactions between individuals and cultural elements which in turn produce concepts of the nation. This is particularly evident in the remembrance of traumatic events, as it is here that the "structures and fractures" (1997, p.7) of culture are exposed. Sturken (1997, p.5) emphasises the process of memory's production through a range of sites, images and representations and the negotiation involved in competing for a place in history. Central to this process is the breakdown of rigid divisions between personal memory, cultural memory and history which allows memories to move from "one realm to another, shifting meaning and context". Sturken also takes issue with what she describes as Nora's nostalgic view of memory; rather memory is always a narrative and form of interpretation, often based as much on forgetting as remembering. The concept of forgetting can once again be divided into the personal and the social or political, but Sturken's entangled approach illustrates the way the two realms are interlinked. By drawing on Milan Kundera's concept of "organised forgetting" as the way in which an occupying force may deny a nation its national consciousness (the idea that a nation which loses its sense of self will be more easily ruled) and the idea of a nation deliberately forgetting, denying memories as a form of self-preservation, Sturken discusses how forgetting can be a form of colonial oppression as well as a tool of self-preservation.¹³ In Freudian terms, forgetting may be a form of repression, where memories produced through mnemonics such as photos and moving images are symbolic "screens" (Freud, 1899/1953), types of forgetting, which function to block out

¹³ In *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies* (2016), David Rieff argues for the importance of forgetting. This is a moral case made on the belief that historical memory can be limiting and damaging to a nation and that the examination of recent conflicts can reinforce divisions and hatreds.

other memories which are more difficult to represent. In seeing these different processes and sites of memory as interlinked rather than oppositional, Sturken illustrates how cultural memory is a continual negotiation between personal and state, official and unofficial, repressed and uncovered.

These tensions, between different types and processes of remembering and the status accorded them, are also evident in the concept of the *testis* and *superstes*. In his analysis of the role of the witness, Giorgio Agamben (2002, p. 17) demonstrates the way in which the survivor who testifies to their own experience (he cites Primo Levi's *superstes* account of his survival of the holocaust) is a *superstite*: "his testimony has nothing to do with the acquisition of facts for a trial (he is not neutral enough for this, he is not a *testis*)". The distinction in Agamben's argument is not made to demonstrate that the *superstes* is unreliable, but that the two types of witnessing reveal the differing functions of law, truth and justice. For Agamben the aim of the law is to pass judgement based on the detached *testis* or expert witness. By contrast, truth and justice are much more blurred and often too complicated to disentangle (Agamben, 2002, p. 18). The problem of the reliance on the detached observer to provide evidence in law is, he argues, that it creates the impression that the problem has been finished and dealt with. For example, the twelve trials at Nuremberg (1945–6), "made it impossible to think through Auschwitz... they helped to spread the idea that the problem of Auschwitz had been overcome" (Agamben, 2002, p. 19). It is not the case that judgement should not be made, Agamben argues that it must be, but that the law "did not exhaust the problem" (Agamben, 2002, p. 20), but revealed the limitations of objective judgement in understanding trauma as it is experienced. In contrast the subjective witnessing from within the event itself, personified by the figure of Primo Levi, conceives of people's actions as a "gray zone" of "irresponsibility"¹⁴ in which it is impossible to pass judgement. This understanding of the value of the *superstes* provides a different way to consider the categories of history and memory, official and personal recollection, subjectivity and objective

¹⁴ Agamben refers to Levi's concept of the "gray zone" which recurs throughout his work, but see particularly *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986).

truth, beyond simple oppositions. In this context the insider testimony, which has little authority or role in legal judgements, is a way of working through trauma.¹⁵

Radstone (2010) describes the different ways in which cinema influences the construction of cultural, social and public memory. The current paradigms of analysis of the relationship between film and memory include: the metaphorical approach of analysing cinema *as* memory; the use of film form to represent memories (memory *as* cinema) and cinema/memory which acknowledges the more permeable relationship between the two. For Radstone (2010, p.336), cinema/memory is a form of cultural experience positioned between the personal and the cultural where the emphasis is again on the breakdown between divisions and categories of history and experience to create a "liminal conception of cinema/memory where boundaries between memory and cinema are dissolved in view of their mutuality and inseparability". This concept of cinema/memory breaks the boundaries between, "inside and outside, personal and social, the individual and the cultural, true and false" (p.336). It does this through what Annette Kuhn (1995) defines as "memory work" (Kuhn, 1995, pp. 4-6) an approach which foregrounds the way that personal memories are entwined with complex references to memories of films. For Kuhn the process that binds together the personal and collective is exactly what constitutes the psychical mediation of cinema and therefore provides a way of thinking about how cinema as cultural memory functions. This emphasis on the micro aspects of film and the very personal aspects of 'reverie' illustrate the ways in which subjectivity links with culture, place and nation, promoted by films which use the "aesthetics, languages and textures of memory" (Radstone, 2010, p. 338).

The intersection of memory and history and the negotiation between past and present, remembering and forgetting, is explored in the films chosen for study. For example, in *A Separation*,

¹⁵ Agamben's distinction between *testis* and *superstes* is similar to the legal system's distinction between eyewitness and expert testimony, a distinction which reinforces his argument. Concerns about the reliability of eye witness testimony were explored by Loftus and Palmer (1974) through the concept of the misinformation effect.

discussed in chapter 2, the individual recollections of the people involved intersect with judicial and religious versions and interpretations. The event itself is hidden from the audience, it takes place behind closed doors, foregrounding the processes involved in receiving and understanding historical events which have not been observed. The rigid belief by both sides of the argument that there is a fixed objective truth about the event which can be discovered and acknowledged reinforces the stalemate and opposition between differing versions of the past.

Definitions of Trauma Theory

Much of the argument and controversy within memory studies can be traced to differing definitions and responses to trauma theory. Trauma theory encompasses the historical, traumatic events themselves as well as the theoretical and methodological approaches employed to understand their effects on groups and individuals. The term trauma therefore covers a wide terrain including both popular and academic approaches. In 'Postmodernism as Mourning Work' Thomas Elsaesser (2001) characterises trauma theory as having a general sense, a "theory of victimhood and a politics of blame" (Elsaesser, 2001, p. 194), and an academic one which encompasses both a reclaiming of fantasy and addressing the crisis of indexicality. Elsaesser argues for a repositioning of the understanding of trauma theory to defend it against accusations of literalness and naivety.

Concerns about the dominance of trauma theory in memory studies is apparent in Radstone (2001) who argues that trauma theory's return to Freud's seduction theory limits the way in which memory can be understood - by arguing that there is a specific, external event which can be located as the cause of trauma. For Radstone (2001, p. 89), theories of trauma too often conceive a relationship between the inner and outer world where a traumatic event is registered at the time of its happening and can be recovered at a later date, refuting the concepts of unconscious agency in the construction of memory: "Trauma theories appear to offer disciplines operating a memory/history opposition, a conceptual model of the relation between the inner world of memory and the external world of

(historical) events. What emerges...however, is the extent to which trauma theories...abandon psychoanalytic theory's later insights concerning the role of unconscious processes". Radstone (Radstone, 2001, p. 90) further argues that trauma theory has become so entwined with therapeutic cures that the "fantasies of the achievability of a self at total peace" becomes linked to the impossible idea of locating "the event". Recovered memory syndrome is one aspect of a wider debate in memory studies and one which trauma theory has been focused on addressing: what explains the gap between historical, traumatic events and their public memory? Given this space between events and the memory of them, how can the relationship between the two be understood, and are they memories of the event itself or representations of repeated, later, memories?

Having defined trauma theory in its general and academic senses, Elsaesser demonstrates how the two can overlap in order to perform a repositioning of the field. For Elsaesser (2001, p. 195), rather than separating fantasy and history, it is the conjuncture between trauma and "historical-political leftovers" which is what constitutes trauma theory. In developing this position, he traces the ways in which trauma theory can encompass discussion of fantasy, referentiality, latency, temporality, belatedness, deconstruction and displacement. The focus on the exploration of the reasons for the space between events and their (lack of) representation leads to a new way of considering films about traumatic historical events; the events themselves are not the trauma, rather representations of holocausts, wars, genocides function as screens for living in the world now. Elsaesser's analysis of the relationship between the traumatic event and its reappearance is similar to Cathy Caruth's (1995) definition of trauma theory. Caruth's (1995, p. 152) definition removes trauma from a specific place and time, it is detached from a specific narrative or chronology, "that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood". This displacement in time and place is due to the fact that the event itself is too traumatic to be assimilated at the time of its occurrence, trauma "consists, rather, solely, in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth,

1995, p. 4). In attempting to explain the reason for a renewed interest in memory and history, certain concepts recur which try to explain why there is a gap between historical events and their reappearance as cultural forms - and what the effect of this gap is. Elsaesser (2001, p. 195) states that this space can be considered as an example of a latency period, arguing that it is of undeniable importance and specifically shapes the debate around film and memory, "accepting the latency hypothesis as significant for filmmaking almost necessitates a theory of trauma, in order to understand the nature of the delays (the displacements of an event and its representation) and to be able to pose the question: why this or that film *now*?"

The defence of trauma culture against literal readings is one aspect of a wider criticism of the approach in memory studies which sees trauma culture as inherently without political meaning because it is a form of popular culture. The development of this second strain in memory studies, the critique of trauma culture, rehearses the mass culture debates of the early twentieth century, arguing that only avant-garde art is able to provide a political reading of society. As Radstone (2001, p. 36) states: "their assumptions concerning the (lack of) politics in the cultures that they critique, together with their espousal of the avant-garde, are reminiscent of that cultural elitism against which cultural studies pitted itself". This development in the field has resulted in an impasse between popular forms of memory texts (mainstream films, 'misery' memoirs) and those forms linked to high culture such as conceptual art, avant-garde film and literary novels. A further complication arises from this opposition: Radstone's critique implies that this reading of trauma culture is part of a repositioning of texts across the cultural divide, which would in turn affect their reception. For example, she cites the case of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* being read as a trauma text, "reading its complex narrative literally as the fictionalized testimony of a child survivor of the Kindertransport. This is a reading that substitutes literalism for the text's complex relationship with realism and reading positions" (Radstone, 2008a, p. 34). In doing this, the critique of trauma culture also suppresses the features of Sebald's work, the experimentation with literary form which would place it in the context of high culture and allows for a different reception and interpretation.

This movement of texts across the borders of high and popular culture in memory studies is also apparent in the opposite direction. This is particularly the case where films are defined as experimental in an, at times, tenuous way. In Janet Walker's argument (2001), closely following Hayden White's (1996) position, it is only non-realist films which can represent holocaust or traumatic events. Walker's definition of trauma cinema is one which deals with "world-shattering event or events of the past – public, personal or both" (2001, p. 214). The processes of memory involved in the attempt to remember the event are central to its representability and non-representability. Walker identifies several features of traumatic memory processes as central to demonstrating the need for a non-realist form of expression: the inadequacy of empirical writing about events as a way of recording memory, the 'traumatic paradox' where memories of trauma are by their nature full of 'mistakes', and amnesiac elements. Walker characterises traumatic memories not as a retrieval system but as a series of correspondences, and loss of correspondence, between recollection and actual past events, which means that memories are continually altering through always referring back to a memory removed. Therefore, the process of remembering is characterised by inconsistencies and gaps rather than definitive concepts of a memory being either all true or all false. It is this experience of memory sensation, along with the traumatic events themselves, which leads to a rupturing of film form, which Walker (2001, p. 214) identifies as, "non-linearity, fragmentation, nonsynchronous sound, repetition, rapid editing and strange angles". In Walker's analysis, it is this non-realist form which provides a necessary openness in the representation of memory, in contrast to the (implied) closed and definitive aspects of realism.

This has an importance not just limited to form but is also put forward by Walker as a political force; a way of challenging the dominant version of history. In her analysis of Rea Tajiri's autobiographical documentary, *History and Memory* (1991), she makes the link between the experimental form and its challenge to the official record (Walker, 2001, p. 216): "The resulting piece is counternarrative, counterhistorical, and - as a traumatized representation - all the more 'true' for its reinstatement of fiction and forgetting to the historical record". Some of the films referred to by Walker, such as

Hiroshima Mon Amour (Alain Resnais, 1959), *Before the Rain*, fit clearly into the definitions of trauma and anti-realism she has set up, while others are more controversially defined, such as *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Thunderheart* (Michael Apted, 1992) and *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) (the opening sequence). The anti-realist strategies of these films include “fragmented editing and the use of extreme camera angles” (Walker, 2001, p. 215) and the effect of the subject matter of catastrophic past events which, Walker argues (2001, p. 215), “intrude on linear narrative and disturb realist representation”. The result of these ‘anti-realist’ forms is to “create in viewers a sense of disorientation and moral ambiguity designed to echo the experience of combat trauma” (Walker, 2001, p. 215). This suggests a definitive link between film form and audience response which doesn’t allow for any alternate readings and would therefore affect the interpretation of popular memory texts. The inclusion of big budget, star led, Hollywood films as anti-realist forms which provoke uncertainty and ambiguity, suggests that a meaningful exploration of memory which challenges a dominant version of the past is not just limited to the avant-garde, but that in memory studies this becomes an a priori definition; if texts explore the past in subversive ways they must be defined as anti-realist. The impasse evident here, that texts are categorised in rigid ways depending on their interpretation, is addressed in this dissertation, which focuses on the features of the films as they draw on styles and traditions across and between popular and high culture, foregrounding the vicissitudes of memory in an accessible way which does not need to be defined as anti-realist. One of the aims of this project is to demonstrate a way through this impasse. Here the films discussed foreground the experience of temporality as fragmented while using a range of techniques such as mise-en-abyme, allegory, and hapticity, which transcend the oppositional categories of realism and anti-realism.

Walker’s position closely follows Hayden White’s (1996) argument that the anomalous historical events of the twentieth and twenty first centuries can only be worked through, recognised and mourned through a modernist attack on realism. White argues that the film form of *JFK* represents a

new kind of fragmented film language for a fragmented period, reflecting the lack of a fixed historical object. The audience experiences the film in a way which represents the modern experience of history, as a rush of events, interpretations and subjectivities without a fixed, objective truth. For White, the enormity and disruption of historical events of the twentieth century means that they must inevitably also disrupt the linear narrative and realist representations of mainstream film; these events cannot be told through pre-existing stories and forms. In this analysis, White argues against the fetishising function of classic narrative which provides a substitute for an inevitably failed attempt at description. The classic narrative form provides an illusionary feeling of mastery of events but its very status as a story means, as White (1996, p. 32) argues, that the “anti-narrative non-stories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of ‘unnatural’ events – including the Holocaust – that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before” and that the “Modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of de-fetishising both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically”. In this analysis the linear narrative provides a recuperation and reassurance which can only be conservative, operating as a form of imprisonment for the real, non-linear, diverse and ambiguous experiences provoked by such disruptive events. As in Walker’s analysis, this seems to downplay the level of linear narrative, along with other forms of realism such as audience positioning and character alignment, evident in much alternative or ‘art’ cinematic approaches, and in particular the films discussed.

The contention that only modernist and anti-realist forms can provide a form for representing trauma has been attacked from different perspectives. Janet Staiger (1996), for example, argues against White by stating that he misinterprets the way in which audiences experience *JFK*. The form is not new (the mixing of documentary and fictional form is very common) and the spectator always understands that this is an account of events from a particular perspective, “who recognise that the movie is a subjective version of the past, created through shots put together by some agent” (Staiger, 1996, p.52). Staiger does agree that *JFK* poses questions for postmodernist representation but doesn’t

see the answer as a return to modernist anti-realist strategies. Instead her explanation for the ongoing trauma of the event of Kennedy's assassination is the opposite of White's, that it is because "we are not yet able to let that past go. ... This is because we still think we might be able to represent with some verisimilitude that event", that society is still looking for a narrative resolution (Staiger, 1996, p. 53). The elusive narrative resolution shifts the focus from approaches to narrative which see it as an organising and consoling structure to one which subverts this function, but which could not be defined as anti-realist. The use of mise-en-abyme in the temporal gateway films addressed here foregrounds the failed search for meaning through narrative.

Memory and the Changing Perception of Time

The focus on anti-realist and avant-garde approaches as the only suitable forms through which to explore the traumatic events of the past reinforces the divisions and hierarchies of the mass culture debate. Andreas Huyssen (2001) argues against the view that the popular concern with memory is part of a nostalgic commodification of the past, evident in narrative approaches. Explicitly positioned in opposition to theorists of the culture industry, he argues that the postmodern interest in memory, which he locates as emerging in the 1980s, is a marked shift from early modernism's belief in continuing human improvement, in a society focused on an unknowable future rather than the past. In Huyssen's view, the contemporary desire to look back to the past is not about a nostalgic yearning as compensation for the anxieties of the future but rather an example of the changing perception of time, specifically the vanishing present. Identifying a paradox in the relationship between memory and culture, Huyssen argues that the reason for the increased interest in memory is due to the infinite expansion of the virtual and cultural past, while the present is foreshortened. The looking back to the past in this context is, Huyssen (2001, p. 72) argues, a response to "informational and perceptual overload" and an attempt to "secure some continuity within time, to provide some extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move". The narratives of the films under discussion explore

this experience of temporality, the desire to find a space in which to exist in the present while attempting to understand the past and the future.

Huyssen's argument traces the problematic nature of oppositional positions set up by a reading of memory culture as a form of commodification, a form of amnesia rather than memory, superficiality rather than depth, trivial rather than serious experience. These categories Huyssen believes are unhelpful in attempting to understand the reasons for the contemporary interest in memory, as they reduce the analysis to entertainment versus 'actual' trauma. This attempt is based on, for Huyssen, a false belief on the idea of a 'pure space' outside of commodity culture, a space which he argues doesn't exist, "however much we may desire such a space" (Huyssen, 2001, p. 66). The problems around how and why a culture remembers cannot be solved "by simply opposing serious memory to trivial memory, the way historians sometimes oppose history to memory *tout court*, memory as the subjective and trivial stuff out of which historians make the real thing" (Huyssen, 2001, p. 67). As Huyssen argues, the traditional historical archive and the Hollywood film are received in the same public sphere, and they cannot be seen as separate: "traumatic memory and entertainment memory together ... occupying the same public space". The distinctions between art and commodification which is central to this is also problematic, "For trauma is marketed just as much as the fun is, and not even for different memory consumers" (Huyssen, 2001, p. 67).

Huyssen's view that cultural memory is neither compensatory nor commodified is based on the nature of the memories and the speed with which they are experienced. Memories of the twentieth century's traumatic events provide no reassurance for a nostalgic, stable view of the past. Rather than a conservative impulse, memories of the past are often used to construct democracy and human rights. The speed at which musealisation now takes place is itself a signifier of the destabilised past not, as compensation critics such as Hermann Lubbe and Odo Marquard argue, a sign of a culture which takes refuge in memory, where the museum is a replacement for tradition. Huyssen (2001, p. 71) states that, "memory and muzealisation are enlisted as bulwarks against obsolescence and

disappearance, to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever shrinking horizons of time and space”.

Building on the work of Reinhart Koselleck (2004), Huyssen contends that there is a changing perception of time, that space and time (fundamental to categories of human experience and perception) are experienced differently at different historical periods. In Huyssen’s more optimistic view of the focus on the past, a return to memory signifies the concerns of a culture. Due to the nature of the memories it suggests society is attempting to address trauma and injustice through a slowing down rather than speeding up of time. In this context Huyssen counters the concepts of the need for violence and disruption of the present which is evident in many accounts of the perception of time to argue that the return to the past is instead an important way of stabilising – and politicising – the present.

Questions of Representation

As has been outlined, the role of popular cinema in constructing and transmitting cultural memories is often seen as an exercise in nostalgia, associated with emotional pleasure rather than intellect, as, “debased substitutes for historical consciousness” (Radstone, 2010, p. 331); as such it constitutes part of a wider debate about the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ way to represent the past. In “History Happens” Vivian Sobchack (1996) argues for the democratisation of historical representation, seeing the breakdown of categories associated with representations of the past (realist and anti-realist) as something ultimately liberating and meaningful, rather than trivial. Sobchack reads *Forest Gump* as representing the shift that has taken place from seeing historical events as fixed and discrete, as clearly momentous, to history as a series of events whose significance is unclear until much later. Separating the film *Forest Gump* from the character, she argues that the film is self-aware and knowing about the experience of historical events. In this model there are no longer definitive boundaries between past and present, trivial and significant, personal and historical, fact and meaning. It is instead, Sobchack argues, history

as “incoherent motives and chance convergences” (Sobchack, 1996, p.2). From a phenomenological perspective, Sobchack (1996, p. 5) argues, this break down means that history can be conceived of as possible at “any moment” in the present, a product of a new self-consciousness of one’s role as an “historical actor”.

The emphasis on history as present at any time, in Sobchack’s analysis, creates a “vibrant connection of present to past” and with this, a previously lost sense of agency in the shaping of human events is “redeemed to us”. Rather than this shift being the result of an increasingly superficial culture, the effect of seeing potential for grand historical events in the trivial and everyday can be seen not as the ‘end of history’ but rather a “real and consequential readiness for history” (Sobchack, 1996, p. 5). The end of the definition of history as a past event of great momentousness and the recognition of the loss of the historical object has meant a widespread understanding of history as process. In Sobchack’s argument (1996, p.6), “It is to recognise that we are subjectively implicated and responsible for the histories we tell ourselves or others tell us and that while these are just representations, their significance has both value and consequence to our lives.” This engagement with historical events means that we are no longer just spectators outside of history, but also participants and adjudicators. This recognition has the effect of revealing previous categorisations as false and subverts the idea that there can be forms of representation which are (in effect) serious and unserious.

The issues debated between Sobchack, White and Staiger, of how, or even if, historical events can be represented after the loss of the fixed historical object are reflected in the films chosen in this project, through a variety of ways. *The Secret in their Eyes* and *Pour une Femme* for example achieved broad international critical success and are designed as popular, mainstream films which use familiar forms to represent difficult and traumatic events concerning individuals and nations. Both use the conventions of melodrama and classic narrative which is reinforced through audience alignment with a sympathetic central character whose perspective and world view the audience is expected to share.

The conventional form of the two films could be described as fulfilling the fetishistic function of narrative, or to be a form of screen memory in which the lack of explicit reference to the events it refers to symbolically is a failure of representation. In this argument the narrative form is an attempt to contain the real disruptions caused by an historical event and to attempt to make it harmless. Counter to this is the way both films foreground the process of remembering and forgetting in the characterisation and the narrative form. In contrast to Sobchack's distinction between *Forest Gump* the character as unself-conscious while the film *Forest Gump* is historically conscious, Esposito, the protagonist in *The Secret in their Eyes* is historically aware, continually describing the unreliability of memory, even in written and photographic evidence, as well as the power of fantasy to distort remembrance. As a writer, Esposito discusses the obstacles involved in attempting to recount a personal history; the historical consciousness operates at the level of character but also in the film as an organising structure. In *Pour une Femme* techniques of allegory and mise-en-abyme which disrupt the search for the past are set in motion through the central character's (Anne) response to everyday archives such as family photography, integrating film styles previously considered as belonging to discrete categories.

In both *The Secret in their Eyes* and *Pour une Femme*, Esposito and Anne demonstrate a readiness for history in which they must participate and adjudicate. The narratives provide a representation of a contemporary understanding of history which is aided by conventional alignment with character, but which also acknowledges the impossibility of agreeing on a fixed interpretation of the past. This approach is typical of the films which are the focus of this research which cover a range of film forms and styles, national and transnational contexts, but are also linked by an interest in the representation of memory of the past as it interconnects between individuals and history.

Each film examined at length in this project can be discussed as part of a process of cultural memory and the construction of identities, referencing but not constrained by, national borders. The films can be defined as examples of trauma cinema in that they work through the traumatic events of

a nation's past (dictatorship, occupation, revolution – and failed revolution), but do so in a way which often doesn't directly refer to these events. In the context of memory studies these films raise debates around how history and memory are represented and what the function of the filmic representation of traumatic events is. The focus on films which might be described as examples of art house, auteur or festival films and which also draw on classic narrative, genre conventions and star performances, provides further examples of the way in which memory films negotiate a range of styles and mode of address in breaking down categories of representation. In the next chapter I examine how a range of films explore mise-en-abyme and allegory to construct a relationship between past and present for the characters and viewers, blurring the type of categories encountered in previous discussions of memory texts.

Chapter 1: Cinematic Memory and the Construction of Identity: Mise-en-Abyme and Allegory

The focus of this study is a range of films from different countries and cultures but which share characteristics in form and content in relation to the way in which they represent the past and the process of remembering. These films can appeal to a wide audience through their stylistic mix of conventions of global art cinema as it has developed since the 1930s with the familiar structures of narrative and genre established by Hollywood's global dominance. As Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (2010) argue, global art cinema is an "elastically hybrid culture", characterised by the intersection of "popular genres, national cinemas, revolutionary film, and the avant-garde" (Galt & Schoonover, 2010, p. 3). The films which are the focus of this chapter - *Pour une Femme* (2013), *The Dust of Time* (2008), *Even the Rain* (2010) and *Ararat* (2002),¹⁶ exemplify this intersectional style in their mix of popular forms with more experimental techniques. This "mongrel" (Galt & Schoonover, 2010, p. 3) aspect is also evident in the context of production: all are transnational co-productions, which makes the place of origin harder to define.

In contrast to films about the past where the main purpose is to retell national traumatic histories, here it becomes secondary; instead the films are a working through of the contemporary trauma around temporality for a Western audience responding to the anxiety about living in the present. In this way the use of historical events functions in a similar way to the concept of screen memories. Thomas Elsaesser has argued that reference to past events can operate in this way, "what I have called

¹⁶ Other films which are part of this grouping but are only discussed briefly include: *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010), *Sarah's Key* (Gilles Paquet-Brenner, 2010), *Night Train to Lisbon* (Bille August, 2013)

the historical leftovers of the twentieth century act themselves like trauma theory's screen memories, since they cover for another philosophical debate, ... the emphasis on temporality and spatiality, but 'displaced' in relation to the event. 'Trauma' would then be the name for a referent that can no longer be placed (that need no longer be placed) in a particular time or place" (Elsaesser, 2001, p. 200). In all the films under discussion in this chapter the historical events are referred to at a remove from the contemporary diegesis through the use of allegory, mise-en-abyme and flashback.

In this chapter I examine the 'contours' of the temporal gateway film to show how a particular form of film about the past has emerged, one which explores the effects of the past on the present. I demonstrate how the use of an allegorical structure (rather than content) emphasises the temporal disruption; the gap between the present and the past represented through flashback is a narrative strategy for representing uncertainties about the past; showing events and memories of the past as constantly shifting rather than fixed. This relationship to the past is explored by the narrative motif of mise-en-abyme which demonstrates the character's relationship to the past as unstable. Through this focus on the unreliability of memory and the impossibility of returning to the past I argue that the films continually challenge official versions of the past as identified in trap of "container culture" (Erll, 2011, p. 7). The utilisation of structures of temporality such as allegory and mise-en-abyme, also, I argue, avoids the limiting nature of narrativization (White, 1980).

The experience of this anxiety around temporality is evident in the positioning of the protagonist of the temporal gateway within a film style which continually replays the feeling of time as fragmented and at a remove, with the desire to capture and order it. On the one hand this creates a form that gestures towards infinity, an endless search for meaning in the past which can't be reached, in co-existence with the feeling that it might just be within one's grasp. This impossible position is reinforced through the characters' experiences of loss, often of a family member, but which mirrors a feeling of non-existence as a subject, apparent in narratives which are in part origins stories of the central characters, attempts at creation. This positioning is transmitted to the spectator through the use of mise-en-abyme and allegory, forms which emphasise lack, the impossibility of reaching a fixed point,

but that entice interpretation. The relationship between the past and present in the temporal gateway film, its constant reference to the inability to reach the past is reified through the representation of the experience of temporality as fragmented and mobile with different periods interjecting though each other, rather than as a smooth and fluid progression. This argument can be illustrated in the shifting stylistic features of the work of Theo Angelopoulos: the transition between the characteristic use of the long take which suggests transcendence, to a meaning developed out of cross cutting with its emphasis on division and barriers.

Contours of the Temporal Gateway Film

The films which are the focus of this chapter share a series of formal characteristics in their exploration of time and space, a grouping which I refer to as the temporal gateway film. The gateway in the context of these films is their focus on temporality, a subject which transcends a range of borders, including the national, in contrast to the requirement of national knowledge about the specifics of a time and place. The temporal gateway film's exploration of national traumatic histories suggests new positions in several ongoing debates in film and cultural studies, particularly in considering the role of cinema in the construction of cultural memory. In this context the films belonging to this grouping break down a series of categorisations of film style and narrative which have previously been considered as discrete and rigid.

Building on the outline I presented in the introduction, the following demonstrates how there are a series of narrative and formal motifs which can be associated with the temporal gateway film. The narrative focus is on a central character who is searching for something, to establish a truth about a past event which concerns them personally, but which is also linked to the wider political and historical context. The function of the character is to explore the sensation of temporality for the viewer, to

represent the mobile nature of the past and present.¹⁷ In this role they are removed from the events of the past; the focus is on their relationship to time, rather than the past as a metaphorical backdrop to character development. The motivation for this search is provided by a traumatic event in the present such as a death, illness or mental breakdown. The quest is usually a familial one, such as the search for an unknown parent or sibling, but sometimes a romantic one, and this structure encompasses the trope of family secrets and hidden relationships. These ideas are then connected to wider concepts of concealed, forgotten or misunderstood political histories. This familiar narrative structure of a hero's quest is a way of making often vast, complex historical events accessible to an audience as they are seen through the eyes of a - mostly - sympathetic character with a relatable situation. In *Pour une Femme*, the death of the central character Anne's (Sylvie Testud) mother in the 1980s prompts her to investigate her parents' lives in France and Russia at the end of the Second World War. The investigation into the past in *Pour une Femme* is repeated across the temporal gateway film and this investigative structure has several functions. In *Pour une Femme* the investigation provides narrative enigmas such as the identity of Anne's father and the outcome of the romantic triangle involving her parents. A similar investigation around identity, of parents and children, is found in all the films referred to here. Sometimes the investigation is a quest to discover culpability in past events which may become a literal uncovering of history (*Sarah's Key* [Gilles Paquet-Brenner, 2010], *Incendies* [Denis Villeneuve, 2011]). However, in all the films the structure of the investigation into the past with its use of flashbacks becomes an allegory for existing in time. An awareness of time passing is central to allegory due to its inherent separation from the thing it is referring to; it is always about the past, about something which has been displaced. The formal structure of the investigative narrative which never reaches resolution, because such an uncovering

¹⁷ At times this is conveyed through a haptic sensation which focuses on texture and movement through gesture, an aspect explored in chapter 2 in the discussion of *Ida* and in the films of Lucrecia Martel in chapter 3.

of the past is impossible, recreates the temporal experience of the characters, constantly attempting to understand the present by moving back into the past.

The motivations for the search into the past cover a variety of traumatic, personal events. In *The Dust of Time*, the central character is a film director (Willem Dafoe) whose current project is a retelling of his mother's life as it was lived during the global historical events of the twentieth century, a project which becomes a film within the film *The Dust of Time*. The director experiences a creative block and is unable to carry on working when his daughter suffers a mental breakdown and goes missing. This event has the effect of disrupting the narrative chronology of the past events in the film within a film, and in *The Dust of Time* itself. *Even the Rain* also takes the narrative structure of a film within a film. Here a Spanish film crew is shooting a film in Bolivia about Christopher Columbus when the contemporary political situation in Bolivia disrupts and invalidates the film they're making. The central characters, the director (Gael García Bernal) and producer (Luis Tosar) of the film and Daniel (Juan Carlos Aduviri), a community organiser and one of the leads of the fictional film, are the focus for the investigation into the understanding of past events. In *Sarah's Key* the American journalist Julia (Kristin Scott Thomas) investigates her husband's family's culpability in the French round up of the Jews in 1942, at a moment of family crisis in the present (a move from the US to France, the breakup of her marriage, an unexpected pregnancy). Here the investigation into the past centres on the attempt to discover the identity of the children of a French Jewish survivor. *Night Train to Lisbon* has the familiar filmic motif of the male midlife crisis; a solitary professor in Switzerland abandons his everyday life to pursue a young woman – in a red coat – across Europe. His subsequent exploration of Salazar's dictatorship in Portugal is inextricably linked to the search for the identity of the young woman's parents. In *Ararat*, the character of Rafi (David Alpay), a young Canadian-Armenian student film maker explores the past in order to understand the motivation for his late father's attempted assassination of a Turkish ambassador. Similarly, Rafi's step sister Celia (Marie-Josée Croze) is searching for the answer to whether her own father killed himself, and if so why. Their stories are linked by the character of Ani (Arsinée Khanjian), who was married to both men and whose work as

an art historian is focused on research into the life of Arshile Gorky, specifically the artist's relationship with his mother and the exile of his father at the start of the Armenian genocide. Sharing certain structural elements, the journey into the past in *Incendies* is prompted by the death of the central character Jeanne's mother and the revelation in her will of the existence of a long-lost father and brother. It is this which sets Jeanne on her exploration of personal but also historical memory: here the impossibility of returning to the past is foregrounded by the decision to use a fictional stand-in for the Lebanese war.

This emphasis on alignment with character is often interpreted as part of an apolitical turn in films which are ostensibly about political events, an analysis which is influenced by realist and anti-realist debates. In memory studies, much writing about film form has attached a greater worth to those films which fragment the narrative, with this form seen as providing a more successful representation of the process of memory as well as distancing the audience from an emotional attachment to the events depicted. Atom Egoyan, in discussing the form of *Ararat*, puts forward a defence of constructing a personal story through which to explore historical events:

In making *Ararat*, I wanted to show how the truth is not to be found in the epic scenes of deportation and massacre, but in the intimate moments shared by individuals – between strangers in a hallway, between workers on a film set, and most profoundly in the conversations between parents and their children (Egoyan, 2002, p. 890).

The films' claim to political relevance is also apparent in the repeated theme of the categorisation of people through the imposition of borders and national identities; attempts at order and control which are repeatedly identified as detrimental to society.¹⁸ These ideas are explored literally (redrawing of

¹⁸ These themes are explored in the analysis of *Ida* in chapter 2.

national borders post Second World War in *Pour une Femme* and *The Dust of Time*, colonisation in *Even the Rain* and *Ararat*) and allegorically through the experience of entrapment of the central character suspended in a limbo between past, present and future.

Memory as Creativity: The Role of the Artist in Constructing the Past

The narrative position of the central character as the one who leads the investigation into the past and is responsible for discovering what happened there, suggests a classic narrative hero, and the characters do exist along a spectrum where they conform to this type - to a greater or lesser degree. Central characters who do not want to remember or who feel conflicted about knowing the past tend to be found in those films which are more explicitly art house in style; *The Dust of Time* and *Ararat* are typical of the greater sense of ambiguity and openness of that style. Even in the most conventional examples here, though, where characters exist in a fairly mainstream film world and do set out to uncover the truth (*Sarah's Key*, *Pour une Femme*, *Incendies*, *Even the Rain*), they are characterised by indecision and uncertainty about their role, an uncertainty reinforced by the narrative form and moral ambiguity – the validity of their enquiry into other peoples' secrets, the uncovering of loved ones' guilt - which is often central to their quest. The central characters in the films also share professions which foreground the processes of memory through storytelling and creativity (as well as providing the character with the investigative skills and resources to make their search possible). The theme of competing versions of the past (or the concept of 'poetic license' as it is explicitly referred to in *Ararat* and *The Dust of Time*) is repeatedly explored. Perhaps not surprisingly the role of film director is a popular choice (*The Dust of Time*, *Pour une Femme*, *Ararat*, *Even the Rain*) as well as journalists (*Sarah's Key*) and writers (*Night Train to Lisbon*). The central character in *Incendies* is a postgraduate maths student where the apparent certainties of her subject are contrasted with the subjective histories she's investigating.

The characters' positions in the media and creative arts represent different approaches to memory. In films which focus on directors, the idea of technologies of memory is often explored. In these examples the notion that film – and other technologies – shapes the way in which people remember is examined

in different ways. In *Pour une Femme*, Anne translates her research into the past into a screenplay. Scenes of her writing the script are the motivation for the shift from filmic present to past and the scenes in flashback are later revealed as the finished film which Anne has directed and is screening at a festival. The form of a film within a film, a type of mise-en-abyme, draws attention to the many versions of the past which may exist. Anne's screenplay is an imagining of the past, as her sister tells her "It's a life you're making up" which, the film suggests, is all that memory can be. This destabilising of certainty is repeated throughout the film and is particularly evident in suggesting the impossibility of defining categories such as fact and fiction or truth and lies. The film within a film form found in several temporal gateway films (*The Dust of Time*, *Even the Rain*, *Ararat*) demonstrates memory as a form of artistic imagination, it also suggests that what we remember can be shaped by memories of films; memories which overlap and become indistinct. The film within a film form encourages the replaying of iconic narratives from classic films. As discussed later, *Pour une Femme*'s storyline of the enigmatic family member unexpectedly alive and returned from war recalls *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Daniel Vigne, 1982) while *The Dust of Time* explicitly references *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) in its mise-en-scene. In both cases the films recast the plots as history, exploring the themes of war-time sacrifice, as well as anxiety about identity and knowledge. In recasting a family's past within the form of these classic and re-called films, the temporal gateway films foreground the desire to romanticise the past and its attendant dangers; part of the potential narrativization and unreliability of reconstructing the past.¹⁹

There is a further similarity across the present/past structure of the films, in that the central characters of the film did not experience the historical events referred to at the plots' centre. This is often because

¹⁹ The use of intertextual references to other films may suggest a connection to Fredric Jameson's (1998) identification and analysis of the nostalgia film, but the function of the references is very different. In Jameson's analysis of postmodern film style of the 1980s, the nostalgia film, with its "narrative set in some indefinable past, an eternal '30s, say, beyond history" (Jameson, 1998, p. 9), was a problematic development from a Marxist perspective as it was characteristic of a lack of understanding of history. In contrast, the temporal gateway film is specific in its conceptualisation of time, the utilisation of other narratives are one of the ways in which the films foreground the different processes of remembering and understanding.

they are too young to have lived through either the Armenian genocide, *La Grande Rafle* in France, Stalin's dictatorship and the Lebanese war, or because they were in another part of the world. This temporal and spatial distancing creates a remove for the characters and the audience, so that the move into the past which is central to the structure of the films, reveals a gap in which film makers are able to explore the nature of traumatic memory, consider how events are remembered, and the effect of this remembering, or absence of it, on later generations. This approach avoids both the narrative disruption of an anti-realist strategy or a more straightforward identification with a character who leads the audience through events as they happen in a unified diegesis. In this way, the films in this chapter can be understood through the prism of postmemory (Marianne Hirsch, 2012), their subject matter positioned between the direct experience of a previous generation and an anxiety about the loosening of remembrance within the later one. The films operate as explorations of what Eva Hoffman (2004) has defined as the "hinge generation": a crucial period of time bridging direct experience and transmitted memory. This moment is also charged with working through how the process of remembering can be balanced with living in the present and the future, not just for the direct descendants but also for the wider culture.²⁰ The films which most explicitly deal with these ideas – *Pour une Femme*, *Ararat* and *The Dust of Time*,²¹ foreground the central character's link to, but removal from, the past events; *Even the Rain* examines more generally the crisis of reviewing the past through film.

²⁰ Hirsch (2012, p.114) distinguishes between the "familial" and "affiliative" structures of postmemory in order to explore the direct, intergenerational transmission of trauma which takes place between generations, but also to consider a wider non-familial group of contemporaries who are affected by the trauma of the previous generation.

²¹ A case can be made through the biographies of some of the directors that they belong to the second or hinge generation as it is referred to in postmemory (Diane Kurys's parents survived the Second World War concentration camps, Theo Angelopoulos's father was a hostage for nine years during the Greek civil war) but I'm looking more at how cinema has responded to the issues of postmemory more generally – rather than as rooted in the biographies of individuals. The exception to this is the work of Diane Kurys, which is explicitly autobiographical in a way which the other films are not.

The films all explore one of the central issues and dilemmas facing this generation, specifically the way that the second generation can take on the survivor's memories with a force that may displace the latter's own memories and subjectivity. As Marianne Hirsch (2012) identifies, such memories of trauma, which precede one's own birth, raise profound questions around remembering the past while living in the present and the future. The concept of postmemory though also draws attention to the further slippage of memory away from the object of remembrance. The gap between the events, the survivor and the following generations is in part bridged by the concept of postmemory, but as Hirsch (2012, p. 22) discusses, these memories are shaped by fragments, imagination and the interpretations of archival material, often photographs, which are partial and incomplete: "rather than giving information about the past, archival images function as 'points of memory' that tell us more about our own needs and desires, our own fantasies and fears, than about the past to which they supposedly bear witness". It is the way in which these points in the present lead characters into the past which is the focus of the films explored here, films which can be understood as products of postmemory itself, but also as discussions of a way beyond the demands of memorialisation – morally and legally – to move into the future. It is in part these dilemmas which render the films so open and ambiguous. Both *Pour une Femme* and *The Dust of Time* explicitly reference the experience of the hinge generation through the positioning of history as a "narrative that preceded one's birth" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). Both films are structured around an enigma, and around the protagonists' attempts to discover their own identities within the context of remembering the past; a past which despite its traumas and tragedies may seem more exciting and worthwhile than one's own.²² In these examples the film form represents the elusiveness of memory and suggests the impossibility of a return to a definitive account of events in the past despite the desire to do so.

²² Hirsch (2012, p. 15) discusses this complicated – and controversial – experience of belonging to the second generation.

The films' themes of memory and the uncovering of personal and historic secrets are foregrounded through the structure of the films and the reliance on flashback.²³ This style suggests how the form and content of remembered films begin to affect the way in which a subject remembers; that memory might become a form of flashback, taking on its uniquely cinematic quality. In the most common form of flashback in the temporal gateway film, the film opens in the present with the introduction of the hero/protagonist and the disruption to his or her personal life which will take the protagonist back into the past. The narrative is then structured by a series of flashbacks motivated by reminiscences, letters, interviews, photographs, memorials and archives, and other audio-visual references to the past, often accompanied with a voice over. Some of the examples use variations on the idea of the flashback structure, analogous to the way in which another person's memories can take on the force of one's own. Although sharing the present/past structure of the other films, *Sarah's Key* is technically made up of parallel stories, one about the American journalist, Julia, carrying out the investigation in the present, the other about Sarah's life as a girl in occupied France, her experiences in a concentration camp and into adulthood. Although Julia can't literally have flashbacks of memories about Sarah, the film's structure works to suggest the connection she feels to the child's trauma, as if she can remember her life - an exploration of postmemory. Similarly, in *Night Train to Lisbon* the flashbacks are the products of the hero's imagination, based on his conversations with those involved and from reading a memoir. In *Even the Rain*, the film within a film provides the historical images of the past, in *Pour une Femme* and *The Dust of Time* the past is imagined as if it were a film. This destabilising of the status of flashback can be read as part of the films' explorations of the role of cinema in constructing memory,²⁴ an intra-textual

²³ In her influential study of the use of flashback in film, Maureen Turim (1989) identifies the different stylistic conventions of flashback which may be used in a variety of ways: in a self-conscious, contradictory or ironic form. All forms of flashback, Turim notes, construct a temporal disjunction in the narrative which is one of the ways in which flashbacks are able to question the reliability of historical narratives. While flashbacks often position the character within wider social and historical events, the flashback is a form of cinematic discourse focusing on "the mind's relationship to the past and on the subject's relationship to telling his or her past" (Turim, 1989, p. 2).

²⁴ In Susannah Radstone's (2010, p. 326) terms "memory as cinema, cinema as memory and cinema/memory".

relationship which informs the structure and function of mise-en-abyme which will be examined later in the chapter.

The films use a variety of styles and approaches to shift the diegesis from present to past, but none are conventional signifiers of a specific character's memory (e.g. the use of dissolve or fade between time periods, a voice over by the character in the present who is also the focus of the past) and all use the shift to draw attention to the problems of memory and the retelling of history. This is often through the ambiguity of the status of the images on screen. In *The Dust of Time* it is difficult to distinguish between the different states of memory and time; the blurring between the central character's memory, his film within a film – which may or may not exist – and the film we are watching. The past in *Pour une Femme* might be the central character's imagination or images from the film she's directed about the past. Instead of conventional signifiers of the flashback, characters from different time periods are able to share the same diegesis at times, destabilising to the character and viewer's experience of temporality.

The use of distancing techniques to disrupt the spectator's relationship to the film, while a recognised strategy in the art house authorship of Egoyan and Angelopoulos, has been overlooked in the reception of more mainstream, seemingly literal films about the past such as *Pour une Femme* and *Sarah's Key*. These films' foregrounding of diverse interpretations of the past through the removal of the central characters from the historical events depicted, also allows an allegorical reading of the films. The films might be seen as thoroughly allegorical in terms of their structure, moving beyond distinct metaphorical moments and actions. The gap between the present and past through flashback, with its disconnect between signifier and signified, is the ideal narrative strategy for representing the absence of certainty about memory which is central to the films. The allegorical structure is enhanced by the use of mise-en-abyme – often through the film within a film structure - as a way of foregrounding the character's relationship to the past as one which is unstable and mobile. In this way, the films make a forceful contribution to the field of memory studies in addressing the impasse caused by the development of cultural memory as a rigid reinstatement of a specific and officially agreed past of a nation.

Representing Temporality: Allegory and Mise-en-Abyme

The central focus of the temporal gateway films is the desire to inform the present through reference to the past, while simultaneously understanding the impossibility of ever knowing the past due to the instability and unreliability of memory. This aspect of memory is continually foregrounded through the processes of representation as well as in the subject matter itself. In this context, the past will always be changed by the present, a process which often focuses on the redemptive or recuperative. This function, identified by Hayden White (1997) as part of the conservative, consoling purposes of the temporal coherence of narrativity, is continually ruptured in the temporal gateway films. The narration of the films conventionally constructs a conflict through the competing assertion of the enigma and the promise of resolution, a tension which represents the paradox of investigating an unstable past, evident in the simultaneity of seeing the protagonist attempting to discover the past at the same time the film form (narrative rupture, mise-en-abyme, and other elements outlined further below) is reminding the spectator of the impossibility of this attempt. The conflict of the character position suggests the effects identified by Jean Baudrillard (1988) of the move from the modern, to the 'postmodern condition', a period ushering in a rupture of established signifying practises. The temporal gateway film enacts Baudrillard's (1988, p. 169) argument of the loss of the referent, the moment of transition where the image moves from dissimulating the absence of reality, to bearing no relation to reality: "the first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation". The foregrounding of this philosophical view of history in the films is achieved in part through the use of allegory and mise-en-abyme. Although these two modes of narrative are usually considered as performing different functions I will argue that there are areas of overlap.

Allegory and mise-en-abyme are contrasting devices in terms of their relationship to the world of the art work and the external world from which it was created. Mise-en-abyme is a self-referential and inwardly reflecting form, contained within the work of art, while allegory relies on connections being

made from within the work itself outward to the external world. The idea of internal and external functions can be related in cinema to the film's diegetic and non-diegetic time and space, but this is a relationship which is made blurred and indistinct by the use of these techniques. The devices of allegory and mise-en-abyme are both forms which inherently refer to loss and absence; their multiple signifying at different levels creates an unstable narrative space. In his account of the different uses of allegory, Ismail Xavier (1999) emphasises the way that allegories shift and change meaning rather than being fixed and stable. This is a process which starts with the problem of defining allegorical intention. As Xavier (1999, p. 342) states:

In our cultural process readers are no longer searching for "intended" or conscious meanings, but for what the interpreter can say on the occasion of his or her encounter with the text, an encounter that cannot, however, be seen as only a dual (reader-plus-text) relationship, isolated from all kinds of contextual influences.

In this process one of the powerful effects of allegory is exactly its shifting meaning, the openness to debate about how it should be read. The allegorical form continually draws attention to the enigma and the 'opacity' of language, foregrounding the latter's status as a form of artifice and mediation rather than natural communication. In cinema, one of the key uses of allegory has been in the construction of national myths and narratives, often invoking personification through an individual whose achievements and characteristics were understood as analogous to the nation state's history. Xavier argues that the instability of allegory as it is read by contemporary audiences means that this type of stable - closer to the symbolic - representation is no longer possible.

In his re-configuring of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragedy* (1963/1998), Walter Benjamin claims it as a misunderstood style of expression which was central to Baroque art and constituted a form of fragmentation and disruption, a form later smoothed over by periods of Classicism and Romanticism which valued the harmony of symbolic communication in art. This process retrospectively erased, or made less visible, earlier forms which were resistant to such unity. Benjamin argues (1963/1998, p. 165)

that the contrast between allegory and symbol is in part defined by their relationship to temporality. Allegory's dynamic and fluid temporality is in contrast to the, "mystical instant of the symbol". For Benjamin the function of allegory, as opposed to the ideological function of the symbol, was to reveal the past in its fragmentary and destructive nature. In his discussion of Benjamin's conception of allegory, John McCole (1993, p. 133) summarises it as containing, "the discontinuous structure of a series of moments, of transitory, failed attempts to capture meaning". Through its reference to something which has already past and the impossibility of ever defining its meaning, allegory is the form which emphasises the continual passing of time rather than its monumentality. The foregrounding of temporality as fragmentary and mobile in contrast to the symbol becomes fundamental to the way in which the two represent the past, an idea expressed in Benjamin's famous example of the death's head mask. In allegory, Benjamin (1963/1998, p. 166) argues, history confronts "the observer with the *facie hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather a death's head". In this account allegory becomes part of Benjamin's overall theme of the attack on historicism, with allegory resisting the smoothness and unity of the symbol in order to disrupt conceiving of the linear progression of the past.

The films in this analysis can be read allegorically in part due to the ways in which they remind the viewer of the impossibility of stability and certainty in the desire to understand the past. In all cases this narrative drive for discovery and revelation associated with more mainstream, often melodramatic forms, is intertwined with a structuring allegorical form and a variety of allegorical motifs which undermine such a drive. The multi-layered structures of signification, within which the character is positioned and often finds their-self trapped, are meta-levels existing alongside the plot of the film, which begin to convey to the viewer the experience of attempting to uncover the past while simultaneously existing in the present; the understanding that it is the present which shapes the past. In this way, the films are "blasts from the continuum of history" (Benjamin, 1968/1992b, p. 253) representing the past as a series of fragments and moments which can't be captured, rather than a teleological view of progress

which might circumscribe historical meaning, particularly when attached to a national cinema where the function could be read as myth making.

Benjamin's (1963/1998, p. 233) definition of the allegorical "as precisely the non-being of what it represents", a constant reminder of loss and the "void" which is always present, is particularly apposite to the subject matter of films where central characters are searching for an understanding of their past which is lost, effaced, or suppressed. This emphasis on allegory's relationship to absence, in Jeremy Tambling's (2010, p. 129) definition, "that it comes out of absence, but it also turns the objects that it represents into 'non-being'", can obscure another aspect of allegory which is its dynamic attempt to counter this non-being; in Benjamin's (1963/1998, p. 233) argument, "these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented". This attempt to "fill out and deny" the void which is always present, points to the character position in the temporal gateway film, their limbo constructed through the continual attempt and inevitable failure to reach something which is absent. The use of allegory to express the constant attempt but inability to reach the past is epitomised in a moment from *Pour une Femme*. This occurs as the protagonist Anne walks the streets of Lyon, where she has returned in an attempt to be closer to the past of her family. The moment of her walking through a doorway of an apartment block (an apt motif for entrances and exits in time) becomes a moment forty years earlier, as her mother Lena walks along the same street; Anne disappearing at the moment her mother appears. This image represents the closest moment between the two time periods of the film, as they momentarily appear to share the same time and space. This is not dissimilar to the dialectical image which, in Benjamin's argument, disrupts the smooth progress of history through the present's connection to the past. This definition of allegory as dialectical is part of its paradoxical and contradictory nature, which distinguishes it from the symbol: "In contrast the baroque apotheosis is a dialectical one. It is accomplished in the movement between extremes. In this eccentric and dialectic process, the harmonious inwardness of classicism plays no role" (Benjamin, 1963/1998, p. 160). Benjamin argues that the "dialectical discussion" of the "antinomies of the allegorical" are essential in understanding its expression in a work of art (in Benjamin's case, the *Trauerspiel*). Such antinomies could have a destructive

power due to “the violence of the dialectic movement” (Benjamin, 1963/1998, p. 166) derived from the fact that: “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else,” giving allegory a power due to the fact that, “all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else” (Benjamin, 1963/1998, p. 175). This could be a description of the films in question, suggesting their understanding of the lost referent in history; in the example from *Pour une Femme*, there is the figure of the mother, who is so close, but always absent. The use of temporality in these films is similar to Benjamin’s understanding of the allegory as a way of breaking out of a simultaneity enforced by the symbol, drawing attention to the fragmentary nature of temporality, and narrative, which is constantly moving between past and present.

The nature of the void – or gap – inherent in allegory is also considered by Xavier (1999) who similarly understands allegory to be about foregrounding what is not present. In addition to its changing reception, this instability of allegory is constructed by the gap between the present and past state which is inherent to its form. This gap has the effect of emphasising the differences and inconsistencies in the relationship between the past and present rather than unity, instead of a teleological representation of progress it is fragmentary: “analogies ... of the past [are] now not the celebration of an identity connecting past and present ... repetition is always an illusion and that old facts like old signs lose their ‘original’ meaning when looked at from a new perspective” (Xavier, 1999, p. 352). It is this exploration of the gap between the present and the past where the films in this study operate allegorically: the characters tend to try to pull together meaning from the past, importing it into the present, while the knots of the film form disrupt and continually remind the viewer of the impossibility of this act of attainment.

In contrast to allegory, the differences in the definitions and application of mise-en-abyme, primarily in literature but also in the visual arts, have been characterised by arguments over the nature of the reflecting and reflected subject, its relationship to the diegesis, and the hierarchy of the two spheres of narrational subjects. The fundamental distinction in interpretation is related to representation; whether mise-en-abyme is closed or infinite, whether it reflects itself or ultimately reveals a hidden subject

revealed underneath the reduplicating layers. In his essay 'Photography en abyme', Craig Owens (1994) argues that André Gide's identification of the technique of mise-en-abyme signalled a radical break with previous modes of representation in art history and literature, signalling the shift from the classic to modernist mode. While mise-en-abyme as a motif in a work reflecting a larger whole (the original reference comes from heraldry) was an 'ancient device', Gide's definition of it was new, arguing the case for his own work as making a break from existing literature. Gide's description focuses on the infinite, a conception of the mode which, Owens argues, is much closer to Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist idea of mise-en-abyme as intratextual, having no meaning outside of the text. In this interpretation, the endless reduplication within the text is a direct product of the void or abyss created by the reduplication itself, where the reflection is of a reflection, rather than a subject with an original meaning which can be uncovered.



Figure 1.8: Les Bal des Quatre Saisons, Brassai (1932)

For Owens, the meaning of the abyss in art, specifically in this instance, photography, was an exploration of identity and subjectivity. In his analysis of Brassai's photograph, *Les Bal des Quatre Saisons* Owens argues (1994, p. 20) that, "the effects of the abyss – the indefinite play of substitution, repetition, the splitting of the self – are evident in Brassai's photograph. The mirror accomplishes both the identification with the Other and the specular dispossession which simultaneously institutes and deconstitutes the subject as such". This conception of mise-en-abyme, where reduplication is an attempt to construct presence in absence in an infinite relationship

where the original subject cannot be uncovered, makes it an ideal form through which to explore a contemporary relationship to time, challenging the concept of a certainty about the personal and historical past; in Derrida's analysis: "the desire of presence is ... born from the abyss (the indefinite

multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation etc.” (Derrida, 1976, p. 163).

The term *mise-en-abyme* has a specific meaning which relates to the way one part of the text reflects the subject of the whole of that text, but the term has become synonymous with many forms of reflections or simple relations within a text. This is evident in the characterisation of films about films as examples of *mise-en-abyme*. Films about film-making cross a range of genres and there are examples of this structure going back to the early silent era.²⁵ Films which include a wide range of different references to a film in progress are often grouped together as if they all have a similar *mise-en-abyme* status and function - but it is possible to distinguish between films about films, films within films, and those which rely on intertextual references, and identify different interfilmic purposes and meanings. *Mise-en-abyme* in films has also been seen as part of the self-reflexive film making associated with counter cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.²⁶ Definitions of film as *mise-en-abyme* can be blurred because the moving image shares with the still imagery of photography a quality which is inherently related to *mise-en-abyme*, through its reflection and construction of an already constructed world, creating a reduplication at its centre. The following analysis draws on these approaches to demonstrate how *Pour une Femme* uses a *mise-en-abyme* structure to explore the experience of temporality for a character who is part of the postmemory generation; the attempt by the central character to discover the past of her family is continually undermined in a constant reminder of the elusiveness of memory within a mainstream film.

²⁵ *Mabel's Dramatic Career* (Mack Sennett, 1913) is one of the earliest examples of the film within a film structure, focusing on misunderstandings caused by the actors and their roles in the film within a film. The final sequence of the film takes place in a cinema where the characters are part of the audience watching the completed film.

²⁶ See for example *Le Mepris* (Godard, 1963) and *La Nuit Américaine* (Truffaut, 1973)

Film as Retracing and Recreating Family and Self in *Pour une Femme*

Pour une Femme uses mise-en-abyme as a structure, as a visual motif, and through the intertextual connections to film history and to other films made by the same director. The film, produced in 2013, takes place in two periods of French history: the film's diegetic present of the 1980s and the past of the immediate post-war period in Lyon. The historical subject matter is retold ostensibly through a flashback, which may or may not be images from the film for which the central character Anne – a stand-in for the director Diane Kurys – is writing the script in the present and which, as we find out at the end of the film, is about to receive its premiere. The scenes in the past follow the lives of Anne's parents, Michel and Lena, Russian Jews who survived the Nazi concentration camps, then married, and have a small daughter, Tania, Anne's older sister. Michel is an active member of the communist party, while Lena appears apolitical. Soon after the end of the war the couple receive their French citizenship and settle in Lyon, living a predictable life until the unexpected appearance of Michel's brother, Jean. The narrative focus of this period is the relationship between husband and wife and the unsettling effect which the mysterious arrival of the brother has on the family. This relationship exists in parallel with the political post-war context of France, particularly focusing on its past as an occupied country and the role of the Left in shaping its future identity. The motivation for Anne to write the film of her parents' relationship is partly the death by suicide of her mother in the 1980s and Michel's failing health. Her feeling of lacking knowledge about the past in personal and historical terms is crystallised by her discovery in her mother's belongings of a post-war photograph of an unknown man standing with Lena and Tania in a family pose, taking the place of Tania's father Michel. The script about the past becomes an investigation into the identity of the unknown man and an attempt to establish Anne's own paternity, this image functions as a mise-en-abyme in its reflection of a family who may or may not have existed. The role of photographs and souvenirs in the film can be further understood through reference to Roland Barthes's (1981) concept of the punctum in photography, demonstrating a further way in which *Pour une Femme* foregrounds the processes of memory.

In “What’s wrong with this Picture?”, Hirsch (2012) uses Barthes’s concept of the punctum to explore the ways in which photographs and remnants of the past, more generally, are used in the transmission and interpretation of that past by the generations that follow. This is a complex form of transmission which simultaneously promises evidence from the past; in Barthes’s terms, the noeme of photography, it is a ‘that-has-been’ referent asserting that something – person or object – had been in front of the camera at that moment, but that also provokes unanswered questions which cannot be so easily quantified. *Pour une femme* dramatizes this process of the relationship between the individual looking at the photograph in the present and the moment of it being taken in the past in all its definitiveness – those people were there in that moment – and ambiguity. Central to Barthes’s argument, outlined in *Camera Lucida*, is that the power of photography comes from the unintentional, rather than the intentional composing of the photographer:

Hence the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; It occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplemental thing that is at once inevitable and delightful; it does not necessarily attest to the photographer's art; it is only that the photographer was there, or else, still more simply, that he could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the whole object. (Barthes, 1981, p. 47)

The punctum is therefore subjective, a form of “anti – theatricality” in Michael Fried’s (2005) reading, a kind of accident waiting for the spectator to understand its meaning.

The punctum is important to the idea and experience of postmemory because of its revelation of the “beyond” or “blind field” (Barthes, 1981, p. 57) of photography, a dynamism evident in the moving image but usually unrecognised in the still image, where the focus is on the frozen moment in time; the photograph as a “certificate of presence” (Barthes, 1981, p. 87). The force of the punctum to animate the photograph’s subject beyond the frame is another form of desire and wish fulfilment in relation to the past, the subjective interpretation of memory. The beyond of the photograph operates on the pivot of the knowledge that the past was irrefutably present at one moment but it is

continually deferred as it can never be returned to. Barthes's analysis captures the experience of attempting to reach the past but continually failing: "what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (Barthes, 1981, p. 76).

The force of the punctum and its importance in the process of postmemory is apparent in *Pour une Femme* in the photograph of Lena, her daughter and brother in law (Figure 1.2), which amongst all the other photographs arrests Anne. The reason for this response is a particular detail of the image; the ring which the man is wearing she now wears, having found it in her mother's belongings. This detail is what animates Anne to imagine the characters' lives beyond the evidence of the referent of the photograph. This reconstruction of the process of transmission of the past is complicated further in the film by the variety of ways in which photographs are used as evidence of the past. In the film credits, stills from Kurys's films appear intermingled with her family photographs, and can also be read as archive of the director's own life, a way of confirming identity within a postmemory context.²⁷ As with Owen's understanding of the use of mise-en-abyme in the Brassai photograph as an exploration of a fractured identity through destabilising subjectivity, the multiple reduplications of *Pour une Femme* perform a similar function. The effect of the abyss at the heart of the mise-en-abyme structure is to dramatize the simultaneous desire for and futility of the search for a category of the past, in a way which is accessible to a mainstream audience through the familiar genre conventions of a romantic period drama, replete with the visual pleasure of the historical mise-en-scene.

²⁷ In Barthes's analysis the meaning of the punctum is always subjective. The force of the punctum may supersede objective detail; Brian Dillon (2011) highlights how, in the discussion of James Van der Zee's *Family Portrait* (1926), Barthes's misidentifies a string of pearls as a gold necklace (Barthes, 1981, p. 54), but that this does not alter the meaning of his argument.



Figure 1.2 : *The ring as punctum in Pour une Femme*

The films of Diane Kurys were some of the most popular films with their national audience in the 1980s, as well as finding success internationally, while her more recent films have been much less commercially successful. It is interesting that her work has been critically interpreted in the context of feminism but, despite producing a body of work which explores the relationship of the present to the past in the context of autobiography and history, her films have very rarely been considered as memory texts.²⁸ Carrie Tarr (1999), in her book-length study of the director, reads the films and their autobiographical content through the prism of feminist film theory. In this context, the films are seen as rare examples within what the author refers to as the male dominated, “misogynist French film industry” (Tarr, 1999, p. 140); they are those of a female director attempting to construct a specifically female subjectivity through the personal focus on familial and female friendships. Kurys’s most commercially and critically successful films (*Diablo Menthe*, 1977, *Coup de Foudre*, 1983) have retold the director’s family history with a particular emphasis on the conflicted relationship of her mother and father in the post-war years. In Tarr’s reading, Kurys emerges at times as a flawed feminist filmmaker who rejects the category of female director repeatedly in interviews and whose work is not feminist enough in its construction of subjectivity, with the films “refusing to provide a distinctly

²⁸An exception to this is Lynn A. Higgins (1999), who discusses memory in Kurys’s *Entre Nous* (1983) in comparison to two films by Chantal Ackerman.

female point of view” and which are “problematic in their reproduction of masculine points of view and their fetishization of female body parts” (Tarr, 1999, p. 145). In considering her work as part of a nostalgia industry in French cinema, the films are analysed as interpreting the past through female stories akin to the concept of hidden histories, but not as memory texts more generally. In the single reference to mise-en-abyme, Tarr identifies the use of the film within a film structure of *Un Homme Amoureux* (1987) as a feminist formal interjection rather than as part of the exploration of the past in her work: “In her use of the film within the film, Kurys challenges the male domination of the genre” (Tarr, 1999, p. 90).

As a film about a film-maker whose next film is the subject of the film we’re watching, *Pour une Femme* can be simply defined as mise-en-abyme through placing it in the sub-genre of films about film-making, following the idea of mise-en-abyme as something that simply reflectively references its own form. Kurys, though also uses the concept of mise-en-abyme in order to complicate the relationship between the past and present, to foreground the tension between an official narrative of nation and personal remembrance, misremembering and imagination. In the case of *Pour une Femme*, Kurys further complicates the autobiographical status of the narrative by focusing on the period shortly before her conception; her investigation into her mother’s past is also an origins narrative. In this she attempts to write herself into presence by investigating the uncertainty around the identity of her biological father – an identity which remains ambiguous at the end of the film.²⁹

In “The Restricted Abyss: Nine Problems with mise-en-abyme”, Moshe Ron (1987) discusses the work of Lucien Dallenbach and Mieke Bal to evaluate different ways of defining mise-en-abyme. In doing this he argues that there are two fundamental aspects of mise-en-abyme; its representational form, which he refers to as “diagrammatic iconicity” (Ron, 1987, p. 428):³⁰ a moment in a text which

²⁹ There are similarities in the subject matter and style of narration with Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2012), which also focuses on a film-maker’s investigation into their biological past, similarly mixing realism and reconstruction.

³⁰ To illustrate this he uses an example from *Great Expectations*: “In the very first scene of the novel, the convict terrorizes the boy into doing his will by turning him upside-down and holding him there

sums up the themes and subject of the whole, but which is part of the diegesis and not performed by an external agent. This is in contrast it to the “diegetic downshift” (Ron, 1987, p. 419), a form of narrative mise-en-abyme which requires a narratorial doubling, the presence of at least two narratorial instances – such as narratives of the present and past - marked by a clear gap between the diegesis of each (the “diegetic downshift”). In mise-en-abyme, this narrative arrangement must include a relation of homology between the two narratives, between the ‘higher’ narrator of the frame narrative and the secondary narrative. This hierarchical relationship must have this homology in order for one subject to reflect the other. *Pour une Femme* has a clear diegetic downshift and dual narratives whose themes are homologous, but it also contains several examples of diagrammatic iconicity, particularly in the use of photographs as part of the understanding of the past. One of the many reflections between the frame – or main - narrative and the mise-en-abyme is the representation of the role of the Left in France: the compromises and apparent contradictions involved in gaining power. In the narrative set in the past, the Communists are at a pivotal moment in their relationship to the USSR, celebrating its role as ally but becoming aware of Stalin’s dictatorship. In the contemporary period Michel, still a Communist supporter in the early 1980s during the period of the Communist Party’s last role in government, is listening to the news reports about the sinking of Greenpeace’s ship, The Rainbow Warrior, an event which was later revealed to be carried out by the French intelligence agencies. Central to the mise-en-abyme is also the notion of wish fulfilment and the desire to create one’s own past, showing how the present can alter accepted versions of the past.

The diegetic downshift in the film is most obviously apparent in the relationship between the present and past narratives, but is further developed by the present in which the film was made, creating a gap of approximately twenty years between production and the present tense of the film. The diegetic downshift is specifically constructed by the identification with Anne, whose investigation into her family history is the catalyst for the plot, but this is an identification constructed by the presence of

momentarily...This mini-sequence of events is diagrammatically iconic of a major aspect of the story as a whole and I believe it to a canonic example of mise-en-abyme” (Ron, 1987, p. 428).

Diane Kurys in the present, through her foregrounding of her own family history. This relationship between Diane Kurys the director and Anne the director becomes allegorical, drawing attention to the gap between temporal understanding which works outside of the mise-en-abyme of the film within the film. This constructs a viewing position which is both within and outside of the film's diegesis, part of the dialectical relationship of the narrative structure of the film. This relationship also helps to determine the hierarchy of the narrating subjects. The relationship between the two worlds of the film – and the third subject of the film-maker – challenge some of the expected relationships within mise-en-abyme. The scenes in the past dominate the screen time and provide the evidence for the investigation which Anne undertakes, and it is this past narrative which sets in motion the mise-en-abyme, the reduplication of the frame narrative. The frame is Anne's position as a creative artist and investigator into the past. The frame narrative positions the subject of the film as belonging to postmemory; exploring the present's interpretation of the past, where the only way in which the past can be understood is as incomplete and partial.

From the beginning, the film's frame narrative foregrounds the unreliability of memory and the arguments over what has happened in the past. As with the character of the director, A, in *The Dust of Time*, Anne attempts to place herself into the historical narrative of the first generation, to be part of the events which overshadow her present life. As a film-maker, the subject of Kurys's work has been the reimagining of her parents' lives (particularly her mother); in *Pour une Femme* this works as an examination of the process of postmemory, dramatizing the role of later generations in remembrance while being able to live in the present and future. Kurys does this through a range of formal techniques linked to an individual's movement in time, each of which refers to the paradox of the need to uncover the past and the impossibility of doing so. This idea is figured through artistic practises which focus on the relationship between intentionality and the uncontrollable nature of memories of the past. In this way the film explores the role of the artist – in this case a writer and director – in constructing cultural memory, finding new strategies for film to represent the past.



Figure 1.3: Photographs and journals provoke versions of the past in *Pour une Femme*

The two sisters – Anne and Tania (Julie Ferrier) – argue about events of the past in relation to their parents, the motivation for which is the sorting through a variety of treasured objects which the mother – Lena – kept throughout her life (Figure 1.3). These are objects which belong to a past history but which now have no meaning in themselves having been removed from their context, instead they become props of *mise-en-scène* for Anne to write into meaning. Through Anne’s voice-over at this stage, her script is explained as the ‘desire to bring them alive again’ an idea that works on several levels. It foregrounds the notion of any film about the past being a subjective view, an unreliable representation, it emphasises the ability of the present to act on the past to alter its chronology and meaning; at this stage Anne’s father is still alive. This moment also links with the later comment by her sister Tania that it’s “her (Anne’s) life you’re writing” again underlining the role of imagination and desire involved in memory. The repeated analogy of film-making with making up the past, with the reference to different layers of storytelling each removed from the ostensible subject, is a clear reminder of the status of cinema as both a form of myth making around a nation’s past and its inherent unreliability. Here *Pour une femme* foregrounds the concept of cinema as memory, the way in which the constructed image can replace or affect the interpretation of the real. The role of the recorded image in myth-making is apparent from the credits onwards (Figure 1.4). Here photographs from Diane Kurys’s own family life, pictures of her with her sister and parents, with her own child and

partner are interspersed in a collage with stills from Kurys's previous films, where actors such as Isabelle Huppert and Miou Miou are stand-ins for the real people.



Figure 1.4: The credits of *Pour une Femme* mix family and film archive

Cinema as Memory: The Role of Film in Re-constructing the Past

This layering of the real and the performance of actors, the images of historical moments with recreations from cinema, introduce from the very start the idea of a film and film-maker interested in the vicissitudes of memory and the role of storytelling and technology in transmitting those memories. Through this context, the importance of the photograph of Lena and Jean and its enigma of identity is signalled as an impossible search; there is no answer to questions about the past. It is this understanding of the nature of identity, the impossibility of answering the question who am I? which makes the past the reflection of the present story. The frame is about the impossibility of living in the

present, of finding a place in the passing of time to speak from.³¹ Therefore, the past, with its setting of post-war transition, shifting national borders, claiming of different citizenships as well as romantic choices, reflects the present of constant change. In attempting and failing to write herself into being at the end of the past diegesis, Anne acknowledges the impossibility of certainty about the past.

The role of cinema in the construction of cultural memory is central to *Pour une Femme* but is not mentioned in the range of reviews on its release, and critical writing on the director no longer seems to exist.³² *Pour une Femme* is both the name of the film in 2013 and the film which Anne is writing within it. The film makes repeated reference to the process of writing, including objects of inspiration; a photograph, a ring, an empty perfume bottle (which function like *mémoire involontaire*, the empty perfume bottle is the inspiration for the film's title) research, writing, revising and imagining. The ambiguous status of the scenes in the past as memory (of someone not yet born), or as scenes from a film Anne is writing, make a direct connection between film as memory and memory as film. The film within a film is shaped by Anne's romantic subjectivity and by her position as a film maker and film fan so that her own desires, historical fact and film narratives (already the product of someone else's imagination) are infinitely interlinked, creating a structural mise-en-abyme. The inability to distinguish between these different forms of storytelling is emphasised in the shifts to the past which happen without noticeable transitions.

There are also several references to specific films within the construction of the past tense of the film, suggesting the way representations of the past are filtered through the archive of film history.

³¹ Tarr (1999: p. 76) points to the ambivalence in Kurys's films as to what the subject matter actually is.

³² Carrie Tarr has provided the most sustained work on Kurys, her last published work on her was 'Heritage, Nostalgia and the Woman's Film: The Case of Diane Kurys' in *Film in Focus: French Cinema and National Identity*, eds. Harris and Ezra, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Evidence of Kurys's downgraded status as a director worthy of academic interest is evident in her disappearance from the second edition of *Fifty Contemporary Film Makers* (Routledge, 2011) despite her continuing to make films.

The key narrative development in the past, the reappearance of Michel's brother, refers to an iconic narrative told in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, remade in the US as *Sommersby* (John Amiel, 1992) but itself a retelling of a tale – possibly true – from the sixteenth century. The reference to the pre-existing narrative focuses on uncertainty and enigma of identity, the impossibility of knowing the truth about the past. The ending of the film, where Lena must choose between the amoral resistance fighter Jean, and Michel, the father of her first child, plays out as a homage to another iconic moment in film history: the ending of *Casablanca*. Here Lena's choice takes place symbolically at a crossroads with a bus – rather than a plane - waiting to take one of the men away.³³ Overarching the specific reference to other films is the reworking of Kurys's own film archive in which *Pour une Femme* can be read as a remake of her earlier films, specifically *Entre Nous* (1983). The focus of *Entre Nous* is the breakup of Lena and Michel, with Lena again facing a choice between her husband and someone she loves, this time a female friend.

The Past in Film Form: Long Take Duration versus Disruption: *The Dust of Time*

The Dust of Time shares several similarities of style and themes with *Pour une Femme* in its exploration of memory and national histories through the perspective of a film director. It is also notable that these are late (and less critically acclaimed) films by two directors which remake and reimagine characters from their previous films, so that memories of films, people and history become intermingled with the creative process. This recreation of previous films may be seen as a characteristic of authorship (although as has been discussed, Diane Kurys has rarely been considered as an auteur) where the exploration of repeated themes is central, but here it is more to do with the status of the films as memory texts. Both films examine the way in which cinema in the twentieth

³³ In addition to these structuring referential devices, film motifs are also used to represent the romantic attraction between Lena and Jean when a reference to the lobster scene in *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977) is recreated, but with the use of gefilte fish.

century has influenced the construction of memories, creating another layer of remembrance to memory, making it impossible to return to the original historical subject.

The Dust of Time has an extremely ambitious subject; the recounting of key historical events in post-war Europe (and to a lesser extent the US), including the division of Europe, the rise of the Soviet Union and the erection of the Berlin Wall, the death of Stalin as well as the Vietnam War. The focus in the present is on a director, known only as A (Willem Dafoe), his struggle to finish his film about his parents' political and romantic lives, and his attempt to help his daughter who has suffered a breakdown. The film, made in 2008 is, like *Pour une Femme*, set slightly earlier than its time of production, New Year's Eve 1999, during the symbolic passing of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. Within the film's historical and contemporary setting, the themes of the temporal gateway film are apparent: A's attempt to construct a narrative of his own origins (that his memory is of a past in which he is conceived is another similarity to *Pour une Femme*) within history in order to understand a present in which he is continually buffeted and unable to comprehend.

The instability of A's experience of temporality, of time as shifting and disappearing, is shaped by his role as a film director, whose understanding of reality is constructed through images which continually appear and disappear. There is not a dichotomy between reality (history) and fantasy (cinema) in the understanding of the past; the role of cinema is recognised as vital in constructing memories where the distinctions between reality and fiction become moot. *The Dust of Time* explores the different ways in which cinema is a form of memory, a form which is constantly shifting and being remade in different times and contexts. The film uses a mise-en-abyme structure through images of the past which assume the status of the film which A is making in the present. As with *Pour une Femme* and *Even the Rain*, the status of this film is never clear. The scenes exist as a product of A's imagination, as his planning for the film which is so far incomplete, as the rushes in the laboratory which A holds up to the light in the opening of the film. It is also, it is suggested at one point, a dream that A has had about his mother. In *The Dust of Time* the past as film suggests the power of cinema in shaping

memories and again blurs the lines between history, memory and fantasy, showing how they co-exist. This idea is introduced in the first scenes of the film. The camera follows A as he drives into Cinecittà in Rome, announcing itself as a film, as a product of the imagination of A as well as of the director of *The Dust of Time* itself, another A, Angelopoulos.³⁴ After this establishing shot of the iconic film studios, there are almost no objective establishing shots of contextual information; the film takes place in a series of interiors where it is often difficult to comprehend the location, city or even at times the country in which the action is taking place. The settings themselves, frequently border checkpoints and hotels, places associated with transition and instability, are often indistinguishable from the film set where A works. His daughter's bedroom appears in three places; in the hotel he is staying in Rome, in his apartment in Berlin and as a stage on a film set. The mise-en-scene of the room, including the striking collage of musical and cultural icons of the twentieth century (Figure 1.5), works as another signifier of the past which isn't limited to a specific location.



Figure 1.5: The mise-en-scene of the bedroom which exists in different times and spaces in *The Dust of Time*

This lack of distinction between different geographical spaces is typical of the way the film addresses one of the themes of the temporal gateway film, that of the effect of borders and categorisations on

³⁴ 'A' is a name frequently used for the central character in films by Angelopoulos.

individuals; it can have been devastating to people in the past and the danger is its resurgence in the present.

Fragmentation and Detachment: Crossing Borders in the Temporal Gateway Film

The jeopardy created by division is in part overcome in the film by an experience of temporality, the ability to move between past, present and future without borders. This is an idea which is personified by the final shots of the film as A's daughter Eleni and her grandfather Spyros (Michel Piccoli) stand at the deathbed of another Eleni, A's mother (Irène Jacob). As they stand looking out of the hotel window on the snow falling, A's voice-over comments on the scene: "the snow was falling on time past and time passing, on the universe". This view of temporality as interlinked is reinforced as Eleni and Spyros – a young woman and an elderly man, unified as he takes her hand – seem to travel through time and space, magically moving from the window to *Unter den Linden* leading to the Brandenburg Gate. The Gate is a resonant European symbol of both division and transition. Its position between East and West Berlin was a focal point of the Berlin Wall, but it also connotes in the film unity and the overcoming of borders through the symbolic crossing through the gate by the German Presidents Helmut Kohl and Hans Modrow in December 1989, at the time of reunification. Against this allegorical backdrop, a gateway with its paradoxical meanings of being both open and closed, the two characters run joyfully through the snow towards the viewer (Figure 1.6), a moment which does not end but slowly fades to black. This optimistic ending in the freedom of time, where the present can change the past and memories are not fixed, is in contrast to the subject of the scenes of the film within the film; the mise-en-abyme film of the past as well as many of the moments in the present.



Figure 1.6: The Brandenburg Gate as symbolic of transition and division in The Dust of Time

This tension between the two diegetic spheres, which are already unstable due to their ambiguous status as memories, films and dreams, suggests a shift in the construction of Angelopoulos's filmmaking. This is a move away from the focus on meaning coming from the long take, in Andrew Horton's phrase, the "living cell" (Horton, 2010, p. 24) of his films, to a style where meaning and sensation comes equally from the contrast between scenes and shots constructed through parallel editing, specifically in the move between the past and the present.³⁵ This reading of the film as about fragments and obstacles is in contrast to much of the writing about Angelopoulos which focuses on the transcendence created by his use of the long take which moves smoothly through time and geographical space. Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (2011, p. 2) refers to the way in which "His unique use of the long take explores each exquisite and carefully constructed frame, moving languidly across space and time all within single shots," while Horton (2010, p. 23) argues that Angelopoulos's use of "continuous space as a 'living cell' to actually move into another historical era has over the years

³⁵ The work of Angelopoulos has previously been categorised through shifts in style; Fredric Jameson argues that there is a 'break' in his work around 1980 and 1983, followed by his 'new' or 'later' films, "there can be few cases of so decisive an emergence of a new and fully realised career after an enormously successful earlier one, whose themes and forms it reproduces at some utterly different level with utterly different consequences – in some ways less successfully, in others amounting to a whole new breakthrough" (Jameson, 1999, p. 77) .

becomes a very distinctive feature of his films, “making it clear that ‘history’ can actually ‘flow’ in a single shot through the same space” (Horton, 2010, p. 24). This characteristic style is linked to the director’s authorial themes which concern the construction and reconstruction of national identity through the drawing of borders and migration, foregrounding the arbitrary and political nature of such constructions through the opening up of time and space through the film style. This questioning and anxiety about borders and divisions, the ways in which these have been imposed historically, is clearly evident in *The Dust of Time*, but the increased prominence of the use of cross-cutting, the way the narrative of the film is made meaningful through parallel editing, suggests a more pessimistic view of the contemporary European political state – particularly in terms of the closing down rather than continued opening of borders. Horton argues that Angelopoulos’s use of the long take has a unifying aspect which makes the audience absorb and feel moments from history in a contemplative way, taking the form of slow cinema. In his analysis of the scenes showing the reaction to the announcement of the death of Stalin in *The Dust of Time*, he states (2010, p. 27): “continual immersion in this historical re-creation... provides the place and space that the films’ viewers can absorb emotionally”.³⁶ However, I would argue that the film is much less certain and more ambiguous than this reading of its construction and intended reception would suggest. *The Dust of Time* focuses on characters undertaking journeys, in the past and present, without direction, marked by loss. The fluidity and freedom identified in the use of the long take and the individual character’s and spectator’s ability to move through time and geographical space rather than being rooted in one place, is slowly disappearing in *The Dust of Time*. Here, in addition to the shift in stylistic emphasis, familiar themes and motifs reappear but are changed. The familiar quest narrative of the character’s search

³⁶ Horton contrasts the contemplation and absorption allowed by this style with how a similar event might be covered by the news media, which allows no time for thought on the part of the spectator. This analysis suggests a validation of styles associated with art house cinema, in contrast to a mainstream or popular culture style – an opposition often found in memory studies.

for a father is evident here but made even more ambiguous and tentative.³⁷ The figure of the 'son' (A) frequently disappears from his own search, while the identity of the father becomes opaque.

The nature of the lead characters in Angelopoulos's films have been defined by Ravetto-Biagioli (2011) as part of the Brechtian aspect of the director's work; they do not provide alignment or subjectivity for the audience. This is apparent to a great degree in *The Dust of Time*, where A fades out of the film, removed from the spectator. The insubstantial nature of A is part of his function as a temporal gateway character, someone who is unable to make a definitive move into the future, another character in limbo; a state which is reinforced by the contrasting effect of the film language; his attempts to move forward through a "living cell" are prevented by the obstacles due the shift in editing. This rhythm of film language again echoes the formal nature of the ritornello and the gallop as discussed by Gilles Deleuze, the one pulling back the other in a continuous exchange.³⁸ In this sense A seems to hover above the events of the film, without agency, quite helpless in the face of the rush of historical events. The relationship between the different styles is part of the allegorical nature of the film, representing the continual opening and closing of borders, a process which is becoming more closed in the scenes of the late twentieth century, where the present closes down as the past, at some points, opens up.

The scenes in the past, which may be the film which A is making, focus on the lives of A's mother and father, Eleni and Spyros, and Jacob (Bruno Ganz), Eleni's lover in the 1950s and 1960s, who remains a close friend in the present. Their lives are shaped in the filmic past by the political events of the mid twentieth century. In the aftermath of the second world war Spyros is arrested and Eleni is exiled in Siberia where she lives with Jacob, before the death of Stalin results in them being able to return to the West, initially to Europe and then to the US. The theme of border crossings and the

³⁷ See also *Voyage to Cythera* (1984) and *Landscape in the Mist* (1988). Angelopoulos's father was called Spyros – a character name which is used frequently in his films for the father figure.

³⁸ This concept is discussed in more detail in chapter 2 in defining *A Separation* as temporal gateway film.

obstacles to movement is focused on throughout these sections. Repeatedly the emphasis is on papers, documents of identity, the endless waiting at border checkpoints for visas which never arrive. Eleni and Jacob's crossing from the East into Austria in the 1950s is intercut with Eleni and Spyros's arrival in Berlin on New Year's Eve, 1999. The scenes in the past take place at a moment of hope, the lifting of some of the most severe restrictions on movement and the freeing of exiles in Siberia after the death of Stalin. In the past the crossing into Austria takes place in a long take, the barrier at the border is lifted as a large group of refugees – Eleni and Jacob are lost in the crowd – enter Austria in an atmosphere of celebration, intensified with the arrival of the new year. In contrast Eleni and Spyros's arrival in Berlin in the present is undertaken in a climate of anxiety, with the threat of a terrorist attack making airports sites of extreme security and control. In the present, the primitive border control of a barrier has been replaced by x-ray machines as male and female passengers step into a booth while a guard checks their x-ray image, a clinical scene representing the frailty of humans and suggests the gradual reclosing of borders across Europe (Figure 1.7).

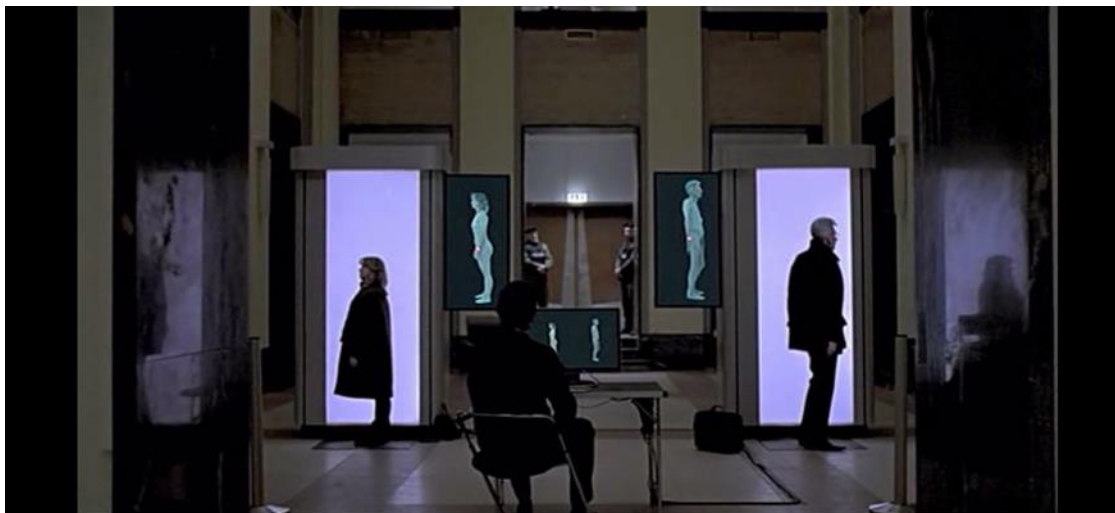


Figure 1.7: Humans trapped at borders in the late-twentieth century in *The Dust of Time*

This cross-cutting between and interlinking of the two borders at different periods results in Spyros in Berlin and Jacob in Austria appearing to swap places while the suspected terrorist at the airport

becomes a refugee fleeing into Austria, reflecting the allegorical structure of the past and present.³⁹ The scenes in the past are a reference point to the events of the present, in one sense a forewarning, but they are also allegorical in the disruptions that one diegesis makes in another, constantly showing time to be unsettling and uncontrollable, constantly changing. In this way, the conventional structure of the present and past in film becomes an allegory for the ways in which individuals experience time. As the central character in this temporal gateway film, this experience is transmitted to the spectator through A. His attempt to make a film in which he is able to find the meaning of his parents' lives is an infinite, hopeless journey, one in which he, like the other characters of these films, attempts to solve clues and enigmas but is still increasingly moving further away from the past. The elliptical nature of the narrative of *The Dust of Time*, which has been criticised for being confusing and incoherent, is one of the ways in which the film represents the past as unknowable in a definitive way.⁴⁰ Instead it shows how the notion of the past is created through imagination and flashes of memory, perhaps from stories we have been told or films we have seen. This is illustrated in the way in which A's birth and early life seems to disappear from the film; the film within a film is an attempt to recreate his past from the present. Eleni writes to Spyros from her exile in Siberia about the child – which must be A – "growing inside her", but he is not seen until the age of three when he is smuggled out of Siberia to Moscow, reappearing only as an adult. This structure in which the chronology of events, the relationship of place to place and peoples' movements between them is unclear, reflects A's experience of time in the present.

A inserts himself into his parents' lives in his role as director and reunites them after their separation and exile, an event which is represented as a form of wish-fulfilment and desire. After his

³⁹ This gap constructed by editing is in contrast to the Einsteinian concept of editing as dialectical, resulting in synthesis.

⁴⁰ For example Derek Elley (2009) in *Variety* (<http://variety.com/2009/film/reviews/the-dust-of-time-1200473607/>) stated that, "*The Dust of Time* rambles incoherently across two hours in a mass of embarrassingly arch English dialogue and impenetrable plotting". Dan Fainaru (2008) in *Screen Daily* (<https://www.screendaily.com/features/the-dust-of-time/4042143.article>) refers to, "Angelopoulos' loose treatment of reality and narrative".

disappearance from the scenes in the past, A reappears in the scenes set in 1974 (a year positioned by references on a car radio to Watergate). Eleni waits at another border, this time between Canada and the US, hoping to find A, who she has been told has moved to Canada to avoid the US military Vietnam War draft. As Eleni waits in the thick fog, which obscures the people and setting, A finally appears, but not as he would be in the 1970s but as he is in 1999. In the build-up to his appearance the audience is positioned in his place, although we are yet to know that he is there, as Eleni slowly walks towards us with an expression of hope. A's appearance is further concealed with a sudden reverse shot so that Eleni stands with her back to the camera, her son hidden in front of her as the camera slowly pans around to reveal him. This is one of several moments in the film where past and present either exist in the same shot or in consecutive ones without conventional signifiers of transition, suggesting the experience of temporality as a rush of fragments of times and places (an effect characterised by Benjamin and Deleuze, explicated further in chapter 2) .

The idea of cinema takes on a variety of roles in the film, but the emphasis is always on its relationship to memory and the different ways it deals with the past. The opening of the film, once A has entered Cinecittà, cuts between the past and the present without any conventional transitions to indicate the shift in time, but the scenes in the past are constructed in a film noir style, a style appropriate to the period and subject matter of post-war jeopardy as transmitted through Hollywood film. The periods in the different temporalities are all of brief duration at this point, emphasising the closeness between past and present rather than its separation. The film noir visual style is echoed in the dialogue, which introduces the theme of romantic love across time and space as Spyros searches for Eleni: "I kept searching for you, crossing borders", the style and tone of these scenes hover around pastiche but the style is deliberate; memories of the past are filtered through filmic references, drawing attention to the idea of performing a past which cannot be returned to. The archive of film history is referenced throughout the flash-back scenes, with newsreels and images of romantic dramas blurred together. In the present, A visits the cinema at a shopping centre which is decorated with a mural of *Casablanca* (1942), another film which combines war, romance, espionage and exile, one

which seems to have shaped A's imaginings of his father's role post-war. The cinema is showing *The Long Way Home* (Mark Jonathan Harris, 1997), the US documentary about holocaust survivors' journeys from displaced persons camps to a new home in either Israel or the US – a journey mirrored in Eleni and Jacob's choice once they cross the border into Austria. The exploration of the way in which memory is transmitted through culture and across nations is evident in other references to creativity and works of art. The voice-over at the end of the film, as the elderly Eleni dies and young Eleni runs through the streets of Berlin, is reminiscent of the final paragraphs of James Joyce's modernist short story 'The Dead' as well as the voice-over in the final scenes of John Huston's 1987 film adaptation. Here, the references to the snow falling on "the dead and the living", the idea of a moment in which past and present, alive and dead come together, is given more intensity by its intertextual reference to the previous work(s). In this moment, the film becomes a dream about the past, with the impossible movement of the characters from window to street, narrated and imagined by A.

The Dust of Time also refers to the way in which time is located in cultural artefacts such as letters, statues, music and television broadcasts. These deliberate attempts at capturing moments are destroyed and lost throughout the film, suggesting the precarious nature of archives and of film itself. The attempt at memorialisation by cultures is addressed symbolically in the film and is another way the film connects past and present. In their Siberian exile Eleni and Jacob are summoned to a government building, statues and concrete memorials to Stalin line the stairs and landing, hastily removed from public display after the 20th Party Congress of 1956 when Khrushchev took control, outlining the 'mistakes' that Stalin had made. The sculptures are symbolic in the way they are material representations of time passing, the time poured into the cast of the sculpture which has now been discarded (Figure 1.8).



Figure 1.8: Statues symbolise time passing in The Dust of Time

The removal of the evidence of the ideology of the past is mirrored in the contemporary scenes in 1999 in A's hotel. Here a terrorist attack on the hotel – a form of terrorist performance art – involved the removal of all the televisions from the rooms, which were then thrown down the hotel staircase. Like the statues of Stalin in Siberia almost fifty years earlier, the televisions are symbolic representations of the attempt to record a version of the past, which is destroyed in the present. The significance of these scenes as symbols of a culture's futile attempt to arrest and memorialise the past is evident in the film language. In *Siberia* a long take follows the characters slowly up the stairway, the camera pausing as Jacob wipes the layers of dust from the bannister, another allusion to the passing of time (as well as to the title of the film which refers to the way peoples' histories can get lost beneath such dust). Here, rather than the fluid movement of the long take identified as part of Angelopoulos's auteur signature, the moment suggests a more repetitive effect of time, a stasis where nothing changes. Just before this scene another long-take focuses on an image of political prisoners trudging up a wooden framework of stairs in *Siberia* (Figure 1.9).



Figure 1.9: The long take becomes repetitive and static in The Dust of Time

The destination of the stairs is not shown and the effect of this is to make the long take closed in; like an Escher drawing it is difficult to know whether the people are reaching the top and moving on or in a constant circular movement. Here the long take becomes closed and still, rather than the idea of a “living cell” which transcends time and space; the shot suggests Sisyphus - an infinity of despair, a moment of stasis and limbo, an image without hope.⁴¹ In the present, in a scene immediately preceding the one in Siberia, A walks into the grand salon of his hotel where the smashed televisions have now been stored. He walks through them as the camera slowly tracks, before moving above, A in a crane shot to reveal him standing amongst the now useless sets, another image of stasis.

⁴¹ Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (2011), drawing on the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Gilles Deleuze, argues the effect of the long take is to suspend time, part of the way in which the director questions a conventional view of history. On a more critical note, David Bordwell (2013) points to an unintended effect of the symbolic use of the long take in his work – where it becomes drained of meaning: “In *Ulysses’ Gaze*, the shot of a dismantled Lenin statue floating down the river on a barge makes its ‘statement’ immediately, but Angelopoulos won’t let it go. He follows its progress, shows people on the river banks kneeling and praying to it, and accompanies the whole sequence with Karaindrou’s surprisingly lilting music. The Symbol of Dead Communism has been drained of its portent and has become a curiously lyrical audio-visual display”.

History Unmade: *Even the Rain*

The role of cinema as collective memory and its importance in personal identity is shown to be vital and fallible in *The Dust of Time* and *Pour une Femme*, suggesting a way of understanding memory as constantly changing and malleable; the impossibility of returning to a fixed moment in time. While these films explore the potential of this for understanding how we remember or mis-remember, *Even the Rain* and *Ararat* suggest that cinema's role in exploring the past is much more problematic due to its attempt to fix a specific reading, to construct myth. This theme is developed through the antagonism constructed by differing versions of the past, a conflict which again the central figure of temporal gateway film is trapped within, attempting to find a way forward. The following analysis of *Even the Rain* examines the way that the structures of allegory and mise-en-abyme, evident in the 'film within a film' plot (a multi layered structure which also includes a documentary film recording the progress of the film within a film) are used to explore the limitations of film as either political document or cultural memory.

Even the Rain is the most explicitly political of the films discussed here. While the focus is still on an individual's agency in exploring the past, this relationship is firmly placed within political and social structures which are shown to play a more forceful part in the construction of the relationship between the past, present and future. The political reading of the film is reinforced by the previous work of the director, Icíar Bollaín and the screenwriter, Paul Laverty. As part of a younger generation of Spanish directors who emerged in the 1990s, Bollaín's films are "recognizable above all by their issues" (Santaolalla, 2012, p. 9), issues which include family break-up, immigration and domestic violence.⁴² Bollaín, as with many of the other directors included in this study, is a transnational filmmaker whose work mixes a range of styles and influences. As Santaolalla argues (2012, p. 78),

⁴² See for example *Hola, ¿estás sola?* (Hi, Are You Alone?, 1995), *Flores de otro mundo* (Flowers from Another World, 1998) and *Te doy mis ojos* [Take My Eyes, 2003].

Bollaín's work incorporates the "texture of social realism" with popular generic patterns, a style which is similar to the hybridity of the temporal gateway film. Lavery's work, often in collaboration with Ken Loach (*Bread and Roses* [2000], *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* [2006], *I, Daniel Blake*, [2015]) is clearly characterised by a commitment to social realism and a belief in the ability of film to effect change, issues which are central to the narrative of *Even the Rain*.⁴³ The subject of the film is a Spanish film crew, with a Mexican director, Sebastián, who are making a film about the life of Christopher Columbus. In order to cut production costs (a necessity as the director insists on making the film in Spanish rather than English, or more specifically, American, resulting in a lower budget) the film is to be shot in Bolivia due to the availability of tax breaks and cheap labour. The crew's arrival in Bolivia coincides with increased tension between the indigenous people of the Quechua tribe and the Bolivian government over the privatisation of the water companies;⁴⁴ a series of demonstrations and police retaliations which became known as 'the water wars'. One of the activists, Daniel, is a pivotal figure in the film as he straddles both the frame and mise-en-abyme film, playing the role of a revolutionary in both. *Even the Rain* is a film which is cynical and pessimistic about the possibilities of film-making and the role of the artist in both imagining the past and being able to use this to effect change in the present. The film does this in several ways: through the use of multiple viewpoints which continually shift the audience's perspective and suggest the multiple interpretations of the past and present which are available; through the mise-en-abyme of the film within a film structure (the film which the crew are producing is recreated in various ways on screen from production stages to screening of the rushes), and through its allegorical structure which casts the film-maker in the role of a solipsistic invader.

⁴³ Bollaín and Lavery's professional collaboration has continued with *The Olive Tree* (2017) which also examines the effects of neo-liberal politics.

⁴⁴ The title of the film comes from a speech by Daniel, the leader of the movement against privatisation, who characterises the immorality of the government's behaviour by saying that they would charge for anything, "even the rain".

In these ways the film explores the limitations of the role of the artist in the construction of cultural memory and its relationship to contemporary political change; the film becomes a discussion of cinema's role in representing the past and the conflicted nature of this role. Like many of the protagonists in the temporal gateway films, the character of the film director Sebastián is trapped by his relationship to the past and through that is unable to understand the present. The film that he wants to make about Columbus's colonisation of the Caribbean is a strategy of cultural memory, a retelling of Spain's past as a colonial power. Sebastián's limiting view of the past (he is accused of producing propaganda by his lead actor), in which he attempts to provide a definitive version of history, is shown to be impossible. The past becomes untameable and unfilmable as the events in the present bleed into and overtake his reconstruction. The attempt to construct historical film images is continually undermined by the disruptive present in a dialectical relationship which Sebastián is unable to comprehend, caught in a conflict between the past and the future, rather than understanding the two as interconnected. *Even the Rain* is another example amongst these films of an attempt to find a new way to explore the problems of representing the past, and does so through the focus on an individual's experience of temporality, using techniques of foregrounding of film form within a mainstream film style.

Even the Rain explicitly explores the way in which attempts to recreate and directly access the past are impossible, (even while importantly not denying the evidence of events having occurred in the past, and their present ramifications); the pasts of nations and cultures are shown to be uncontrollable and continually changing in response to present shapings and perspectives. The move to Bolivia is the result of the first of many paradoxes and compromises made by the director and producer in the film. For example, their insistence on making the film in Spanish for authenticity leads them to film in a country where they can take advantage of cheap labour to employ a large supporting cast, played by non-actors who don't speak Spanish only Quechua. The allegorical structure of the film is clear; in taking advantage of the low wages and apparently traditional nature of the indigenous people of Cochabamba, the film crew's behaviour becomes a reflection of the Spanish colonisation of Bolivia as

well as the continuing divide between Europe and the Global South, a relationship which the director of the Christopher Columbus film seems (painfully) unaware of. The impossibility, even desirability, of authenticity and realism is evident and the drive for these is seen to be complicit in a politics of inequality which the film crew ironically are committed to subvert through their work. This lack of stability in the representations of past affects the understanding of both past and present as the roles of the Spanish film crew and the indigenous people of Bolivia are replayed as Spanish colonisers and colonised.

Competing Versions of the Past: Film Performance and Point of View

The role of film-making in the construction of cultural memory and specifically its fallibility, is central to the film's thesis on representations of the past and the different ways in which individuals are affected by this relationship.⁴⁵ This is evident from the opening of the film which constructs the split point of view and multiple positions of viewing but also foregrounds the relationship between the past and present. The positions of spectator alignment are divided between the character of Sebastián, the Mexican film director and his assistant, Maria (Cassandra Ciangherotti), who is making a documentary recording of the film production process. The character of the director is initially indicated as the central role, in part because he is played by Gael García Bernal, but the narrative expectation raised by the star performance is later subverted in another example of the film's instability. The initial expectation of allegiance as well as alignment with the character's struggles in completing his film shift as the narrative develops, with audience sympathy shifting to Costa (Luis Tosar), the film's producer. The first shots of the film from inside a jeep driving across unmade roads in Cochabamba are firmly aligned with Sebastián, and the audience is sutured into the inside of the modern, powerful car, literally looking down in a series of point of view shots at the Bolivian people

⁴⁵ It is film-making in particular – rather than creative practice in general - which is the target of the film's argument. This is apparent in the focus on the specific financial context of film making, which the film-makers seem to suggest makes the practice inherently conflicted.

walking along dusty streets. This positioning continues as Sebastián selects people to appear as extras in his film from a mass of people attracted by their open casting call. The position of seeing through Sebastián's eyes as he judges the extras foregrounds the gap between privileged film maker and the otherness of the people presented to him, a void which suggests the impossibility of recreating the past as it can never be reached. This void is one of the many gaps inherent in the allegorical structure of the film: the nature of performance is revealed in the gap between private individual, actor and character; the move to Bolivia means the setting of the events of the past is adrift in space and time; Sebastián's drive for realism is paradoxically revealed to produce an increasing distance from the event itself. The experience of watching a film about the making of a film which is never made, reflects a similar feeling for the audience of being further and further distanced from the subject, trying in vain to reach it, a sensation which is central to *mise-en-abyme*. The foregrounding of film-making as a removal from the historical subject, rather than a means of capturing it, is intensified through point of view.

Point of view becomes more complicated once the crew return to their jeep and the documentary-maker starts to interview Sebastián and the producer of the film, Costa, in an expository sequence which sets up several of the paradoxes of the film that have to do with authenticity and realism. The documentary maker's point of view is reinforced by the use of black and white footage to represent her perspective. The introduction of this secondary point of view (Figure 1.10) initially appears to connote the authenticity of the documentary – a conventional filmic trope – as opposed to the drama and artifice of both the frame and the *mise-en-abyme* film, but this is soon shown to be another misdirection.



Figure 1.10: The documentary point of view in Even the Rain

This evaluation is encouraged as Maria becomes increasingly more focused on the world of the indigenous people of Cochabamba and their activism against the government's privatisation, rather than the process of the work of the film crew. In the first part of the film this means that the indigenous people and their stories are distanced from the audience by being represented through the Spanish documentary film-maker, but this formal motif is soon displaced and Daniel and his colleagues emerge as direct subjects of the frame film, no longer constrained by the representation of Maria. The narrative of the heroic documentary film-maker who records the truth is also undermined when Maria stops filming as the situation becomes more violent and difficult. The documentary film about the water wars, constructed through the authorship of a European liberal, is abandoned, as is the Columbus film which is irrevocably compromised by the director's attempt to affix the past to a specific narrative, oblivious to how his actions in the present mirror those of the past. The film's undermining of the possibility of cinema either representing the past or effecting change in the present is another factor in creating instability for the spectator, as the film continually questions its own status. This position is alleviated by the storyline focusing on Costa, the producer, which moves in a far more narratively conventional way. Costa develops from being driven by money to caring about the lives of the people he's been exploiting. Costa's more heroic actions in insisting that the film must be abandoned for the safety of those involved, contribute to the undermining of the status of

film as cultural memory or political activism. The shift from Sebastián to Costa culminates in the final shots of the film, which are a mirrored reflection of the opening. Now Costa sits in the back of a taxi, leaving Cochabamba, his point of view shots are of a blurred, rapidly moving neighbourhood, no longer objectified by the outsider's (artist's) eye.

The disruptions to Sebastián's artistic vision of the past come from aspects of performance, practicalities of the production and the influence of contemporary events, of which Sebastián seems unaware. *Even the Rain* plays on the differing understandings and interpretations of films amongst different audiences, and these are structured in a competitive and conflictual way. The Spanish actors who are playing the priests who attempted to resist Columbus's actions frequently argue over the motivation and representation of their characters; this reveals a competition between different interpretations of history and unknowable and past personal motivations. In addition to the professional Spanish actors who claim their motivation is for the 'gold', the Quechua people who have been employed as extras also resist Sebastián's vision of the past. When asked to enact the historical moment when the Indian women sacrifice their babies in a river rather than let them be eaten by the soldier's dogs, they withdraw, refusing to imagine such an event. The concept of acting and performance is understood differently by different groups within the film. While the European actors spend hours analysing motivation and the construction of performance, the Quechua do not recognise a gap between reality and performance – or even implicitly invoke the darker ways that present performance might enact and 'make' history. This opposing understanding of the function of performance reveals another way of viewing the past – as if it is physically embodied in the present; in this way the Quechuan women influence the making of the past by refusing to re-enact selective events in the present (while also implying an ethics of performing the past and its relations in the present).⁴⁶ In the previous scene, Sebastián is shown to be moved to tears by the moment as he reads the script, but is unable to comprehend the Quechua's response. The conflict between Sebastián's

⁴⁶ The focus on embodiment also helps the film avoid the cliché of associating the indigenous people with authenticity and innocence – they are instead agents in reconstructing the past.

attempt to reconstruct the past and the destabilising of his historical vision by the present is symbolically represented by the mise-en-scene, with its composition of the camera and production crew set up on the left-hand side, and the retreating Quechua extras moving to the right, leaving an emptiness between them (Figure 1.11).



Figure 1.11: *Mise en scene reinforces the gap between film maker and the events of the past in Even the Rain*

The attempt to control events – of historicity and the past, in the present – is shown to be futile through the layering of different versions of production and performance. The film does this in part by interlinking several themes belonging to the sub-genre of films about film-making. The use of mise-en-abyme in *Even the Rain* references more than one aspect of this category in order to represent the multiple versions of the past and the film-maker's inability to represent it. In this context, Sebastián belongs to the 'auteur as tyrant' narrative within the sub-genre; his only goal is to *make a film* and he has come to believe that all sacrifices that other people make in the pursuit of his vision are justifiable. As Santaolalla (2012, p. 216) argues, this moment "leads to questions about the film, its role and purpose, its audiences, relationships to the reality of people's lives, and the limits of acceptability". The actor who plays Columbus accuses Sebastián of making a propaganda film, not a work of art, due to his alignment with the priests and the colonised people against Columbus. The meaninglessness of Sebastián's support of the oppressed in history is demonstrated through the way in which he is made

an allegorical figure of colonialism, treating the indigenous people as commodities whose lives are only important in so far as they contribute to the making of the film. Through strategies that are arguably aligned, *Ararat* explores the attempt to define meaning through a variety of performances, creativity and filmic representation. This is embodied in the roles of the characters of the two film-makers: Edward Saroyan (Charles Aznavour) is directing a definitive action blockbuster about the Armenian genocide, while Raffi is an accidental film-maker whose footage is ambiguous and ultimately may not exist.

***Ararat*: Genocide as Spectacle and Absence**

Atom Egoyan's film *Ararat* has been considered as a memory text in its focus on the different interpretation and denials of Armenian history, specifically the genocide of Armenian citizens by the Turkish military in 1915. By placing the film in the context of the temporal gateway, the film's argument about the nature of remembrance becomes clearer, revealing a more complicated view of the past than simply an argument for recognition of the genocide.⁴⁷ The film has a multiple narratives structure, interweaving stories and characters in a way which reinforces the transitional and fluid nature of its subject; characters interconnect in a variety of different ways, in different time periods. The stories and characters are linked by family and romantic relationships, by work, by ethnic heritage and by chance. The overarching themes of the film, its exploration of memory and history, the burden of the past, are carried through its temporal indistinctness and its focus on the creation of art – particularly film-making and painting – in response to historical events. The director and screenwriter of the film within the film, also called *Ararat*, are of Armenian descent and employ Ani (Arsinée Khanjian) - an art history professor whose research is on the Armenian artist Arshile Gorky - to be an

⁴⁷ The massacre of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915 is officially recognised as genocide in 20 individual countries (including Canada, Egoyan's home nation) as well as by the EU; the UK parliament does not officially recognise it as such. In 2015 the ECHR ruled that it was not a crime to deny the Armenian genocide.

adviser. This connection links to another narrative strand about Ani's family, her son Rafi whose father, a terrorist – or political activist - was shot dead after his attempted assassination of the Turkish ambassador. Rafi's girlfriend Carla is also his step sister, her father was married to Ani. Carla blames Ani for her father's death from a fall, which may have been suicide or accident.

Ararat draws together several themes in the realm of cultural memory; the necessity of remembering historical events within the paradox of the impossibility of doing so, of recognising the transformations and mutability of memory while rejecting the idea of historical truth as relative.⁴⁸ The way in which the past is remembered (or denied) and the effects of that memory on the descendants of the period, is used as a prism through which to argue that individuals' experiences of the present are affected by but should not be defined by the past. In finding a way through these competing points *Ararat*, in a way that can be seen to map on to other films discussed here, shows how memory and history is created through interpretative creative forms such as stories, paintings and films which in turn are interpreted by people who are influenced by their own background, knowledge and emotions. None of this means that events of the past did not happen, but nonetheless this conceptual framework suggests how the past is only alive through the constant debates and interrogations taking place in the present; these do not deny the past but recognise its varying qualities. The burden of the past is an aspect of postmemory, and *Ararat* explores the way the following generations participate in memories of trauma through a variety of forms of transmission.

As has been noted,⁴⁹ the layering of events, stories and points of view in an often allegorical structure is part of the auteur signature of Atom Egoyan, whose work examines the unreliability of memories and their blurring with stories and other art forms. The creation of different versions of the past by characters is sometimes seen as deliberate, such as in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), where a character chooses to lie about the past in order to punish her father rather than tell the truth. In

⁴⁸ This theme of remembering the divisions of the past without reinforcing them in the present is explored in the discussion of the Polish film *Ida* in chapter 2.

⁴⁹ See for example: Johnathan Romney (2003) and Marie-Aude Baronian (2006)

Egoyan's most recent film *Remember* (2016), memories are shown to be uncontrollable and elusive; a holocaust survivor attempts to track down a prison camp guard but due to dementia his memories are unreliable. In *Ararat* memories of the past are shown to be used ideologically, positioning characters on either side of the genocide; Armenians as victims and Turks as guilty. Memory is also shown to position characters in conflict over emotional and familial events of the past; Raffi accuses his mother of "using history like a weapon" in her interpretation of Gorky's life, but also in her own. That this conflict through interpretation of the past remains in the present day is one of the film's warnings against letting a version of the past become sacrosanct. As Ewa Mazierska (2011) notes in her analysis of the film, *Ararat* does point to intransience on both sides of the conflict. When Ali (Elias Koteas), a Turkish Canadian character who is playing the Turkish military leader Jedvet Bey, questions the Armenian claim to be sole authors of their history he is dismissed and humiliated by the director. The actor's concern that he was only cast in the film within the film because he is of Turkish origin is a recognition of how Armenians still view Turks ninety years after the event. As with the other films of the temporal gateway, this understandable attempt by characters to proclaim the wrong done to them is shown to hold back both groups, unable to move forward in terms of negotiating histories and in time itself. It is this burden which Egoyan attempts to explore, in order to understand how it can be possible to recognise the past and still live with history in the present.

In *Ararat*, the search for meaning in the past, whether the recent past of family members or the historical past of the genocide, is an attempt to make sense of the present, with the characters finding different ways of remembering. In the film the multiple-character narrative point of view allows for these different ideas to be examined, with all the characters trapped to a greater or lesser extent by the past. In its highly structured narrative form, the different character lives interweave with each other sharing themes of loss and grief, searching for some kind of key to the past. The repetitive patterns of their lives suggest the inability to progress in time. Central to the structure is the character of Raffi, a Canadian of Armenian descent and a young man who, as he says, has been brought up on stories of the Armenian history and culture. The role of Raffi is pivotal in the plot and themes of the

film and becomes the central character that the audience aligns with in the multiple-character narrative structure. Raffi's central structural position is symbolic. As a character in a temporal gateway film he is caught in the present, the narratives around him suggesting different options to how he may understand the past and future. Raffi's own quest is to try to understand his father's motivation for the attempted assassination of the Turkish ambassador, as well as to find a way to reconcile Celia and Ani, both of which are part of a wider exploration into his own Armenian heritage. Raffi's suspension in the narrative again reinforces the push and pull relationship to time; the attempt to discover an absolute truth while constantly being pushed further from it.

Raffi travels in time throughout the chronology of the film. It is difficult to pin down where he exists in the diegesis and this is one of the ways in which the film looks to a more fluid way of experiencing the past without it simply becoming a burden; Raffi's position in temporality is not fixed. The majority of Raffi's scenes take place at the airport where he is being interrogated by a customs officer, David (Christopher Plummer), who is working his last day before retirement. Raffi has been stopped by customs for carrying undeclared reels of film which he initially claims are part of a location shoot for Ararat (Figure 1.12).



Figure 1.12: The content of the film cannisters remain unknown in Ararat

The airport location has been interpreted as a symbol of transience, reflecting the diaspora of the Armenian people, but it actually functions as a space of limbo, of waiting. As with *The Dust of Time*, border crossings are paradoxes of closure and openness, categorisation and ambiguity. The airport in *Ararat* is first introduced as a setting when the film director (of the film within the film) Edward Saroyan, arrives and is stopped, by the same customs officer, from bringing a pomegranate into the country. Edward refers to the airport as the gate to the country, a motif as symbolic of restrictions and refusal. The setting is a limbo in the diegesis, its temporal relationship to the other scenes difficult to place. There are no visual clues to indicate that the airport scenes take place at a different time to the other scenes in the present – the making of the film within the film, the lectures given by Ani about Arshile Gorky, the tempestuous relationship between Raffi and Celia. It is only when David points out that ‘Ararat’ completed filming months before that alerts the viewer to the different time-period. Even then it is difficult to articulate where in time this scene exists, it is the present but also the future, a place the audience catches up with at the end of the film. This confusion comes due to the rejection of the conventional temporal grammar of film language. In this temporal incoherence, Raffi, as with the other characters of the temporal gateway, remains suspended outside of the action of the film, the airport a symbol of his in-between state.

The burden of the past is felt by all the characters who radiate from the focal point of Raffi and David and they respond to it in different ways. Ani understands the past, through her research into the life of the artist, as a space which can be fixed and revealed. This is represented in the film through Ani’s lecture and book reading, two scenes which are almost identical in their structure, reinforcing formally the stasis of the characters, their relationship to the past and how they are trapped by it, unable to engage with alternative interpretations. In the first scene Ani is giving a lecture on Gorky’s most famous painting ‘The Artist and his Mother’, based on a photograph taken of the two shortly before the genocide and after Gorky’s father had escaped to the US.



Figure 1.13: Ani defines the interpretation of the photograph in Ararat

Ani states that the photograph represents the mother's resilience, her determination in the face of her husband's desertion. The photograph (Figure 1.13) is an example of diagrammatic iconicity, a form of mise-en-abyme which reflects the other fatherless families in the film, Raffi's and Celia's, whose fathers are both dead. It also mirrors the relationship of Ani and Raffi, mother and son abandoned (in one interpretation) by the husband and father. This mise-en-abyme function is, though, undercut by the accusations of Celia, who stands and disrupts her stepmother's talk by challenging her interpretation, arguing that it has been transformed by her own experience. This undeniable characterisation of interpretation, which acknowledges multiple versions of a given moment experienced simultaneously, is closed down by Ani's refusal to engage, and by Edward Saroyan. As a member of the audience he tells Carla to stop interrupting as they have 'come to hear the professor, not her', an oblique if clear reinforcement of an official version of the past. In this scene the possibility of a definitive reading of the past by the present, transmitting a direct, linear experience from the artist's mother, becomes ruptured. The scene is reiterated later in the film, this time when Ani is reading an extract from her book. When Celia asks why she won't discuss Gorky's suicide, Ani replies

that that was not the part she'd chosen. The repetition of the same exchange with the same set up and conclusion reinforces the entrapment of the characters, unable to find a way out from past events.

These entrenched views are mirrored later in Raffi and Ali's exchange about the ongoing dispute over Turkish and Armenian history. In response to Raffi's argument that those who forget the Armenian genocide are more likely to repeat similar traumatic events, Ali tells Raffi he should "drop the history and get on with it", to emerge from the past. The characters whose understanding of the past does not include transformation and change are trapped in a postmemory world which is ultimately impossible to live in, and those who understand ambiguity and openness are able to travel through the past, present and future. The impossibility of a single understanding of the past is symbolised in the film reels which Raffi attempts to bring through customs, the content of which changes, as Raffi's testimony changes throughout the film. Initially they are additional shots needed for the film which had to be shot in Van, site of the genocide, then they are scenes for a documentary which Raffi is making about his family's past. Ultimately Raffi admits that he doesn't really know what is in the circular canisters as he has been given them by a Turkish policeman. David believes it to be drugs, Raffi, film. At the point of revelation, the viewer is led to believe that Raffi is right, it is film stock (the lights had been turned off in order to protect it and they remain turned off after opening) but this is followed by a shot of David with his hands touching heroin in a canister, when Raffi has already left. The ambiguity of this moment is intensified as it is revealed to be an account David is telling his son, Philip, who demands to know which it was, film or heroin? David simply replies, "does it matter?" The ability to resist the definitive characterises the past as a product of different stories, points of view and hopes, while David becomes a transformative figure, his role at the airport, the gateway to the country, symbolic of this possibility of openness and transformation.

The role of the creative arts and particularly its direct line to postmemory is a clear focus in *Ararat* where it becomes another part of a paradox. The film engages ways in which art can be used to memorialise, to attempt to capture a particular version of a moment, but also the ways in which it is

inherently constituted of different versions and open to many interpretations. Creativity is transformative, a further moving away from the object it attempts to render but, this can also be used in a much more fixed, ideological way.⁵⁰ The idea that there is a fixed moment in the past which can be grasped is the thread which follows the characters and links them from Gorky at the very start of the film to Ani's research, through Saroyan and his script-writer, to Raffi who returns to Van to try and find the evidence for what happened in the past and to capture it in film.

Conclusion

The films discussed in this chapter demonstrate how an aspect of contemporary cinema, the temporal gateway film, uses the past to explore contemporary anxieties about temporality. The central characters in the films are trapped in a form of limbo, weighed down by a past which they haven't experienced, but also unable to move into the future without an understanding of how that past shapes their present experiences. This position is configured through a present/past narrative structure which provides a gap between the protagonists and the events they are investigating; a gap which allows space for the experience of temporality to be explored. In my analysis I've demonstrated how the categorisation of films about the past can limit and contain an understanding of the function of memory texts. The use of a variety of narrative and stylistic techniques including allegory, mise-en-abyme and flashbacks in the films discussed here blur the conventional boundaries used in assigning realist and anti-realist labels to films about the past. The temporal gateway films use techniques associated with realism, such as classic narrative structure and identification with character, but eschew narrative fetishization and its associated reassurances through the use of a mise-en-abyme structure, which continually reinforces the impossibility of ever reaching the historical object. The blurring of formal categories is echoed in the subject matter and themes of the films. These explore

⁵⁰ This view of cinema as only reflecting fixed points of view – even operating as propaganda, is evident here and in *Even the Rain*.

how trauma in the past was the result of the creation and reinforcement of borders of nationality and ethnicity, and warn of the danger of their resurgence in the future. In the context of memory studies this is a problematic and at times paradoxical theme: how to memorialise the experience of specific groups (ethnic, national, cultural) in the past without the memorialisation itself reinforcing those divisions in the present and future. This is an area explored further in chapter 2, which examines how spatial and temporal relationships are disrupted in remembering the past.

Chapter 2. Remembering and Forgetting: Politics and Perceptions of Time

This chapter focuses on a group of contemporary fiction and nonfiction films: *Ida* (2013), *The Secret in their Eyes* (2009), *A Separation* (2011) and *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), which deal with national, historical events but which have a transnational currency based on their figuration of temporality, exploring different perceptions of time and competing versions of the past, which transcends their specific exploration of national trauma. This is a wider address to a range of audiences beyond the national, namely the foregrounding of temporality as a way of figuring an individual's experience of trauma and their possibility of recovery. I define these as 'temporal gateway' films as it is their focus on time through which they construct new ways of exploring the past and is a key reason for their appeal to broader audiences across national borders.

The work in this chapter represents a development of the approach in chapter 1, which showed how the characters in the temporal gateway films were trapped in time through structural forms in the films; in chapter 2 the focus is on how temporal disruption is evoked through different representations and experiences of space. I explore how these films negotiate the problems of representing the past, particularly in the context of national histories, where memorialisation can reinforce past divisions. In my analysis I aim to show how the films provides a way of exploring both the desire to revisit the past and its divisions, the dangers of such a return, and also a way of existing outside of limiting categories. This analysis is greatly influenced by Gilles Deleuze (1985/2005) and Walter Benjamin's (1968/1992) analysis of temporality as a state of constant struggle provoked by the desire to make time material rather than abstract. In each film the central character experiences a form of entrapment: by events of the past, by the desire to remember, which runs the risk of remaining fixed in the past. In each case the films offer a mode of escape from existing categories, an indeterminate space in which characters

don't have to choose definitive identities or versions of the past. This approach is exemplified in *Nostalgia for the Light* with the astronomers' appeal to the universe, away from the materiality of the earth and in *Ida*'s suspension in space and subsequent disappearance into the fade to black at the end of *Ida*.

My notion of the temporal gateway is influenced by Seigfried Krackauer's (1963/1995) analysis of the liminal space of the hotel lobby, a space which is part public, part private, a gateway between defined spaces. In Douglas Tallack's (2006) reading of the space of the hotel lobby, it is a place of coming and going, of "movement and stasis" (Tallack, 2006, p. 141), an indeterminate space where people are transforming and becoming in the movement between the street and the hotel room. It is this sense of the liminal which informs the concept of the gateway films, suggesting the experience of the characters in the narrative who are of "movement and stasis", simultaneously trapped and attempting to move forward. It is also a way of understanding how the films communicate meaning to the spectator who understands the experience of trauma through the perception of the character's movement in time, rather than through the representation of past events. In the context of memory studies, this suggests a different way of remembering the past, without reinforcing the national, ethnic and political categories and divisions which initiated the original trauma. In this way the films can be read as exploring the tension between remembering and 'forgetting', the latter a concept which has tended to be side-lined in the field of memory studies.⁵¹

All the films discussed in this chapter have been contested culturally and politically on their release. Their reception traces familiar arguments over the role of national cinema, with arguments focusing on, the suitability of the form and aesthetics to address traumatic events, whether the films address a national or international audience and the implications of this for the representation of national

⁵¹ The often-quoted phrase, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Santayana, 1905/2011, p. 215), where forgetting is compared to being in a state of savagery and infancy, has become the dominant view in a range of political and cultural approaches to memorialisation.

histories. These traditional approaches to interpreting films about national events ignore the way in which temporal gateway films have found new forms to explore this subject matter, which cannot be contained by oppositional arguments about form and function.

The narrative shift from the exploration of the specific historical and political events more commonly associated with memory texts to a focus on temporality, also means that the films are liable to accusations of taking an apolitical turn, of providing reassurance through resolution in the move away from the events themselves. Susannah Radstone (2008a) identifies the problematic nature of critiques of memory texts (films and literature) as apolitical. On the one hand, she argues, the initial interpretation of memory texts as political had really relied on a veneer provided by the subject matter of witnessing trauma which risked “screening as much as it reveals of the politics of memory” (Radstone, 2008a, p. 32). Later readings assume that personal accounts are by their (psychological) nature, apolitical. This division once again reinforces the cultural hierarchies found in the discussion of how memory texts represent the past. In drawing on the continuing debates in the field of memory studies around the nature and, in Saul Friedlander’s (1992) term, the “limits of representation” of traumatic histories, I will show how the concept of the temporal gateway film expands the form in which film can explore and memorialise the past. It does this through using the medium’s unique relationship to time to reveal how temporality is subjective; its illusion of coherence shattered. It is in this reading that the films engage with the politics of memory, rather than simply through the subject matter which often rejects the theme of witnessing as a narrative trope.⁵²

The films under discussion here do not, as discussed in the Introduction, fit neatly into any of the categories of national, transnational, supranational or travelling film, though aspects of these concepts which emphasise the interconnectedness and indeterminacy of the nature of film production and reception are useful. Overall, the attempts to fix a time and place to the films, to provide a

⁵² The function of the non-witness is a concept also discussed further in chapter 3 in the analysis of the work of Lucrecia Martel.

definitive reading ignores the complexity of the films' form and the specific constructions of the past as part of a fragmented temporality. The films discussed here deliberately disrupt the established categories of film form and style, such as classic realist and art house film. The hybrid forms and ambiguity of style include the conjunction of the open image⁵³ of Iranian national cinema with a thriller form in *A Separation*, *Ida*'s imitation of an international art house aesthetic from fifty years ago and the juxtaposition of European art house themes with a Hollywood aesthetic from film and television in *The Secret in their Eyes*.⁵⁴ *Nostalgia for the Light* disrupts the categories of different modes of documentary, combining witness testimony and historical evidence with the essay film's style of poetic reconstructions of memory and philosophical questioning (in this case of the experience of temporality). The film-maker, Patricio Guzmán, becomes an intercessor, in Deleuzian terms a character who moves between fiction and nonfiction, revealing the constructed nature of truth and storytelling. This erosion of boundaries between established film categories is one of a number of ways that the films suggest different experiences of the past, recognising the representation of the past as one of several versions rather than a definitive one. This theme links the films to an openness which is a feature of Deleuze's (1985/2005, p. 5) concept of the time-image film, a style associated with a disruption to linearity and the loosening of cause-and-effect relationships associated with the earlier movement-image. The transition to the time-image is, Deleuze argues, the result of a moment of crisis in society and evident in Italian neo-realism (a movement most associated with the 1940s) via the form of the films.⁵⁵ The mix of different forms which all of the films use, is one of a number of

⁵³ The concept of the open image in relation to Iranian Cinema has been developed by Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn (2003).

⁵⁴ This is a style which has caused controversy in the film's reception as an example of Argentinean national cinema. In his analysis of the film Matt Losada (2010) draws on this context, arguing that the Hollywood model of film-making is an inadequate form to deal with national trauma.

⁵⁵ Deleuze (Deleuze, 1985/2005 p. 13) identifies these movements as characteristic of a period of faltering – or transition between the movement and time-image - evident in the concept of the trip/ballad film, which *Ida* in particular, with its emphasis on travelling, episodic narrative and a road trip, can be linked to.

ways in which they disturb the filmic coherence of a unified narrative form. This is a disturbance which culminates in the disruption to temporality for characters in the film and for the spectator, a representation of the experience of temporality as political, a way of challenging the official version of a nation's past. The sense of movement and disruption to an established ordering of events suggests a break with the past.⁵⁶ It is at this point that the films represent those individuals and groups who are no longer able to experience temporality as others do; it is a moment of violence and disruption which means that time is experienced differently.

The Configuration of Temporality: Versions of the Past

The films' representations of the experience of time is reminiscent of both Gilles Deleuze (1985/2005) and Walter Benjamin's (1968/1992) analysis of temporality as a state of constant struggle provoked by the desire to make time material rather than abstract. Benjamin's conception of the present as *jetszeit* or 'now time', is a way of shattering the conception of the past as empty and neutral, foregrounding it instead as historical, populated by discourses and structures which organise the world. All the central characters in the films are involved in some way in an exploration of their past which in turn connects to issues of national trauma and identity. The weight of past events means that they are unable to progress in a conventionally chronological way but are instead stuck in a kind of stasis, where the past is a physical force in their present. The films explore the characters attempts to configure this past and make it material in order to be able to examine it, an attempt which is continually undermined, becoming a process of entrapment by but possible release from the past, mirroring the distinction between acting out and working through.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ This would be reminiscent of Benjamin's (1968/1992b) thesis that changing experience of temporality is a product of political and cultural change, such as revolution: "Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history" (Benjamin, 1968/1992b, p. 253).

⁵⁷ These different responses to trauma, distinguishing between those people able to work through and beyond trauma and those who remain in the past, are explored by Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001).

The motif of the characters entrapment in temporality is articulated through the formal structure of the films which contrast movement and stasis through the characters' thwarted attempts to move forward. *The Secret in their Eyes* is an Argentinian thriller which focuses on the reinvestigation in the present of the murder of a young woman in 1974, during the period of the military dictatorship.⁵⁸ The killer was never brought to justice and Benjamín Esposito (Ricardo Darín) a civil servant in the state prosecutor's office who was involved in the original case has felt the injustice of this since, believing the killer to have been protected by the corrupt state. His investigation of the original case led to his exile from Buenos Aires and the film begins with his return after fifteen years, a period of his life which is never represented on screen, becoming a form of limbo, of waiting, unable to move forward. Esposito's return is a way of restarting his life by reactivating the events which are still denied by those he experienced them with. Similarly, in *Ida*, the central character is in an unchanging state, having spent her childhood and adolescence in a closed convent, ignorant of her origins and past life. It is another quest, her search for the burial place of her family and her own birth identity, which is the central narrative of the film and which instigates the movement of the character. This movement is represented through a road trip which plays out in contrast to the motionless situation of the convent. *Nostalgia for the Light*, a nonfiction exploration of the past, situates the mothers of Chile's 'disappeared' in the Atacama Desert where they keep up an infinite search for the material evidence of the death of their family members. The survivors of the Chacabuco concentration camp, also in the desert, recreate the material reality of the past through sketching the conditions in the camp and recreating the blueprints of the camp from memory. One of the survivors paces out the remembered

⁵⁸ Although the term 'dirty war' is often used to describe the period of dictatorship in Argentina, it is a problematic term due to its use by the junta to defend its crimes during that period and because it is increasingly associated with denialist groups who seek to downplay the level of murder and abuses during the dictatorship. See (Smith & Roberts, 2008) for further discussion of the meanings of the term.

dimensions of his daily walk through the camp in the living room of his home, a physiological recreation of the past. In *A Separation*, which deals with the contest over memory of the recent past, the central character Nader (Peyman Moaadi), who has been accused of causing his housekeeper to have a miscarriage by pushing her down the stairs, is engaged in a constant battle to make his version of the past the definitive one. This continual battle against multiple versions of the past prevents him from making any decisions about the future: whether to leave Iran or stay, whether to leave his wife or stay.

The position of the characters in the narrative is reminiscent of the crystal-image, with the characters' position in space serving as one of the ways in which their predicament is transmitted to the viewer. The films' use of settings - a convent, the desert, an apartment, towns and regions - can be understood in Deleuzian terms as one of the ways in which the films represent different states of the crystal-image, a feature of the time-image. The crystal-image is at times frozen and closed, with characters trapped and unable to move forward but continually dragged back into the past, or cracked, allowing for an escape into the future and freedom. Deleuze (1985/2005) demonstrates how film captures the experience of temporality through characters that are caught in the crystal-image, a series of doubles and mirror images which confuse the distinction between the real and imaginary, actual and virtual images. The crystal-image is described as a type of theatre (there are many analogies to theatre and performance in the definition of the crystal-image) in which characters try on various roles until, on finding the right one, they are "bursting forth" (Deleuze, 1985/2005 p. 85) into life. The crystal is a trap in which life is suspended, but it is also vital to the beginning of life. Deleuze argues that the cinema's unique expression of time is due in part to the fact that it is inherently a crystal-image; the relationship of doubles between past and future, actor, character and image is fundamental to film, and to the constitution of the crystal-image. Deleuze's conception of the crystal-image as the site of infinitely reversible images in a circuit, where characters can only break out into the future by disruption and disintegration, can be applied to the narratives of the films under

discussion, with characters only able to enter the real through recollection, which becomes the key to their future. The films represent the individual's experience of time as conflict, as each protagonist battles against the constant motion and instability of time to find space in the 'now' in order to reconcile the past and "take charge of the future and freedom" (Deleuze, 1985/2005 p. 85). The protagonists of the films are trapped in the actual and virtual exchange of the crystal-image and this entrapment explores the conflict of remembering and forgetting: how to memorialise the past but not to be weighed down by it. The time-image with its characteristics of ambiguity and openness is a way of exploring this conflict, but the films also embody aspects of the time-image in the way they use hybrid forms.

The definition of the films as examples of time-image films which have appeared at a moment of cultural and political crisis is evident in the way that all the films foreground multiple temporalities, showing that different experiences of time fundamentally challenge a unifying narrative of the past. This foregrounding of the idea that temporality is not natural or innocent, but a construction reveals the films as political texts which see the past and its link to identity as a continually contested place. In *A Separation*, which deals with the shortest duration of past time, the battle over different versions become inscribed in the characters' physical movements, in their arguments and in their positioning in the mise-en-scene, unable to move forwards but caught in a continual state of return.

A Separation takes place at a moment of crisis represented by a split in time as different versions of the past compete to become definitive. This temporal rupture is particularly traumatic for Nader, the central character, as it offers a range of possible alternative versions of his life. This is personified by the central dilemma of whether to remain in Iran or leave. The narrative of the film focuses on a married couple, Nader and his wife Simin (Leila Hatami). Simin wants the family to leave Iran, so that their daughter can grow up away from the repressive regime, and will divorce Nader if necessary to achieve this. Nader is much more conflicted: he doesn't want to divorce but also feels he should stay in Iran, in part because he needs to care for his father who has dementia. The situation reaches a crisis

when Nader is accused of causing his housekeeper, Razeih (Sareh Bayat), to miscarry by pushing her down the stairs. This personal crisis of identity, symptomatic of the choices facing the Iranian middle classes, is a moment of upheaval so great that it transforms perception. Nader's increasingly desperate attempts to arrest time represent the psychological trauma faced by those with this dilemma. As with the other films discussed here, the form of *A Separation* explores these ideas through a series of conflicts and oppositional relationships which create a sensory experience of being caught in time.

A Separation is a film about competing versions of past events which demonstrates the instability of memory and symbolises the powerful moment in which memory falters and therefore allows the opening out of the image and a shift away from realism and the concept of linearity. This shift does not happen easily at the level of form or content of the film, there is instead a constant, antagonistic relationship between the opening up of the image and the attempt to limit and close it; the events of the film are dramatised through this conflict. This is evident in the role of the protagonist and in the audience response. Nader has a clearly defined goal in the narrative, to make his version of the events on the stairs the established one and to keep his daughter in Iran with him, but he is continually challenged and prevented from achieving this goal. The audience is primed to respond in a specific way to the series of questions set up by the thriller style construction of the narrative: specifically that it will receive answers to questions posed. This desire is complicated and ultimately blocked as the narrative moves between examples of indiscernibility and discernibility. These positions illustrate the attempt on the one hand to classify and capture, to prevent change, and on the other hand suggests the possibility of future and past change. In using the narrative form of a thriller and explicitly providing an enigma which might conventionally suggest the possibility of resolution, as with *The Secret in their Eyes*, *A Separation* continually proposes and denies the pleasures associated with the action image. This is characterised in the protagonist who continually attempts to act and to discern but is held in limbo, able to see the problems but not resolve them.

***A Separation* as Crystal-image**

A Separation begins with direct images of time which are indicative of the proliferation of reflections and multiple versions of events which are to come. These images of time are present in the title, in the first images of the film, where the credits appear over a series of documents being photocopied, and through the introduction of Nader and Simin, who are in the process of separation. The first two scenes of the film symbolise the process of splitting and doubling as identified in the crystal-image, something which is already in action as the narrative begins. There is no clear dividing line between past (before the film starts, before Nader and Simin are separating, before the passports become copies) and present. The photocopying of the passport is a crystal-image, the moment of the splitting of the actual and the virtual image. The light in the copier constructs a reflection of the original document, the moment in which time splits and doubles (Figure 2.1). That it is the copying itself, the part of the process which is usually hidden from view, rather than the paper emerging from the machine, emphasises the concept of indiscernibility of actual and virtual images in the time-image. In this unattainable spectator position – inside the lid of the photocopier – it is impossible to identify the original and its copy, the two have coalesced. The simultaneous restricting and privileging of the audience view at this stage, the first shots in the film, is indicative of the aesthetic of *A Separation*, a style which Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn (2003) in their analysis have identified as characteristic of recent Iranian film. The partial view is reinforced by the series of different documents belonging to different people which are also scanned, only two belong to the couple which the film subsequently follows, suggesting the possibility of a virtual film or films which exist about the other characters.⁵⁹ This image emphasises the possibility of parallel stories and different histories, destabilising the status of the one taking place in the film. The image of the photocopy provides an

⁵⁹ The influential Iranian/UK observational documentary, *Divorce Iranian Style* (Kim Longinotto, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 2007) might be one of those films.

illustration of Deleuze's explanation of the actual and virtual image and how the two are in a relationship of exchange and ultimate coalescence in the time-image:

Therefore an image has two sides – virtual and actual. It is as if an image in the mirror, a photo or a postcard came to life, assumed independence and passed into the actual, even if this meant that the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo, following a double movement of liberation and capture (Deleuze, 1985/2005, pp. 66-7)

The concept of liberation and capture as features of the actual and virtual are played out on film with the couple constantly shifting between the two states.



Figure 2.1: A Separation (2011): The photocopying of the passports suggests the actual and virtual image

The choice of passport as the opening image is loaded with meaning which symbolises a further series of splits and doubles. The passport represents an attempt to categorise and define, to capture and fix, it is a way of the state controlling and monitoring the individual. However it also signifies the possibility of travel, escape and freedom, for Simin the possibility of escape for her daughter who won't have to grow up, as she says, in "these circumstances". As a form of identification, the passports are a copy of the 'real' Nader and Simin who sit in front of the judge at the end of the credit sequence. The copying of the passport is a bureaucratic symbol of Simin's virtual life, the one where she leaves Iran with her husband and daughter. The character's attempt to actualise this virtual life is made problematic in the film because the right and wrong of the situation is not discerned. The possibility of leaving exists simultaneously with staying and Simin is in a situation of limbo where a decision is never made. In *A Separation* there is no clear resolution, either to this dilemma or to the question which becomes the subsequent focus of the film, whether or not Nader caused Razeih's miscarriage by pushing her down the stairs. There is no objective truth or reality to be discovered in *A Separation* - only different views and ambiguities.⁶⁰

In *A Separation* the concept of the crystal-image is apparent through a series of oppositions of the discernible and indiscernible, and the narrative is structured by the attempt by the characters to make the indiscernible discernible, and distinct. This desire to categorise and account is something associated with Deleuze's (1983/2006) concept of the movement-image and its linear movement toward answers and solutions; the expectation that the narrative will find its end point. Nader's quest is to control the narrative by making his version of what happened to Razeih – she slipped on the stairs, her husband beat her which caused her to miscarry – actual. The narrative obstacles to this attempt are many. Nader's actual version is already composed of multiple versions in itself; there are a number of accounts from other characters which cast doubt on his version, and the audience is never

⁶⁰ In this aspect *A Separation* can be compared to the style of narrative used in *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1950), which features contradictory witness accounts of a crime without providing a definitive version of events.

actually shown what happened. Nader himself acknowledges that several different versions of the event may simultaneously be true; in answer to his daughter's questions about whether he knew that Razeih was pregnant when he argued with her he replies, "I knew but at that moment I also didn't know". Nader's attempt to force structure onto the indiscernibility of events tends to lead to further splitting and ambiguity of the narrative. Each attempt by Nader and Simin to clarify and finalise the version of what happened to Razeih spins off into a further complication, another layer of memory and retelling of past events. In this context every visit to the judge which is a plea for their version to be actualised results in the development of another narrative loop with more witnesses called and accounts changed. At one point in the process Nader instigates a reconstruction of the events on the staircase to prove that his version is the actual and not merely one of many virtual versions (Figure 2.2). As he acts out the events they become less and less convincing as he demonstrates something he didn't see to people who also didn't see it (the other characters and the film audience). The moment is intensified by his physical re-enactment of the past event which has become imprinted in the movement of his limbs. The reconstruction scene ends with an interjection by a new character (a neighbour) which then splits the narrative again, forcing it into another direction, only to circle back to the question of what happened on the stairs.



Figure 2.2: A Separation (2011): Nader's re-enactment of past events is reinforced through movement

Deleuze's concept of the ritornello illuminates the competing stories and structure of the film. Deleuze refers to Guattari's definition of the crystal of time as a 'ritornello par excellence' but expands on this:

The melodic ritornello is only a component which contrasts and is mixed with another, rhythmic component: the gallop.....The gallop and the ritornello are what we hear in the crystal, as the two dimensions of musical time, the one being the hastening of the presents which are passing, the other the raising or falling back of the pasts which are preserved. (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 90)

This conception of the rhythm of time as a process of movement forwards and backwards characterises the world of *A Separation* and particularly Nader's repeated attempts to move forward which are continually rebuffed. The sense of conflict apparent in the film is similar to Deleuze's further discussion of the gallop-ritornello relationship: "the two intertwine with one another more and more closely, throttling themselves like wrestlers, lost-saved, lost-saved" (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 91). The scene on the stairs referred to above could be read as characteristic of the ritornello-gallop relationship; Nader's attempt to make a decisive move towards resolution of the case is pulled back by the ritornello of the neighbour, a refrain which comes back differently each time with a new challenge to Nader's story. In this way *A Separation* is structured around the musical rhythms of ritornello and gallop, which reflect the experience of the character's experience of temporality and in turn transmit that sensation to the viewer.

This structure and feeling is also found in the use of setting and editing, both techniques emphasising the circuitous nature of the round. Razihi's journey home to the suburbs from Nader's flat in the centre of Tehran begins conventionally. She is shown walking along the street, being given a lift to the bus stop by Simin, waiting for the bus and then shown inside the bus, but when it seems that she has finished her journey she is actually back at Nader's flat, a circular journey which has no end point of home. This disorientation is paradoxically reinforced by the use of continuity editing which sets up the expectation of a linear narrative. Similarly, the space of the main setting of the film, Nader and Simin's

flat, is ambiguous and deceptive. When in the flat, characters tend to be in motion, continually walking around and then through rooms, the movement reinforced by the reflections created by windows and glass screens which divide up the flat. The circular layout of the flat and the characters continual restlessness is repeated in the number of overhead shots of the shared stair case of the apartment block (the place which was concealed from view when Razeih slipped or fell) as characters run up and down them, circling around the stair well at the centre. These images of circling movement around empty spaces culminate in the central space in the centre of the flat – a well which the accommodation seems to be arranged around. This emptiness at the centre of the dominant setting acts as a symbol for the absence of an end point or narrative conclusion, a reinforcement of the concept that some things cannot be known and emphasises the stasis of the characters who seem to remain circling rather than moving forward.

The Secret in their Eyes is also a film which explores an individual's experience of time as a form of entrapment as they attempt to establish a version of the past – in this case relating to historical events. Like *A Separation*, *The Secret in their Eyes* doesn't make explicit reference to the national events the characters have been affected by, in this case the dictatorship in Argentina of the 1970s, but rather specifically avoids representing it. Although a more conventional film than *A Separation*, in its form and style, particularly in its more pronounced use of the thriller genre, *The Secret in their Eyes* also challenges the notion of an official version of the past through a character who experiences time differently to others. *The Secret in their Eyes* focuses on a central character, Benjamín Esposito, a traumatised, destabilised figure, who, as we will see with Ida, is attempting to investigate his personal and professional past after a long period removed from conventional chronology. The diegesis covers two time periods. The plot centres on Esposito's work as a clerk in a Judge's office at the end of the Peron administration in 1974 and his role in an investigation and subsequent cover up of a rape and murder of a young woman. The present of the film is 1999 (twenty five years later as the characters frequently state), when Esposito returns to reinvestigate the case. In the intervening years Esposito has been living in Juju, a provincial town in the north of Argentina. Esposito's despair at his inability to

reveal the institutional corruption, unease at the ability of his colleagues not to see what was happening as well as the threat to his own life, are the traumatic events which lead to his exile and removal from his established identity. This twenty-five year period remains absent in the diegesis and there are no references to the events in his life during that time. The period of Esposito's absence coincides with the dictatorship, a period when the Argentinean junta was responsible for the deaths and disappearance of thousands of people as well as endemic corruption. The point of Esposito's return – from the perspective of a film made in 2009 – is at the beginning of Argentina's economic crisis.

The murder and corruption plotline is intertwined with a romantic storyline which focuses on the potential relationship between Esposito and the Judge, Irene Hastings (Soledad Villamil). Esposito's return to Buenos Aires after years of absence is an attempt to make his experience of the past definitive, but this attempt is in conflict with a series of obstacles, expressed through the struggle between stasis and movement that is central to the film. This is in part structured through the genre form of the thriller, with its inherent setting up of enigmas for Esposito to resolve, but also through the memoir he is constantly writing and rewriting about his past. The generic structure is part of the film's exploration of multiple pasts and temporalities which is apparent through the plot, the use of flash-back, the visual style and the foregrounding of Esposito as a writer of his own past. The focus on temporality and the gaps and emptiness in recollections of the past oddly has been ignored in the reception of the film with responses instead reinforcing traditional positions in the context of definitions of national cinema and the appropriate representation of traumatic, national events.

The Secret in Their Eyes: Melodrama and History in Argentinean Cinema

The Secret in Their Eyes acted as a prism through which to rehearse some of the long-standing debates around the desired function and purpose of Argentinean cinema, dating back to Third Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s and the films of the *apertura* of the 1980s. The national critical reception of the film was, as will be discussed with *Ida*, marked by controversy provoked in part by its international success

(it also won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film) which gave it an influential position in representing Argentinian cinema and history to an international audience. The national, critical debate centred on the cultural and ideological meanings of the production context, film form and style of this representation. This is particularly evident in the criticism of the film's aesthetic, which has been unfavourably described as 'glossy', influenced by advertising as well as Hollywood film and television style. This particular discussion exemplifies the way the film's reception was a reiteration of familiar arguments about Argentinean cinema (and more generally across national cinemas).⁶¹ These include the conflicts over how a national cinema should explore its past, the question of addressing a domestic or international audience and anxiety over the effect of the increasing role of multi media conglomerates in funding Argentinean cinema. In this context the focus on temporality and the foregrounding of competing versions of the past were ignored, with the dominant readings around the apparently conservative nature of the genre form and aesthetic.

The production context and aesthetic of *The Secret in their Eyes* meant that it embodied many of the developments seen as likely to result in Argentinean cinema becoming a superficial and globalised form. The director of the film, Juan José Campanella, is one of the most successful of the 'industrial auteurs', film-makers whose work has been funded by conglomerates. Rather than being an artisanal, independent film-maker he has therefore been criticised for lacking authenticity and artistic integrity. Matt Losada (2010) contextualises his attack on the film by highlighting the director's background: "Director Juan José Campanella's filmmaking trajectory goes a long toward explaining his treatment of the memory of trauma", referring to the "sentimental nostalgia" of his previous Argentine

⁶¹ For example the history of British national cinema has been influenced by its relationship, in terms of production and distribution contexts as well as style and themes, with Hollywood. Nick Roddick (1985) and Neil Watson (2000) explore the anxiety around a feared loss of national identity in British cinema through its need to compete with Hollywood film, as well as the threat of the withdrawal of funding from Hollywood studios. These ideas are problematised by Deborah Shaw (2013) in her discussion of Mexican national and transnational cinema and its relationship to Hollywood.

commercial films⁶² and the “time tested plotlines” which Losada links to his work on US television series such as *House* and *Law and Order*. The identification of mainstream, popular forms in the context of national cinema as a kind of infiltration from a commercial ideology, is apparent in previous responses to the films of the *apertura*, the 1980s post-dictatorship period of state funded film production. Here films were developed specifically to promote a representation of Argentina to the world, one which emphasised it as a democratic country which valued freedom of expression. In explaining the appeal of these films to the international market, Tamara L. Falicov (2007, p. 51) argues that the “films’ historical themes were now packaged neatly for foreign consumption” and links this directly to the fact that “a large percentage of film-makers came out of commercial advertising backgrounds, thus creating a glossier visual format”. In analysing one of the most successful - domestically and internationally – films of this period, *The Official Story* (1985), Falicov cites Raul Beycero’s analysis of the visual style as the “language of advertising” and argues that: “Ultimately, using glossy commercial shots helps the film conform to the established conventions of an international (read: US) style of filmmaking – an aesthetic that reinforces palatability” (Falicov, 2007, p. 71). For Falicov this palatable style was linked to a political failure of the film, that it does not refer to the complicity of foreign governments (i.e. The US) in supporting the dictatorship. Therefore, the international “language of advertising”, is unable to deal with the complexities of a political analysis which should be central to national cinema, an analysis which is the dominant view in critical responses to popular Argentinean film about the past. This position is restated forcefully by Losada (2010): “The emphasis on visual spectacle in *El Secreto* suggests that it shares Hollywood’s ideal viewer, that easily bored pleasure-seeking product of market surveys who demands the kind of production values that mark a film as fashionably up-to-date ... that limits a film to only the most easily consumable options, both thematically and formally”, going on to claim, in a position reminiscent of

⁶² Campanella’s Argentinian films (often featuring Ricardo Darín) are some of the country’s most commercially successful, they include: *Metegol* (Underdogs) (2013), *Moon of Avellaneda* (2004) and *Son of the Bride* (2001).

some of the interpretations of Third Cinema, that it is only documentary forms and micro-budget filmmaking which can critique the past in a meaningful way.⁶³

The influence of Hollywood on Argentina's film production is also apparent in the Hollywood domination of exhibition in Argentina since the late 1990s. As is the case in the Latin American region as a whole, the domestic market for national cinema in Argentina is very small, with the box office dominated to a great extent by Hollywood films. Between 2007 and 2014 there were eight Argentinean films in total in the box office top twenty (three of which featured Ricardo Darín, probably Argentina's most successful film star who is closely associated with commercial cinema and the films of Campanella specifically). It is notable though that when an Argentinean film is popular it often outperforms Hollywood films. Three of the eight most popular recent Argentinean films were the top grossing films in their respective years: *A Boyfriend for my Wife* (Juan Taratuto, 2008), *The Secret in their Eyes* (2009) and *Wild Tales* (Damian Szifron, 2014).⁶⁴ While the domination of national production, distribution and exhibition by Hollywood is a common obstacle for national cinemas globally, the situation in Argentina is complicated by wider issues of Argentinean cultural identity as a Latin American country with close ties to Europe. Falicov (2007, p. 57) argues that "Argentine cinema has become synonymous with art house cinema akin to European production" and that this can be seen in the idea of Argentina as a "Latin American nation in search of a European identity" expressed

⁶³ In his analysis of Nigerian cinema Jeffrey Geiger (2012) argues directly against this kind of binary categorisation. Building on Teshome Gabriel's argument that Third Cinema should, "avoid fixed or oppositional theories...that there is no simple dividing line between Third Cinema and the popular"(Geiger, 2012, p. 62), Geiger argues that 'popular' media and approaches can not only be seen to critique political and national histories, but also might be seen to develop strands of the political critique of Third Cinema, rather than simply oppose Third Cinema's aims: "While not always explicitly or uniformly politically-minded in the sense of traditional definitions of Third Cinema, many Nollywood films...are marked by a refusal of mainstream film-making conventions: created with an urgency that often refutes the conventions of cinematic illusion, narrative transparency, hero identification, and other (western) realist strategies" (Geiger, 2012, p. 65).

⁶⁴ *Wild Tales* has broken a series of box office records in Argentina, becoming the first domestic film to surpass 100 million pesos (\$12m) at the Argentine box office (Mango, 2014).

in the wider concept of *Arielismo*. The popular, commercial cinema which deals with Argentinean political and social themes is therefore open to criticism from two approaches, that it is too close to Hollywood but also European film style, both of which are a threat to its cinema as a representation of national culture. It is clear that rather than embracing the potential for indeterminacy offered by such an admixture, the hybrid nature is seen as a threat to a definitive national culture.

These contrasting elements have long been seen as central to the film-making practice of the region. Juliann Burton-Carvajal (1998, p. 589) identifies the two pillars of Latin American cinema as being melodrama and history, forms assumed to be at odds with one another. Melodrama was explicitly rejected as a form by the radical filmmaking theory and practice of Third Cinema, part of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw melodrama as a form of “imperial contamination and escapist (apolitical, ahistorical)” while history was “enlisted as a documentary presence – stylistically and narratologically” (Burton-Carvajal, 1998, p. 589). This conceived dichotomy of melodrama and history is still evident in the reception of *The Secret in their Eyes* which questions whether it is possible to integrate genre forms - thriller, melodrama - with history. The Argentinean critic Eduardo Rojas (cited in Kercher, 2015, p. 349) criticises the film for being formulaic in using the enigmas of the thriller form: “why use the still unhealed wounds of our recent history as a guessing game?” and argues that the high degree of resolution required by genre forms preclude a more complex analysis of the past – or the present.

***Testimonio* Film: Constructing Memory**

It is notable though that as well as the hybrid European art house, Hollywood genre style of this period, the films also integrated the wider Latin American genre of the *testimonio* or testimony film. More usually associated with literature and then the revolutionary documentary film of the NLAC, the concept of the testimonial is central to the films of this period which explore an individual’s recent

trauma of the past.⁶⁵ In the context of non-fiction forms, *cine testimonio* is seen as a political form of self-representation for members of marginalised groups whose individual experience can be read as symbolic of the wider experience, but its fictional use (though usually based on historical events and people) is often dismissed as melodramatic and self-indulgent. In *New Argentine Cinema*, Jens Andermann (2012, p. 2) cites Patricia Aufderheide's comment about the testimonio films of the 1980s, that "the Argentine public seemed primed to use the darkened movie house like a confessional" and he refers to the collective desire to view the films as a "self-purging". This kind of language, which is in contrast to the more analytical response to the *testimonio* of the documentary movements, is part of a critical response which sees popular films as eliciting an overly emotional rather than intellectual response from the spectator.

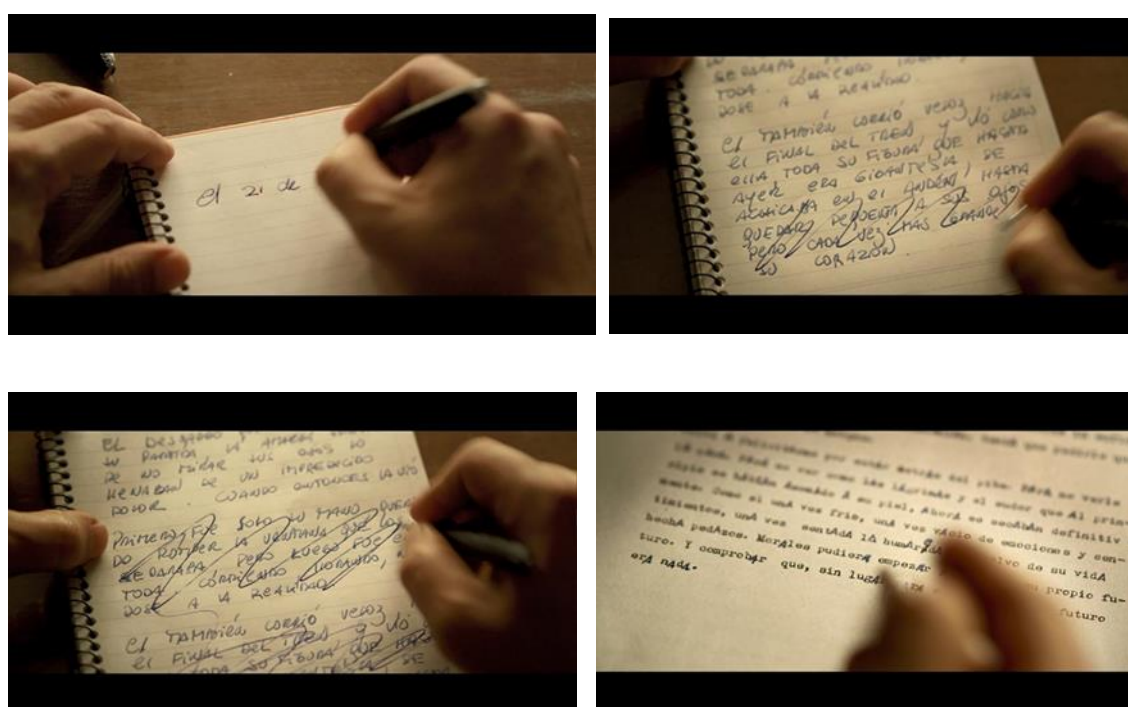


Figure 2.3: The Secret in their Eyes (2009): Esposito continually writes and rewrites his memoir

⁶⁵ Despite its connotations of documentary history, Falicov (2007) uses the term *testimonio* unproblematically to refer to fiction films, stating that 16 out of the 24 films made in Argentina in 1984 were examples of *testimonio*.

The explicit reference to the writing of a *testimonio* in the form of memoir by Esposito in *The Secret in their Eyes* has multiple functions. The reference to *testimonio* links to a cultural tradition, positioning the film as Argentinean and Latin American, however in doing that it suggests the limitations of the form as a way in which to analyse the past; its inherent nature means it is a partial recollection and reconstruction. Through the motif of Esposito's memoir (Figure 2.3), the narrative form of the film foregrounds the understanding of memory as subjective and multiple, rather than as a statement of fact. The focus on Esposito's written account is self-reflexive. The opening sequence of the film introduces the uncertainty and confusion between the actual and the virtual which the narrative will attempt, but ultimately refuse, to work through and clarify. The first images of the film set up the spectator's alignment with Esposito, but also the way in which this alignment is often disrupted. The opening takes place at a train station with a farewell between a man and a woman. It is presented as fragments in close up and often filmed in slow motion; the distortion of the film stock adds to the sense that this is a subjective recollection and presentation of events. The revelation that it is Esposito's memory, he is attempting to write a memoir about these events, reinforces the subjectivity and sense of partial recollection. The layers involved in this moment of memory – manipulation, artifice, creativity – destabilise the film from the start, making it inherently about the impossibility of simple recollections of truth. Throughout the film he writes, crosses out and rewrites a version of his past, images in flashback are presented as his memories, but, it becomes clear that these are versions he has invented, he couldn't have had access to the events he describes. The spectator is restricted to Esposito's worldview as shaped by his memories, which may or may not be reliable; in conversations in the present with Irene (the woman at the train station in the past) about his recollection of that moment she comments: "If that was how it happened". Through this unreliability of memory, the character of Esposito, despite his narrative position as a detective-hero, does not provide the reassurance to an audience associated with the films of the 1980s. In those days the detective character, in Andermann's argument, provided "pedagogic or redemptive qualities", and functioned

as a stand-in for the audience (Andermann, 2012, p. 4).⁶⁶ The promised progress of the genre plot is constantly undercut by Esposito's position in limbo, his inability to proceed and the film's awareness that it is impossible to provide a definitive account of the past.

This foregrounding of the construction of memory and its fallibility is the problem that is invoked by the film but is not resolved in order to provide closure and reassurance, rather it states that ultimately remembering may be impossible. The question of how to examine the past when it is made up of multiple versions remains open and ambiguous, suggesting the importance, or inevitability, that remembering must also contain forgetting.

The Tension Between the Virtual and Actual in Constructing the Past

The story of the film is organized in flashback, and this has a narrative and symbolic function which again foregrounds the conflict over the past and the battle over time in the film. The contemporary scenes are a series of conversations between Esposito and Irene, who was his boss during the original murder investigation. These conversations take place at her office, in cafes, and finally at Esposito's apartment and emphasise the development of the love story which runs parallel to the investigation of murder and corruption in the film. The structuring device of the pair's conversations also dramatizes the two alternative futures for Argentina posed by the film. Esposito's need to excavate the past, to find answers and to see justice done is continually countered by Irene's need to repress historical memory. For Irene, returning to the past is impossible: "I can't look backwards" she tells Esposito, arguing that Morales, the fiancé of the murdered woman, did receive "some justice" and that this should be accepted in order to be able to exist in the future. As a judge, the character of Irene symbolises the laws which were passed in response to the end of the dictatorship. Her decision to close the Morales case, to sign and seal the files, is emblematic of the laws passed to prevent the prosecution of the junta for crimes against humanity at the end of the dictatorship in the mid-1980s.

⁶⁶ In this analysis of Argentine films of the 1980s, Andermann draws on Fredric Jameson's concept of the social detective in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (1995).

The 'Full Stop' Law (*Ley de Punto Final*) of 1986 was brought in after some of the military dictatorship had stood trial and been imprisoned: the "some justice" urged on Esposito by Irene. A different approach, based on investigation and recognition of the suffering of people during this period, had initially been brought in by the Alfonsín government elected in 1983. The 'Never Again' (*Nunca Mas*) Report, produced by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, investigated the cases of thousands of unexplained disappearances and contained an individual report on each case. Esposito's memoir can be read as a form of *Nunca Mas*, his testimony of a disappearance, but, as has been shown, this has limitations. As a contribution to the group of films about this period in Argentina's history, it explores a way of memorialising through a protagonist who both wants to actualise the past but also accepts the need for forgetting. *The Secret in their Eyes* does accept that there are aspects of the past which will never be known, such as the fate of the disappeared, no matter how much investigation into the past takes place.

The national response to the events of the dictatorship followed a process similar to the post trauma responses of other countries,⁶⁷ the choice between remembering and forgetting, positions which are often linked to concepts of retribution and reconciliation. In Argentina the response was initially one which valued investigation into the past and recognition of the suffering of people during this period. In *The Secret in Their Eyes*, rather than retaining the familiar opposition of remembering and forgetting, the film argues that both are possible. Esposito solves the puzzle of the murder but warns against an obsession with the past, due to its unknowability, of becoming "stuck in time", a controversial position which has resulted in the accusations of the film being apolitical and ahistorical.

The Secret in their Eyes represents the past as ultimately unknowable, an absence at the centre of the film, a temporal hole of twenty-five years which cannot be recollected or understood. The use of

⁶⁷ E.g. The Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa, The Pact of Forgetting (1975) and the later Historical Memory Law (2007) in Spain, Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (2005) in Algeria.

the thriller genre structure implies that this absence will be filled, but this is constantly undercut due to the openness of the narrative which has similarities to the time-image concept of ambiguity. It is the uncertainty about what has happened in the past which therefore precludes movement and conventional resolution for Esposito, and the film does not provide the narrativization and reassurance often associated with mainstream forms.⁶⁸ The film sets up a conflict between stasis, the limbo of the past, and movement, the detection narrative, through Esposito, whose experience of temporality places him outside the mainstream understanding of chronology. Esposito has experienced time as stopped during his exile; his return to Buenos Aires is structured around a series of actions in which he tries to discover what really happened in the past and to make that actual. This attempt is constantly challenged in the film: by his own doubts, by the alternative versions of the past offered by other characters and by the film form itself, which repeatedly represents him as insignificant or fading figure in the *mise-en-scene*, someone disappearing from view. The aesthetic of the film means that it is often difficult to focus on Esposito, an unusual representation of a central character (particularly when he is played by Ricardo Darin, one of the biggest stars of Argentine cinema). He is often dwarfed by props, out of focus or in the background of shots. The composition of shots, through the use of *mise-en-scene* and depth of field creates an atmosphere of claustrophobia and entrapment from which Esposito is attempting to escape, the visual style creates a haptic sensation for the viewer of a character who is trapped by their surroundings, engaged in a continual conflict between past and future. This is apparent in the use of low, canted angle shots, the emphasis on a highly controlled *mise-en-scene* which includes *chiaroscuro* lighting and the dominance of interior settings. It is a visual aesthetic which makes reference to expressionism and in turn, film noir, relevant to the film's themes of the attempt to discover the truth beneath surface appearances. Esposito is repeatedly positioned in darkness at home or in his office, surrounded by towering piles

⁶⁸ There are answers to enigmas, such as the identity of the murderer, but this is revealed early on in the film (perhaps in homage to Hitchcock, one of Campanella's influences) and the structuring narrative of the romantic plot line between Esposito and Irene has only a tentative resolution: "It'll be complicated" Irene says about their proposed relationship at the end of the film .

of legal documents and often becomes an immaterial figure that can only just be picked out in the frame. The use of perspective and foreshortening exaggerates this sense emphasising his isolation in temporal experience (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.4: In The Secret in Their Eyes (2009), the hero, Esposito, is positioned as a marginal character, often disappearing from view.

The focus on the material world of the mise-en-scene – as is also the case in *Ida* – is also a way of foregrounding multiple temporalities; Esposito is in conflict with time in order to make his own experience of time definitive. The film's contention that the past continually changes, interweaving

with and shaping the present and future, illustrates Benjamin's concept of the woof and warp of memory and forgetting:

When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of a lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting (Benjamin, p. 198, 1968/1992).

In a similar way to the relationship of symbiosis between the ritornello and the gallop, this suggests Esposito's position in time and memory; the more he endeavours to investigate the past the more it becomes indistinct. This link between past and present is evident in the filmic techniques used to represent the shifts in time. The flashbacks are not signalled using transition devices (fades, dissolves etc) or a subjective voice-over from the central character, conventions which represent the past as separate to the present of the film. In *The Secret in their Eyes* the past and present are fluid. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish which period the film is in (the characters are aged slightly but remain very similar to their younger selves). The movement in time is done by linking objects in the mise-en-scene such as the focus on everyday props such as the faulty typewriter Esposito used as an investigator and is now typing his memoir on.

Film Form and the Figuration of Temporality

The aesthetic form of the temporal gateway films is a way of exploring the theme of memory as a continual antagonistic process of remembering and forgetting. The competition over memory is evident in the foregrounding of stillness and movement in film form as a kind of battle, with one attempting to subsume the other. This idea is further linked to temporality with on the one hand, a character's need to move forward in time and on the other the temptation to remain either in the past or in an endless present. This concept of foregrounding the contrast between stillness and movement rehearses some of the key ideas about film and its definition as a medium of motion and action. The

evaluation of cinema as a radical, positively destructive form comes in part from its inability to be still, in contrast to an elite art which demanded contemplation by a spectator in front of an unchanging image. For Benjamin (1968/1992a, p. 213), the speed of filming, where, “the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech” was what implied reproducibility and “its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (Benjamin, 1968/1992a, p. 215). Deleuze’s (1985/2005) identification of an international art house style as a time-image, counter to the Hollywood mainstream of the movement-image, retrenched the categorisations around high culture and popular forms which film had supposedly ruptured. The connotations of ambiguity of the time-image and art house cinema, were seen as more able to represent the experience of modern life than the definitive response of the movement-image, politically and artistically.⁶⁹ The temporal gateway films discussed in this chapter are structured through the competing forms of these two styles of film-making; the conventional narrative drive (evident in the investigative, quest narratives) which is constantly modified and derailed by the focus on situations of limbo and stasis.

As a form developed during modernism and a symbol of a newly technologised culture, cinema has been defined as inherently of mobility, speed and constant change. For Giuliana Bruno (2002) cinematic representation is never static, the “very technique of representation aspires to motion, tilting, panning” (Bruno, 2002, p. 20) and the development of this moving image has been closely associated with the modern city and its perceived rush and movement. Bruno argues that this travelling cinematic representation which is always moving and wandering, looking at and from diverse positions, has been side-lined in film theory in favour of the idea of a fixed gaze as a way of interpreting film, a gaze which is male, compared to the feminine, haptic interpretation of film as about movement and feeling (Bruno, 2002, p. 16). This tension between stasis and motion, between an optic or haptic

⁶⁹ This division is another example of the hierarchies attached to film styles, these values are also evident in the debates central to film theory and practice in the 1970s, for example see: Wollen, (1972/1982) and MacCabe (1974).

understanding of film, is produced by the moving image's ability to appear still. For Deleuze the static long take in cinema "is the point where the cinematographic image most directly confronts the photograph, it also becomes most radically distinct from it", it is a "representation of what endures, through changing states" (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 17). The photograph has no duration and is therefore unable to show time passing in the way the moving image does, even at its most still. The inherent relationship of the still and moving image is central to film form, its importance evident in the connotations attached to the different forms and in discussion on the effect on the spectator. This conceptualisation also reinforces the medium's specific relationship to temporality; that it experiences, or represents, time passing as forward progression, as a moving on rather than a stasis or backwards journey. Here film is unable to do anything other than move on; in a way reminiscent of working through, it is inherent in its form. This analysis suggests an inevitability to progression, but this is complicated by the intervention by film-makers in manipulating the natural phenomenon of films' relationship to time. This intervention might be the manipulation of film speed, the signifiers of time lapses, or disrupted chronology. Film in its pure state, the non-intervention of a camera recording time as it passes, is continually ruptured and foregrounded in the films for study, evidence that the film-makers are making a particular point about the importance of temporality for the subjects of the film and the spectator. As William Brown (2014) argues, while it is true that all films must capture time, few films have it deliberately as their central focus, showing "the different and differing temporalities of the world precisely because of the prominence that the environment plays in the film; rather than backdrop the environment becomes a prominent character" (Brown, 2014, p. 87).

Bruno's (2002) argument for the film experience as a haptic terrain based on sensory experience and movement can be read in a wider context of art and art history. The teleological art historical view of art's civilising move from the haptic to the optic, from the tactile experience of Egyptian bas-relief to the illusion of space and depth in renaissance art, is a persistent one but one which has been challenged by theorists of modernism who no longer accepted the connotations and value judgements

attached to the different modes of art. The nineteenth-century art historian Alois Reigl's interpretation of the haptic was influential on Benjamin's analysis of the transformation of perception evident with the emergence of cinema, where the viewer sees haptically through interaction with the technological gaze on screen (Benjamin, 1968/1992b). In Reigl's example of Egyptian art it is the slightly raised modelling against the flatness, the lack of shading and light and dark which provokes the viewer to want to touch, not to remain passive or distant. This relationship between viewer and work of art is very different to the later relationship, seen by Reigl as an inevitable, civilising progression, of optical contemplation between artwork and spectator (cited in Marks, 2002, p. 4).

Benjamin (1968/1992b, p. 216) refers to Reigl's analysis of art as being either haptic or optic, but reverses the values attached to the move from one form to the other, to make a case for the tactile and haptic as a progressive mode of perception which destroyed auratic art. This destruction of the established optical hierarchy was achieved through simultaneous mass viewing of reproductions and also by the visceral jolt to perception provoked by film construction; the impossibility of optical contemplation before a film which was continually shifting its place and focus: "Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. With the close up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended" (Benjamin, 1968/1992a, p. 229). This shift in perception, in the understanding of time and space, was linked for Benjamin, as it was later for Deleuze, with social transformation. In Benjamin's argument this radical new way of seeing through filmic representations would have a transformative effect, creating a more democratic, equal society (Benjamin, 1968/1992a, p. 225).

The representation of multiple temporalities is explored in a variety of ways in the temporal gateway film, at the level of subject matter, characterisation and aesthetic. Throughout these areas the representation is a product of conflicting forms which are antagonistic to each other, posing a series

of oppositions. The central tension in the films is about the need to construct an identity in the future through the contradiction of remembering and forgetting. Overall these oppositions can be characterised as a series of contrasts between stillness and repetition, movement and progression. These concepts of time and motion, in turn, contain a range of meanings and provoke different spectator responses. These include stillness as an attempt by the characters to arrest time and to make it physical and meaningful, evident in the aesthetic emphasis on material culture and the texture and fabric of props and settings. It is also evident in the mise-en-scene of cities and interiors, of the contrasting textures of glass and concrete, in actors' performances, in the use of long static takes which encourage distanced contemplation and mobile camera which places the spectator in the forefront, travelling to the future. In carving out the present, the stasis in the film aesthetic suggests an entrapment for characters, the ongoing limbo between needing to remember in order to move forward and becoming trapped by the past. The paradoxical stillness of the moving image, static camera, empty, frozen mise-en-scene, reflects the experience of time for characters caught in time. This ongoing conflict is a way of conceptualising temporality as a physical struggle, something painful but also exhilarating, a spectator response as well as way of materialising temporality as experienced by the characters.

Disrupting the Categorisations of the Past in *Ida*

Ida explores the complexities of remembering national, religious and ethnic historical trauma in the context of anxieties around the limiting nature of geographical borders. Drawing on the concepts of memory studies and approaches to defining the experience of place in modernity, I argue that the film configures the weight of the past through place - nation, towns and buildings - as a burden which must be superseded by traveling and transition, a form of non-place. This conflict between the two states constructs a haptic response for the viewer: an understanding of the physical sensation of attempting to remember but not to be trapped by the past. In offering ways of escaping the past *Ida* questions the

need for memorialization of trauma through categories of place and identity. *Ida* herself is a transitional figure in this movement from past to present and future, remaining in limbo at the end of the film, suggesting the difficulties as well as hopefulness of this trajectory. These positions of entrapment and movement experienced by *Ida* are illuminated through Gilles Deleuze's (1989/2005) concept of the crystal image which suspends characters in limbo and Marc Augé's (1995/2008) concept of non-place, a transient place without meaning or conventional definitions of identity.

In its exploration of Polish society during and after the Second World War, *Ida* shows the destruction of lives through ethnic categorization and state control. These limiting and divisive categories are national and cultural, evident in the historical desire to confer stable and fixed borders, religious and ethnic identities. The film's setting in time and place, Poland in the early 1960s, is pivotal. The context of historical and political events, specifically the effect of the German occupation and annexation of Poland in the Second World War and its inclusion in the Soviet bloc in 1947, are used in *Ida* as an allegory for the limiting and damaging nature of all forms of categorization on humanity. These historical events are part of the profile of a country whose borders had been redrawn frequently throughout the previous two hundred years. The film contrasts this experience of division and confinement of people and places with the possibility of a future openness which leaves behind rigid definitions.

The plot of the film concerns *Ida* Lebenstein (Agata Trzebuchowska), a young Jewish woman who initially believes herself to be Catholic, and is on the verge of taking up her vows to become a nun. This process is disrupted by the arrival of her Aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza) who takes her on a road trip through southeast Poland, from Łódź to Szydłów, in order to reveal *Ida*'s past to her, namely that her parents and Wanda's child were murdered by fellow Poles during the occupation. *Ida*, who has no memory of the places that she visits on the road trip, becomes a fluid character of movement and transition. Freed from the confines of the convent which defines her identity at the start of the film,

Ida spends a pivotal period of her journey in a hotel in Szydłów, before the final shots place her in uncertain space rather than a place with a stable meaning.

Ida's view of place and its divisions is historically specific to Poland, but also resonates in the context of the film's release in the early twenty-first century and the increasing contestation over open borders in Europe. The Schengen Agreement (1985) abolished checks on internal borders within the European Union (EU), central to the organization's commitment to the free movement of people, a commitment made legally binding through the Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Commission 2010). This principle of openness and mobility is currently under attack, exemplified by the United Kingdom's vote to leave the EU, but also evident in other contemporary populist political movements (for example, Poland's Law and Justice Party, the National Front in France, the Danish People's Party) which argue for a return to domestic control of the movement of people and the demarcation of national borders. In this context *Ida's* message about the dangers of barriers and divisions has a contemporary as well as historical relevance in respect of how place is defined. The film's engagement with the issues of borders and travel can be understood in the context of memory studies as *Ida* can be discussed through the prism of transcultural memory (as outlined in the Introduction), a form of remembering which is "continually moving across and beyond ...territorial and social borders" (Erll, 2011, p. 10). Elements of transcultural memory can be identified (if not defined as such) in early aspects of memory studies. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) describes how individual recollections are created through an active form of remembering, influenced by a range of different contexts and social groups, arguing that "the greatest number of our memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38). Erll (2011) argues that this conception of individual recollection, drawn from different groups and experiences is inherently transcultural, something which becomes closed down in Halbwach's definition of collective memory: "When he writes about the individual he provides a good model of the transculturality of memory. But when he looks at the construction of collective memory in social settings, he seems to imagine a 'containered' memory" (Erll, 2011, p. 11). The character of *Ida* is a transcultural figure, her exploration

of her own frames of references as Polish, Jewish, Catholic, and female in the context of wider political and historical contexts, constitute the themes of the film. *Ida* reflects on the shifts between personal and collective memory, constructing a further entrapment for the central character in her negotiation between the two.

In attempting to locate *Ida* in the context of national cinema its appeal as a travelling rather than national film becomes apparent. The national reception tends to fix and close down meaning evident, as will be shown, in the argument from some Polish commentators and academics that *Ida* was problematic because of its lack of historical, cultural and political specificity. As a film about both the Second World War and the experience of life during the Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (PRL), *Ida* deals with two of the familiar themes of Polish cinema. The film, though, was little seen by a domestic audience, with very limited cinema distribution and correspondingly low box office. Its national reception was also characterised by a number of positive reviews and festival success⁷⁰ but also controversy, with cultural and political figures on the left and right in Poland attacking the film's representation of the past.⁷¹ Although the film may have failed in one aim of national cinema – addressing a culturally specific audience - it did succeed in fulfilling another, in that it travelled to an international audience representing the nation abroad. In debates about the role of Polish cinema these two functions – success at home and critical recognition internationally – have been central in envisioning the function of Polish film. The wish for Polish cinema to be recognised abroad has intensified as it has become more isolated, unable to replicate the international success of the auteur cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s, when Polish directors such as Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi, Jerzy Hoffmann and Jerzy Antczak were successful beyond Poland. In contrast, *Ida*, has been

⁷⁰Best Film: Warsaw Film Awards, Best Film, Best Director, Best actress, Best Editing: Polish National Film Awards (The Eagles).

⁷¹ For an account of the differing positions in the controversy over *Ida* in Poland see Bill Stanley (2014).

distributed far more successfully abroad, to over fifty countries, than at home and this is in the context of a country which has a robust audience for national cinema.

Despite dealing with similar periods of history as some of Poland's biggest recent box office successes (e.g. *Battle of Warsaw 1920* (Jerzy Hoffman, 2011), *Warsaw 44* (Jan Komasa, 2014)), *Ida* is clearly a film of a completely different, more austere, style than those far more popular films. The response to the release of *Ida* at the cinema was muted. It was released on 75 screens (about half the number that a Hollywood or Polish blockbuster would expect), and in its first week it was the ninth most popular film in Poland and disappeared from the top twenty after the second week. Two other Polish films dealing with the recent past were released at the same period, one by Andrzej Wajda, the bio-pic *Walesa* (Wajda, 2013) and *Bilet na Księżyc* (Ticket to the Moon) (Jacek Bromski, 2013), the story of brothers in the Polish navy in 1969, both of which were very popular domestically.⁷² In contrast, while *Ida* was rejected domestically, it was successful across other European countries, Latin America and the US.

Ambiguity in *Ida*

The nature of the film, which meant that it could be successfully marketed to both Jewish and Catholic religious groups in the US, is indicative of a response to the film which has seen it as open, a characteristic which has been seen as problematic, even offensive, in Poland.⁷³ It is this lack of definitiveness – in subject matter and style – which seems to mark out *Ida* as different from the more popular contemporary Polish films. The controversy which marked the reception of *Ida* in Poland increased with its international success and particularly with its nomination and subsequent Academy Award. Interestingly the film has been attacked for being both anti Polish and antisemitic, by

⁷² See Van Heuckelom & Van Otterdijk, (2017) for a comparative analysis of *Ida* and *Ticket to the Moon*.

⁷³ Although this response has mostly been evident in its national reception, it has been pointed to elsewhere; Richard Brody (2014) in a review in *The New Yorker* titled 'The Distasteful Vagueness of *Ida*' argued: "Nothing in the film is a solid thing or an action; everything is an example".

commentators on the left and right of the political spectrum. Filip Mazurczak (2015) lists a series of comments by a Polish MEP, the Polish political scientist Michal Szulczynski and those published on a Catholic website *Frona*, which all argue that the film is guilty of a defamation of Poles through a misleading representation of the occupation and of the holocaust.⁷⁴ Accusations of antisemitism, which only seem to be considered in Poland, are based on the idea that the film plays on national stereotypes, particularly of Jewish women. These attacks were in direct contrast to the popular critical acclaim and awards the film received. Agnieszka Graff (2013) is scathing about the critical consensus around *Ida*, accusing Polish critics of being in a competition to see who can lavish the most praise on the film. The qualities for which it is praised, its aesthetic, 'subtlety' and 'openness' she finds problematic, arguing that the film ignores the politics and specificity of Polish history. Graff does cite one challenge to the dominant view, the feminist critic Anna Zawadzka. Zawadzka (2013) argues that the narrative of the film reinforces antisemitic and misogynist tropes in a simplistic story of revenge about a Jewish woman sentencing Poles to death as a vendetta for the murder of her relatives. This is a reading of the film echoed in comments made by Helena Datner of the Jewish Historical institute in Poland (cited in Mazurczak (2015)), who argued in a discussion after a screening of the film that, "*Ida* presents a protagonist according to a simple principle: what Poles want to think of a Jewess building real socialism. That she's a whore and an alcoholic." Graff compares *Ida* to the more popular, thriller genre retelling of the Jedwabne massacre in *Pokłosie (Aftermath)* (Wladyslaw Pasikowski, 2011), an event first publicly exposed in Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors*. Graff notes: "*Aftermath* is basically a pop culture version of *Neighbors*. Pasikowski's film has its flaws, but it is important and brave; he can be accused of anything, but not subtlety and escape from politics [as in *Ida*]". The controversial ambiguity of *Ida* is in part a product of the tension inherent in the themes of the film.

⁷⁴ It is unclear whether *Ida* would now be judged in breach of the recent law (2018) passed in Poland which criminalises suggestions that Poles were complicit in the holocaust. When the film was broadcast on national television (before the law was passed) the government added a series of title cards at the end of the film which stated that only a small minority of Poles had aided the murder of Jews.

As with several of the films in this study, *Ida* can be read as a parable about the need to investigate the past in order to achieve a sense of identity, a message about the dangers of covering up past atrocities. It is also though a film which suggests the dangers of closing down any meaning of the past, of making it fixed and definitive. In arguing this, the film emphasises the power of the central character to change the past as well as her future which is also open to change; it is no longer pre-ordained.

The representation of place and non-place in *Ida*

Ida configures the weight of the past through place - nation, towns and buildings - as a burden which must be superseded by travelling and transition, a form of non-place. This conflict between the two states constructs a haptic response for the viewer: an understanding of the physical sensation of attempting to remember but not to be trapped by the past. In offering ways of escaping the past *Ida* questions the need for memorialization of trauma through categories of place and identity. *Ida* herself is a transitional figure in this movement from past to present and future, remaining in limbo at the end of the film, suggesting the difficulties as well as hopefulness of this trajectory. These positions of entrapment and movement experienced by *Ida* are illuminated through Gilles Deleuze's (1985/2005) concept of the crystal-image, which suspends characters in limbo, and Marc Augé's (1995/2008) concept of non-place, a transient place without meaning or conventional definitions of identity. The ongoing tension in the relationship between place and non-place is echoed in Deleuze's definition of the crystal-image. In *Cinema 2* (1985/2005), Deleuze argues that cinema's unique expression of time is due to the fact that film is inherently a crystal-image. The crystal-image is constructed through the repeated exchange of the virtual and the real; the image as it was recorded and passes becomes virtual, the present, as it is viewed, the real. *Ida*'s character and the fluidity of her identity, suspended between the trauma of Poland's past and an unknowable future, exemplify this form of repetition and slow transformation, embracing the lack of definitive categorisation of self and place.

The use of non-place in *Ida* is imbued with a sense of loss, particularly in the representation of the life and death (by suicide) of Wanda Cruz, Ida's aunt, who represents the small number of Jews remaining in Łódź post-war. Wanda's isolated and despairing life in Łódź (signified by her reliance on alcohol and sexual relationships devoid of emotional connection) can be understood through the historical context of the city. The loss of Jewish culture is a phenomenon identified by David M. Smith (2000, p. 68) in his analysis of the post-war rebuilding of Łódź, as the "moral geography of absence", a process which accepts the disappearance of a group from the landscape of a country without acknowledging that absence. Smith continues, "Its representation has to come to terms not only with the death of those quarter of a million, and the survival of so few, but also with the absence of evidence or even recollection that most of them ever lived" (p. 69-70). In 1939 Łódź had the second largest Jewish community outside of Warsaw, facing "the Second World War with a Jewish population of 230 000" (Smith, 2000, p. 68). The majority of this population died in the Łódź ghetto, and the sealing of the ghetto in 1940 is a further horrific image of separation and control. As Smith states (2000, p. 68), "with very few exceptions, those who avoided murder or starvation in the ghetto itself went to the death camps at Chelmno and Auschwitz". The Jewish population at the end of the war numbered less than a thousand. In its reference to this absence, *Ida* is part of a current debate about the meaning and extent of Jewish spaces in Poland today, in cultural production as well as geographical locations. In *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*, Lehrer and Meng (2015, p. 1) argue that recent Polish cinema, such as the trilogy, *And Europe Will be Stunned* (Yael Bartana 2007 - 2011) and *Aftermath* (Wladyslaw Pasikowski 2012), has played a part in the project of restoring Jewish space in Poland, to "powerfully evoke spaces of not only past and present but also future Jewishness". Here the argument is for defined space to represent the presence of Jews in Poland, to overcome their absence. In contrast, the concept of non-place in *Ida* suggests a different way of conceiving of space, one which is positive in its lack of definitiveness. Where the themes of some Polish films and the restoration of Jewish religious sites, including the synagogue in Szydłów (the destination of the road

trip in *Ida*), suggest an emerging presence and rediscovery of place as a recognition of identity, *Ida* posits a continued absence of the Jewish population.

Wanda's death in the film is configured as an image of absence, of non-place, but one which contains the traces of her presence, like a haunting. Her death is almost mundane and every day: she puts on her coat as if to go to work, stubs out her cigarette and then jumps from the apartment window. A long take emphasises the empty room and the open window after she has jumped; the faint wisp of cigarette smoke and the continued soundtrack of Mozart's 'Jupiter' symphony playing (a composition we associate with Wanda from an earlier scene in the film when she plays a recording of it) reinforce the lack of the woman who experienced them. Wanda's apartment becomes an empty space which signifies tragedy and loss rather than optimism and change (Figure 2.5). *Ida*, through the character of Wanda, remembers the annihilation of the individual's identity in a specific time and place, the holocaust, but also imagines, through the mutable character of *Ida*, an existence free from definitive categories. This tension in the film, of respecting past identities while attempting to become free from them, is a fraught position in the context of memorialization and theories of identity. *Ida* makes absence within place central to a dissolution of identity categories, finding the concept of non-place ultimately more hopeful in its uncertainty, than places linked to territories and specifics of the past.



Figure 2.5: The mise-en-scene of Wanda's flat in *Ida* (2014) emphasises absence

Postmemory Film as Crystal-image

The central theme of *Ida*, whether it is possible to find a way of remembering the past but not to be trapped by it, is a particular concern of postmemory (Marianne Hirsch, 2012). Postmemory explores the experience of the descendants of those directly affected by traumatic events, and the way in which memory is transmitted to later generations who did not experience the event itself. *Ida* explores one of the central dilemmas facing this group, identified by Eva Hoffman (2004, p. xv) as the "hinge generation", by the way in which they take on the survivor's memories with a force that may displace the latter's own memories and subjectivity. In this way *Ida* can be understood as a product of postmemory, the subject matter positioned between the direct experience of a previous generation and an anxiety about the loss of remembrance within the later one. The concept of postmemory continually draws attention to the slippage of memory away from the object of remembrance. In *Ida* this concept is explored in the attempt to return, through the road trip, to places which contain the past and the simultaneous need to escape them in order to live in the present and future.

The use of place in *Ida* can be understood as reflecting different states of the crystal-image (Deleuze 1985/2005, p. 66) which is a central characteristic of the time-image. In the crystal-image, the present is defined as a form of entrapment, a kind of limbo which must be made transitory in order to escape into the real of the future. To continue from the discussion above relating to *A Separation*, Deleuze (1985/2005, p.81) characterises the crystal-image as a continual splitting of the present into two images “one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time consists of this split, and it is ... time, that we see in the crystal”. It is in this way, Deleuze argues, that cinema explores the past and memory, configured through its inherent form as fleeting and subjective, a series of doubles and mirror images which confuse the distinction between the real and imaginary, actual and virtual images. As further elaborated above, Deleuze refers to the way in which characters can become trapped in the crystal-image, which is at times frozen and closed, with characters stuck, unable to move forward but continually dragged back into the past, or cracked, allowing for an escape into the future and freedom. The narrative of *Ida* and her aunt positions them as trapped within the crystal-image. For the character of *Ida* this is due to her specific place in time, in limbo between childhood and adulthood, and because she is ignorant of her parentage and ethnicity. In contrast, *Wanda* is trapped by her own inability to come to terms with her the past. These character narratives operate as a prism through which the effect of the past on an individual is explored in a narrative which is constructed through motifs of place. The characters’ movements between these different types of place and the different roles that they undertake in them signifies, as with the relationship of time in the crystal-image, two different ways of constructing the past, one that may be fixed or one that is open to interpretation. In arguing this the film emphasizes the power of the central character to change the past as well as her future, an interpretation which defines *Ida* as a time-image film which can be discussed in terms of the crystal-image and the relationship between the actual and virtual. The interplay between the actual and virtual is evident in the representation of the past which is not fixed but can be rediscovered or reinvented. In the concept of the crystal-image the future is also open to change, it is no longer pre-ordained.

The experience of the characters in the crystal-image is constructed in *Ida* in part through the aesthetic of the film,⁷⁵ which is shot in monochrome and the Academy 4:3 aspect ratio, with long takes and a frequently static camera. Matilda Mroz (2016) argues that the aesthetic, particularly the framing of the characters low or at the edges of the frame, is part of the film's representation of absence: "outside the boundaries of our field of vision. It is an apt rendering for the ways in which Polish-Jewish history and memory continually comes up against absence". The Academy ratio – particularly for spectator's accustomed to viewing the 16:9 aspect ratio of widescreen – also signifies the past, constructing a feeling of restriction which entraps the characters, pinning them to their places (Figure 2.6). The use of the mobile camera which features at times of narrative transition is given meaning through its contrast to this enclosed space; it is the visual expression of *Ida*'s conflict between staying in the confined, solid world of the convent or moving into undefined space of non-place.



Figure 2.6: Ida (2014) The enclosed space of the academy ratio reinforces the positioning of the characters as trapped

⁷⁵ Like recent films *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) and *Blancanieves* (Pablo Berger, 2013) it recreates a past cinematic style which evokes not just a historical mise-en-scene, but a more complete experience of a cinematic return to the past.

Place in *Ida* is constructed through a series of contrasts which function symbolically through connotations of solidity and permanence as well as spaces of more abstract, tentative qualities. This function of place can be identified as characteristic of the director's, Pawel Pawlikowski's, visual style and his interest in constructing settings which gesture towards a realist style, such as being shot on location, but which are impossible to place. In discussing the choice of setting for his film *The Last Resort* (2000), a similar approach to that in *Ida* is evident. Regarding *The Last Resort*, Pawlikowski explains, "every location was chosen because it wasn't quite real, or real but not real. I tried to stylise it to the point where it wasn't the real world at all" (Roberts 2002, p. 97). Within the crystal-image of *Ida*, the characters' relationships to place create a continual pushing and pulling in relation to the past and the future. They are placed in a state of limbo, caught between a desire to move forward against the weights of the past and its reliance on definitive categorization. Central to this is the role of the convent where *Ida* was sent as a child, an act that saved her life and which functions as both reassurance and prison as she chooses between leaving and remaining. The opening scenes of *Ida* take place in the convent, where the low framing and restricted screen ratio enhance the sense that the characters are trapped. The solid stone columns which surround the nuns are tactile, covered in indications of age through rough surfaces and cracks, and are a reminder of the past. The scenes recall the work of early Renaissance painters where earthly structures such as stone pillars frame and solidify angels and humans (see Duccio's *The Annunciation*, 1307-8, *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, 1310-11: Figure 2.7).



Figure 2.7: The aesthetic of Ida (2014) is reminiscent of early Renaissance painters: Duccio, 'The Annunciation', 1307-8

The structures' entrapment of the past is reinforced by the exaggerated, diegetic sound of the film. When Ida is called into the Mother Superior's office to be told that she must meet her aunt before she takes her orders, the echoes of Ida's footsteps accentuate the container-like quality of the office, a place which reverberates and surrounds the characters. The use of Ida's footsteps to symbolise the contrast between the closed and the open world she moves between is evident as she travels to her aunt's apartment from the convent. After gliding through the streets by tram, her footsteps are silenced as she approaches the apartment before being reinforced once more as she climbs the closed stairs to her aunt's.

The solidity of place is also reinforced in the scenes showing Wanda in her role as a Judge, where the mise-en-scene places her at the judicial bench but also as part of it. This setting, with its emphasis on texture and solidity, appears to enfold Wanda so that the narrow plane of depth frames her face as if she is part of the backdrop of sleek marbled tiles, and the indentations of the studs of the chair

are repeated in the chain of office on her shoulders (Figure 2.8). The sturdiness of the mise-en-scene, and the stillness of the shot, fix the character in place, immobile, suggesting the static position of a person unable to move forward.



Figure 2.8 : Ida (2014): The aesthetic suggests the ways characters are trapped in their roles - Wanda as a judge.

On the Road: Transitional Places

The definitive places of the narrative are contrasted with Ida's experience of other places as lighter and more mobile; places encountered on the road trip, including bus stations, bars, transportation and roads, are represented by a moving camera and shifting patterns of light reflecting from car and bus windows. Images of glass in *Ida* are multivalent and carry different stages of meaning about place and space in the film. Windows are both closed, such as at the convent where they are opaque, but also transparent sites of openness, reminiscent of the structure of the crystal-image. The reflections created by glass in the tram windows, in bars and offices, signify actual and virtual states and suggest alternative actions and experiences beyond the central characters' knowledge. Deleuze (1985/2005, p. 66) identifies the use of reflection in film – in glass, mirrors and water – as the coalescence of the actual and virtual central to the crystal-image. The repeated use of reflections in film is an

encapsulation of the trap of time in the crystal-image which must be escaped, often through force. During Ida and Wanda's road trip, windows provide an opening out to the exterior world. As Wanda sits in a bar waiting for Ida to return from church, she is positioned in front of a picture window with the activity in the street outside clearly visible, which is a shift from the monumentality of the judge's chambers that previously surrounded her. When windows are covered, such as in Wanda's apartment and at the hotel where they stay on their road trip, it is the flimsy, net material that creates patterns in the light, which quickly disappear (Figure 2.9). Wanda's resolve at the start of the film to reject her niece crumbles as she watches her through a window of an office where Ida is waiting for her. At the hotel, Ida's conversation with the young man, Lis, a jazz musician who falls in love with her, is shot against a large window, its lightness reinforced by decorative fairy lights.





Figure 2.9: *Windows become sources of light and possibility in Ida (2014)*

The monumentality and solidity of the material settings are also made more fragile through the representation of their age, to suggest the possibility of the dissolution of past certainties. Unlike the powerful structures of the institutions of State and Church seen in the settings of the court and convent, the buildings in Szydłów (the town where Ida's family had lived) and the surrounding countryside are marked with age. The static long take of the exterior of the block of flats, where the killer, Feliks,⁷⁶ lives, focuses on the cracking concrete of the walls, the uneven surfaces revealing layers of work from different years. At the hospital where Feliks is dying, the paint is peeling off the frame of the bed and the walls behind him. The emphasis on the damage caused by age and the representation of time passing through inanimate objects suggests an inevitability to the destruction of place and, by association, categorization. This process is also evident in the first shots of the farm, which belonged to the Lebensteins before the war. As Wanda and Ida approach the farm another long static take reveals the ages of the building in its different textures and materials from different periods. The crumbling materiality of the places associated with the past, the way in which they are both present and absent, is characteristic of the tension between places and their meaning in *Ida*. The

⁷⁶ In a film where names carry symbolic meanings, the choice of Feliks, meaning happy or lucky, must be ironic.

transformation of place is another form of the interplay of the actual and the virtual, the real and the imagined within the crystal-image in which Ida exists and must escape from.

The focus on the settings, props and textures of the background give the inanimate objects a focus and importance which is missing from more mainstream films about the past. The deliberate focus on elements which are usually unnoticed foregrounds the idea of time passing and the different temporalities experienced by individuals at periods of crisis and transformation. While the films discussed here use different aesthetic styles, all pay close attention to the inanimate objects in the frame and their temporal and spatial relationship to the characters. In contrast, recent Hollywood films about the past (e.g.: *Selma* (2014), *The Butler*, *Fury* (2014), *The Monuments Men* (2014)) all emphasise the primacy of the individual in time with the setting as an anonymous back drop. This approach is reinforced stylistically by the frequent use of a shallow rack focus which emphasises the star in the foreground while blurring the background objects and setting. The contrast between the two aesthetics is notable. In the Hollywood films mentioned the aesthetic is part of the way that the films declare a definitive view of past events (even in films which are revisions or re-evaluations of dominant histories), where the past is controlled by an individual's deliberate and often heroic actions. The progressive movement of the characters is untroubled and unimpeded by multiple or competing versions of the past, a form of film-making in the style of the movement image.

Movement and Stillness: A Haptic Experience of Place

The interplay between solidity and decay is reinforced by the formal construction of movement and stillness, whose contrasting nature configures the experience of entrapment in the crystal-image. An experience transmitted to the spectator through a haptic response creates the visceral sensation of being caught by place and time and the tension between the desire of escape and the temptation to remain. In *Atlas of Emotion* (2002), Giuliana Bruno reclaims the notion of a haptic response to film. She argues that this viewing position has been displaced by the optical and that there needs to be a

move from the “voyeur to voyager”, making the spectator a traveller in a “haptic, emotive terrain” (Bruno, 2002, p. 16). *Ida* provokes a haptic sensation; the emphasis on texture and surfaces appeals to the sense of touch and the possibility of an interaction with the physical objects. The viewer can feel the image and understand space in film through touch and movement. This response is reiterated in *Ida* by the emphasis placed on the textures of age but also in the repeated patterns created by aspects of the physical setting. These include the curled wrought iron staircases at Wanda’s apartment, which is repeated in the spiral staircase and the elaborate grille on the window at the hotel. These intricate patterns invite the viewer to trace the detail, feel the cold of the metal, and become familiar with the sensation. The use of ceramic tiles and marble walls as backdrops at the hospital and in Wanda’s court also evoke the sensation of touch, creating a film world which is experienced through feeling as well as seeing. The specific choice of the types of object which transmit the haptic response are hard and unyielding, stating their presence in the material world. This is again in contrast to the fleeting nature of film itself, the stillness and solidity of the objects as felt by the viewer is opposed to the continually passing image; the tension between the actual and virtual of the crystal-image (Figure 2.10).



Figure 2.10: In Ida (2014) the contrast between the solidity and movement of the image is constructed to create a haptic response

For Bruno (2002) the haptic response is inextricably linked to film as a site of transition and mobility, but one which is in constant symbiotic relationship to stillness: “The moving image overcomes the death of ‘still’ photography. And just as it happens in the work of mourning, life moves on” (Bruno, 2002, p. 25). This description of an infinite haptic overcoming of the stillness of the past, and of death, is very close to Deleuze’s (1985/2005) definition of the crystal-image as, “The two aspects, the present that passes and goes to death, the past which is preserved and retains the seeds of life, repeatedly interfere and cut into each other” (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 89). Both transmit for the spectator the

experience of characters caught in limbo, which Deleuze further conceptualizes in the form of the relationship between a ritornello and the gallop of motion, a relationship which has meaning through contrast. Deleuze (1985/1989) uses this concept to explain the experience of different temporalities: "The gallop and the ritornello are what we hear in the crystal, as the two dimensions of musical time, the one being the hastening of the presents which are passing, the other the raising or falling back of the pasts which are preserved" (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 90) This ongoing conflict is a way of conceptualising past, present and future as sites of physical struggle, something painful but also exhilarating, a haptic response which transmits the characters' experience of temporality.

The aesthetic of contrasting movement and stillness in *Ida* is linked to the construction of place and its symbolic meaning. For Deleuze (1985/2005) the editing of shots of differing duration is directly linked to the ritornello and gallop: "Whatever the speed or the slowness, the line, the tracking shot is a race, a cavalcade, a gallop. But safety comes from a ritornello which is placed or unrolls round a face, and extracts it from the line" (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 89). A similar relationship is evident in *Ida* from the first narrative progression in place, when Ida leaves the convent to meet Wanda in Łódź. In contrast to the objective, static shots in the convent, Ida's journey is shot in point-of-view, travelling shots as she travels on the tram looking out at the street which seems to flash by at speed. As Ida stares out of the tram, patterns of light and shade play across her face in constant movement, an image of a fluid and insubstantial world reflecting an open space in contrast to the past at the convent. This style of shot is repeated throughout the road trip, which Ida and her aunt take to reclaim the bodies of their family. The relationship between movement and stillness remains mobile, again without a definitive fixed point, as exemplified by the film's final shots.

The ending of *Ida* has been the source of differing interpretations, particularly as to whether it

indicates that Ida is returning to the convent, which would suggest closure.⁷⁷ The disagreement is typical of the openness of the moment, but the ending withholds any definitive resolution to Ida's journey. The final shot is another long take, just over a minute in duration (Figure 2.11).



Figure 2.11: The final shot of Ida (2014) is an image of non-place rather than place

The sensation of movement is created by the use of a hand-held camera positioned in front of Ida and moving backwards as she walks towards the camera. Ida, dressed again in her novice's habit, walks down the country road, possibly towards the convent, but her destination is unclear. The composition of the shot emphasizes her distance from the past behind her but provides no image of what lies in front of her; it is a place she never reaches in the duration of the film. The impossibility of arrival is emphasized by the occasional car that passes her, travelling in the opposite direction. In contrast to the movement of the composition, the camera focuses squarely on Ida's face, her eyeline steady, providing the safety of the ritornello. In this image of movement suspended, which is reinforced by

⁷⁷ Mroz (2016) argues that the film remains open; its homage to the ending of *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959) reinforces this. By contrast Elżbieta Durys (2015), in a conference paper placed *Ida* in the tradition of a conservative form of melodrama, suggesting that Ida chooses patriarchy at the end of the film as she returns to the convent and Catholicism.

the relationship between the reverse tracking shot counterpointing the forward movement of the character, Ida is an ambiguous figure, breaking out of the crystal-image of the past and its associated limitations, but nonetheless not moving into a new, defined place. The central focus of temporality and trauma is the character of Ida herself. Ida's search for identity is constructed through her experience of temporality, one which can be understood in relation to the Deleuzian concept of the crystal-image but also in Benjamin's personification of time in the angel of history, a figure which Ida bears similarity to. Ida begins her journey in a state of limbo, caught in the crystal-image in an eternal present. This is in part due to the idea of the convent as removed from conventional chronology in its other worldly status, but is intensified in the discovery that she should really be dead, her place was in the unmarked graves with the rest of her family. When she asks Szymon at the site of the unmarked graves "Why am I not here?", in other words, why am I not dead?, it is a further marker in the severing of her previously assumed identity. The period of her life in the convent is in parallel to her death, an alternative, virtual 'life'. The parallel nature of these experiences defines the time at the convent as a period of dormancy before she is called to Lodz by her aunt. Ida's severing of her previous identity, the cutting of the strings which tied her to the past is a destructive but also liberating act which causes the disruption in temporality and shifts Ida's perception of the past and future.

This image of a figure caught in time, appearing to move but reaching nowhere, is reminiscent of Benjamin's conception of the relationship between the past and the future symbolised by the image of the angel of history. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin is looking back at the rise of Nazism - he refers to the catastrophe and wreckage, strewn with the dead, as characteristics of the past - as Pawlikowski does in surveying the effects of the holocaust from eighty years. Benjamin describes how the angel of history is propelled uncontrollably into the future by, "This storm ... we call progress" (Benjamin, 1968/1992b, p. 249), a desperate view of time passing without logical chronology in a destructive chaos. In the final shot of *Ida*, this idea is reversed. Ida becomes the symbol of progression, a storm of movement, both destructive and exhilarating.

Ida's position in the final moments of the film and the impossibility of knowing her decision – if she has made one – is characteristic of the ambiguity of the film. As has been discussed, the attempt to demarcate places and people is resisted in the film through the construction of the crystal-image and its relation to a haptic response. *Ida* further resists this categorization through the use of spaces of transition, places of movement and mobility. These are sites of possibilities, of different versions of past and future, as well as suggesting absence and the unknown. The space of the possible and indefinable is expressed not just through connotations of mobility and stasis ascribed to the different places in the film, but also through the construction of the in-between place of the hotel, which is the pivotal location on the road trip. Hotels in cinema are often used to represent a non-place of transition and in-betweenness; they encourage anonymity, the trying on of different personae, the ability to rewrite oneself.⁷⁸ The space of the hotel has also been interpreted as a uniquely modern one, a place which continually slips between geographical locations, being difficult to categorize and locate. The notion of non-delineated space in modernity has been conceptualized around a negative, a product or reflection of alienation, but also as a liminal place of transformation. In Augé's (1995/2008) view, the non-place such as that of the hotel is a liberating one, "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver", (Augé, 1995/2008, p. 83). He goes on to argue that: "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (Augé, 1995/2008, p. 83). This position might be mapped on to Deleuze's (1985/2005 p. 112) conception of

⁷⁸ Many films use hotels' ability to signify places outside of everyday time and space to focus on central characters who are in the process of a variety of transformations which may or may not return them to the real world. Some recent examples include; *Lost in Translation* (Sophia Coppola, 2003), *Somewhere* (Sofia Coppola, 2010), *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015), *Youth* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2015), and *Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014). The indeterminate nature of hotel space is also part of the supernatural iconography of the horror film, where it provides the setting for characters with multiple personae; such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *1408* (Mikael Håfström, 2007), and *Identity* (James Mangold, 2003). For detailed exploration of the variety of functions of hotels see Clark, Pfannhauser and Doel (2009).

“any-space-whatever”, an open rather than closed space: “It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways” (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 113). The possibilities of indeterminate space are in contrast to the fixed nature of places linked to the past in *Ida*.

During the two nights at the hotel in Szydłów, which is celebrating its anniversary (a reference to traditional ways of commemorating the past), *Ida* adheres to her religion and novitiate training. She initially stays in her room and rejects her aunt’s offer of a choice of party dresses to wear to the celebrations. Nevertheless, she goes on to discover the music of John Coltrane, develops her relationship with a possible romantic partner, Lis, and discusses the location of her family’s graves with another visitor, Szymon, the son of Feliks. The hotel can be read as a seed in Deleuzian terms (1985/2005, p. 81-2) because it reflects a series of alternative identities which *Ida* may try on before either staying within the crystal or “bursting forth” into life. The choices held out to *Ida* during the transition period of the hotel are reiterated later on in the film, reinforcing the idea of future possibilities, none of which are predetermined or concluded at the end of the film.

The hotel as liminal space in *Ida* is linked to the ritornello and the gallop, another site of constant movement and exchange, which has a particular relationship to the process of remembering the past. In this way the hotel in *Ida* provides the backdrop for possible past and future interpretations; it is impossible to fix meaning. This setting reflects *Ida*’s own position as a liminal figure in a stage of transition, which is symbolic of the hinge generation. *Ida*’s transformative power is explored through her relationship to the liminal space of the hotel, her mobility between place and non-place, through to the final shot of the film which suspends her in a space of ambiguity. This ambiguity gives *Ida* a kind of freedom in her resistance to definitions. In doing this the film suggests a way of negotiating the need to live with the trauma of the past while moving into the present and the future.

The non-place of the hotel personifies the film’s movement from limiting categories represented

through places and their associations with boundaries and division. Ambiguity imbues the film as a way of attempting to memorialize past losses without repeating the trap of categorization - of nations, religions, ethnicity, gender - which led to them. The style of the film, in its movement between and exploration of place and non-place, the fixed and the mobile, is a response to the problems of conceiving of a replacement to memorializing the past through places and identity categories. Drawing on the concept of absence as an inherent feature of remembrance, *Ida* contributes to a process of remembering, which also allows a freedom from the past. Ultimately the film finds solace in the existence of the character of Ida in non-place rather than making claim to another divisive category of place and the associated markers of division.

The Search for Spatial and Temporal Identity

The motif of characters such as Ida suspended in time, either attempting to find a place of stability or to be able to move forward, is something which links the films under discussion, despite their differences in style and contexts. The documentary essay film, *Nostalgia for the Light*, places a group of characters and their experiences of temporality in the theatre setting of the Atacama Desert and the sky above it, a setting which operates as an archive for a range of past experiences; personal, national and universal. The subject matter of *Nostalgia for Light* is temporality and the different - conflicting - ways individuals and groups experience it.

In the first minutes of *Nostalgia for the Light*, the screen is filled with a series of black and white images of planet earth. The camera pans slowly across the images; a long shot establishes the planet's position in the cosmos, close ups reveal its uneven surface of dips and hollows, a tactile representation. The final close-up of the sequence, where the planet fills the frame, is gradually superimposed by an indistinct pattern of light and shade flickering across the screen (Figure 2.12). The pattern is slowly revealed to be sunlight shining through the leaves of a tree, reflected in the glass of a window in a house in Santiago, Chile; an image further identified as a memory of the filmmaker's

childhood home. This journey from the universal to the particular is then later reversed in some of the final images of the film. Here, a close-up of another globe, a child's marble, symbolises the innocence of the filmmaker's youth, a time when, as his voice over describes, "each of us could carry the universe in the depths of our pockets", a memory of temporality before the violent coup in Chile which ruptured the experience of time and space. In this range of scientific and personal images, of reconstructions and imaginings of the history of a place and a universe, Patricio Guzmán encapsulates the differing experience of time, space and memory in the aftermath of trauma, a philosophical exploration which is the central theme of the film.



Figure 2.12: Nostalgia for the Light (2010): The director's memory of dappled sunlight is superimposed on an image of the cosmos

The Temporal Gateway and the Essay Film

This search for meaning in a past which intersects subjective and public history places *Nostalgia for the Light* in the grouping of the temporal gateway film, which has thematic and stylistic similarities with the essay film. Central to the definition of the essay film is its examination of the interconnection between subjectivity and the public sphere. For Timothy Corrigan (2011, p. 63) this meeting is a destabilising one, the product of “a social, existential, and representational crisis that would galvanize an essayistic imperative to question and debate not only a new world but also the very terms by which we subjectively inhabit, publicly stage, and experientially think that world”. The moment of representational crisis is apparent in the temporal gateway film where subjectivity is explored through time, with characters who are in limbo: simultaneously trapped by the past but also attempting to move forward. This state of limbo is the result of a period of crisis in the context of a traumatic national history. The porous nature of the essay film, which cuts across different categories of film style, is characteristic of this group of films which all have hybrid forms, crossing borders between art house and genre, fiction and nonfiction, the national and transnational.

The temporal gateway film also shares with the essay film an understanding of the past as a product of competing views and fragments of memory which are unresolved; a focus on journeys and quests of exploration into personal and public histories which remain elusive. As a form which can look both outward and inward to examine how we think about the world, the essay film is a way of representing the working of mind and memory; an ideal form to configure the experience of time. *Nostalgia for the Light* uses the form of the essay film to explore questions of Chilean national identity in the context of memory and reconciliation. As a displaced person – an exile from Chile in the 1970s – the filmmaker Patricio Guzmán narrates the film as memory; an attempt to reconstruct his own past as a Chilean, a past which has been lost. Guzmán also links his own exploration of time and space as a filmmaker to the other subjects of the film whose lives are defined in different ways by their connection to the past. The film is a reflection on different types of excavation into the history of Chile through focusing on individuals with a marked relationship to that history; the female relatives of the disappeared (those people tortured, imprisoned and murdered following the coup in 1973), survivors

of the Chacabuco concentration camp, archaeologists and the astronomers at the ALMA observatory. The characters are also linked by their relationship to the Atacama Desert, site of the nitrate mines of the nineteenth century which were operated through the forced labour of indigenous people, the Chacabuco concentration camp of the twentieth and the world's largest telescope in the twenty-first; the film presents these places as a form of layering and repression of previous histories and trauma. The subject matter of the film is the different ways these individuals and groups experience temporality. This ranges from the astronomers' conception of time as infinite, where past, present and future can hardly be distinguished, to the women who have a specific understanding of the past as containing the remains of their murdered relatives, to the archaeologist who is able to see the layers of history within a geographical space and reveal the ideological reasons for either excavating or burying the past. These different evaluations of history as abstract, political and material are made more complex by the experiences of the survivors of Chacabuco whose memories are archived in the body; recreating the physical experience of life in the camps.

These differing relationships to the past are central to *Nostalgia for the Light*; there cannot be one version of Chile's past but several, rejecting the idea of a singular national history. Shohini Chaudhuri (2014) argues that the aim of the juxtaposition of the different "regions of the past" in the film is "to summon us to remember and make connections between different violent histories. This is the cosmic perspective that it offers" (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 104).

Memory Places and Archives

Nostalgia for the Light has been read in the context of memory studies as a new way of defining archives, where the earth and the cosmos itself become archival records. David Martin Jones (2013) identifies two intertwined archival spaces in the film, the universe and the desert, which are

continuously searched for evidence of the past, functioning as vast archives of human experience. In addition, I would identify a third space, that of the filmmaker and the film form itself; another archive full of memories and experience. The pre-title sequence of *Nostalgia for the Light* sets up a link between film, astronomy and temporality so that the form in which the past is explored becomes a way of exemplifying the perception of time. This is evident in the first shots of the film, which are a series of close ups of mechanical parts of a telescope which constructs the similarity between the telescope and a film projector. Starting with a close up of a metal base the sequence focuses on a series of abstract shots of discs and wheels slotting and linking in to place like a two-reel projection system. The motion of the telescope's ratchet wheel mirrors the spooling of film on to the sprocket. The sound of the cogs whirring in the head of the telescope echoes the distinctive – and now obsolete – noise of film projection. The circular shutter system of the telescope is also reminiscent of a zoetrope. The sequence culminates with a long shot showing the completed telescope ready for use beneath the dome of the observatory. The link between telescope and projector emphasises similarities in their relationship to time and image; both capture the past through light for it to be received in the present, which has already past. The first image of the cosmos in the film continues the analogy with a beam of light illuminating dust particles in the darkness, a motif reminiscent of the projector's beam of light emerging from the projection box with its trajectory lighting the dust in the air over the audience before reaching the screen (Figure 2.13). The visual reference to cinema in a film about the need to excavate the past in order to live in the future, links the filmmaker to the other groups represented in the film. In this context, the filmmaker is like an archaeologist or astronomer, exploring the past in order to understand the present and future; he becomes an active interpreter of national and individual histories, rather than an observer of events.

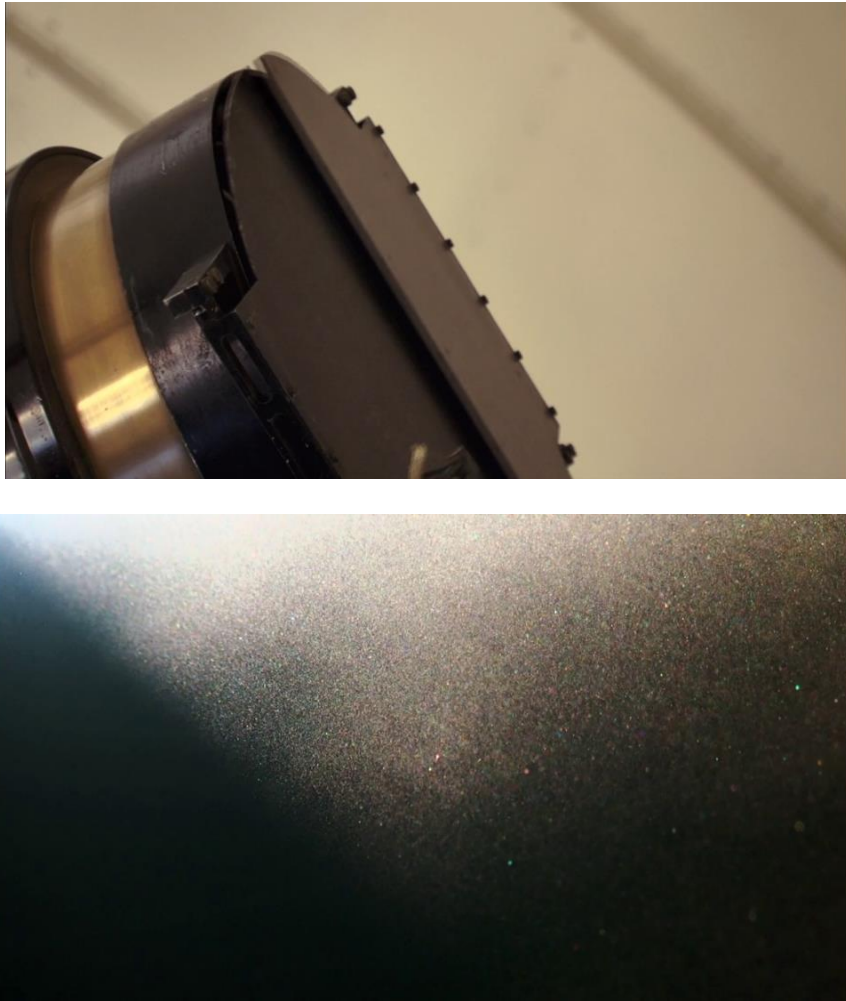


Figure 2.13: Nostalgia for the Light (2010): the telescope and beam of light through the cosmos suggest the film projector

This interpretation is evident in the personal framing of the film through memory and recollection by the filmmaker, a characteristic of the essay film which so often foregrounds fragments and fleeting moments from a life or from the life of a place or time. This archive, which is an interplay of filmic and memory images, reinforces the indeterminate category of *Nostalgia for the Light*, where distinctions of real and imaginary, material and ephemeral are constantly challenged, with imagination, rather than the objective study of an historical event, offering the possibility of recovery from trauma. This is apparent in Guzmán's recreation of moments from his childhood which frames the other pasts which are the film's subject. These are constructed as 'memory places', a spatial and temporal mnemonic of events of the past. The images are material and specific, presented in a montage,

focusing on textures and surfaces; a radiogram, the kitchen of his childhood home, a napkin folded on a plate on top of a crocheted table cloth, a satin bedspread, but they are also impossible to grasp. The sunlight flickers across the objects making them indistinct – a style which becomes a familiar motif of the film - the film form erases each image through editing once it has appeared. Guzmán's voice-over adds to the sense of memories coming into and out of being as he remembers an idyllic period, tinged with a romantic recall as he refers to the way his childhood was interpreted through his love of sci-fi films and astronomy, the two forms, fictional and objective, already becoming intertwined, initiating the subjectivity of the film to follow. This series of moments at the beginning of the film proposes the power of the imagination and memory to recreate time and place, to construct a peace which is real for the person who remembers it. This is echoed by the words of the astronomers at ALMA who argue that they would search for the remains of their loved ones in the stars rather than in the desert; Valentina Rodríguez, whose parents were murdered during the dictatorship, explains how astronomy has given her reconciliation as it has allowed her to imagine them as existing still in the universe. This transcendent philosophy suggests a way of memorialising the past while recovering from trauma. To do this many of the conventional aspects of national cinema which deal with traumatic events, such as the reconstruction of the past in order to explain it, are circumvented.

In making temporality – and the differing perceptions of it – the focus of a film about Chilean history, *Nostalgia for the Light* avoids a conventional narrative construction of the past which, in Hayden White's definition, functions as a "neutral container of historical fact" (White, 1997, p. 393). Time as subject matter subverts one of the central definitions of narrative realism where time is subordinate to events which are presented in a cause and effect relationship; in doing this *Nostalgia for the Light* explores the effect of historical events through a commentary on the attempt to remember, rather than by providing a sense of a truth about the past. The film challenges the narrativity of historical discourse through foregrounding the multiple experiences of the past as simultaneously subjective and official, specific and intangible; its representation of the universe as infinite (another contested 'truth') provides a metaphor for the ultimate unknowability of the past. In

addition to its integration of the subjective address of the essay film, *Nostalgia for the Light* erodes the categories of factual and fictional film forms through its Deleuzian engagement with temporality, specifically the idea that film captures the experience of living in time through characters that are also caught in the crystal-image. This is a move away from documentary realism in order to find a way of representing events in the postmodern era. Postmodern representations of events, in Hayden White's analysis, place "in abeyance the distinction between the real and the imaginary" (White, 1996, p. 19). The context of postmodernism therefore raises problematic questions of how films which engage with the complexities of remembering and the lack of distinction between fact and fiction, can still convey a sense of truthfulness as opposed to pure relativism. In his work on American documentary film, Geiger (2011) addresses this question, arguing that the postmodern turn in documentary helped to underline "the fragmentary nature of truth and witnessing" - "It is not that truth and fiction merely amount to the same thing. ...Truth and lies are no longer juxtaposed as polar opposites; fabrications, simulations, and partial fictions that disguise and insulate traumatic events might be drawn upon in relation to other narratives to help reconstruct figurations of the past" (2011, p. 196). *Nostalgia for the Light* erodes these distinctions further with the force of memory and the imagination indecipherable from the category of material events. It is this recognition which suggests a way forward for those individuals and nations suffering from trauma, moving beyond the categories of remembering or forgetting, reconciliation or retribution, usually associated with post-trauma histories.

This foregrounding of the idea that temporality is not natural or innocent, but a construction, reveals the film as a political text which sees the past and its link to identity as a continually contested place. The film works through the fraught nature of reconciliation with the trauma of the past by focusing on the human need for reconstruction, for making whole what has been damaged and destroyed, with the understanding that this is ultimately impossible – except through memory. This theme is explored in the different ways in which the individuals attempt to remember, how they memorialise and repeat the past and attempt to make it material. *Nostalgia for the Light's*

representation of the experience of time is reminiscent of both Deleuze (1985/2005) and Benjamin's (1968/1992) analysis of temporality as one of constant struggle provoked by the desire to make time material rather than abstract.

Re-enactment and Reconstruction in Documentary Representations of the Past

As an essay film, *Nostalgia for the Light* disrupts the categories of different types of documentary, combining witness testimony and historical evidence with poetic reconstructions of memory and philosophical questions of the experience of temporality. In this way the filmmaker becomes an intercessor; in Deleuzian terms a character that moves between fiction and non-fiction, revealing the constructed nature of truth and storytelling. Debates around the relative ability of different documentary forms to appropriately address traumatic histories have been central to work in memory studies, particularly in discussing the limits of representation in the filmic depiction of holocaust events.

Saul Friedlander (1992) problematises the idea of a search for an adequate form of representing the Shoah. For Friedlander it is easier to point to existing works which have a feeling of 'adequacy' in their ability to provide actual insights into the Shoah than it is to define the specific characteristics and devices which should be used. The works which he feels do have a sense of adequacy, which include Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985), have a common denominator, a form of showing but not showing, "the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, but the use of some sort of allusive, or distanced realism. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid" (Friedlander, 1992, p. 17). The 'filter' which constructs a form of distanced realism is apparent in several ways in *Shoah*. The relationship between voice and image prevent direct access to events for the viewer, as the interviewees' descriptions of the memories of concentration camps and mass graves are played over images of the places as they now exist as fields and woods, without

a visual trace of the past. The formal decisions made about the approach to the translation of speech add to the distancing effect as it takes place in several stages; there is none of the ellipsis and dubbing commonly seen in documentaries where translation is needed. The original Polish (sometimes German) of the witness testimony is translated on site for the French speaking director; the director has left intact his questions, the interpreter's translation, the interviewee's response and finally the translation into French (in addition there are the relevant subtitles for different national releases). This approach is a form of repetition (one which substantially lengthened the running time of the documentary), with each stage of translation having its own character and emphasis, each translation a form of imitation of the previous expression. This form of distancing re-enactment which foregrounds the impossibility of there being only one version of past events is apparent – often to more controversial effect - in recent documentaries and dramatized documentaries about twentieth-century war and massacres including, *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), *Armadillo* (Janus Metz Pederson, 2010) and *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), which have the concept of re-enactment and performance as a central strategy of representation.

In discussing the reason for the contemporary interest in re-enactment in art and film making, Kodwo Eshun (2013) argues that it is a product of the specific time zone which re-enactment produces; a simultaneous looking back and looking ahead: “it’s [re-enactment] clearly looking back, it’s clearly re-working something that’s past, but it’s also looking ahead to something that couldn’t emerge then, and has to be projected now” (Eshun, 2013, p. 73), a sense of gesturing forward to something which hasn’t happened yet. Like the characters of the temporal gateway film, those caught in re-enactment are in a form of limbo; in a moment of coming and going, of movement and stasis, in an indeterminate space where people are transforming and becoming. In her analysis of *The Act of Killing*, Homa King (2013) argues that re-enactment is reliant on fantasy, in contrast to the related documentary strategy of reliving of events, arguing that in the latter, subjects are never in “the present moment. Those in the thrall of the repetition compulsion are in a sense time-traveling to the past: like broken records,

they cannot move forward” (King, 2013, p. 32). King argues that *The Act of Killing*, in its use of fantasy within re-enactments provides a way forward from the stasis of repetition.

Nostalgia for the Light uses the filter of re-enactment and reconstruction as a distancing effect, a foregrounding of the different experiences of temporality and the way in which histories are constructed, but also to show a way through for subjects caught in time. Here it is the images provided by the astronomers’ study of the cosmos which allows the subjects to consider a different way of living in time, of making connections between past, present and future which weren’t apparent before. This effect is particularly evident in the focus on the survivors of the Chacabuco concentration camp.

Re-enactment as Corporeal Memory

The contributions of two of the survivors of Chacabuco, Luis Henríquez and Miguel Lawner, are presented through repeated reference to the need to remake the past with the focus on sensory and physical memory. As with the style used in *Shoah*, the survivor is filmed in long takes, walking through the setting of the camp as it is now while comparing it to how it was when he was a prisoner. These memories are of structure and layout, not the experience of suffering. Henríquez is filmed walking through the ruins of the camp, recreating it in his memory, as Guzmán’s voice over explains, he is a “transmitter of history”, he “remembers traces that have been erased – electric cables, watch towers”. Henríquez traces his fingers over the carved names on the wall, filling in the names of his friends where the letters have become too faint. He reproduces the drawings of a telescope (Figure 2.14) that he built with the rest of his astronomy ‘class’ (removed by the prison guards as they thought there was a danger that the prisoners would be able to navigate their freedom by the stars), performing a series of reconstructions which provide a reminder of the history of the country.

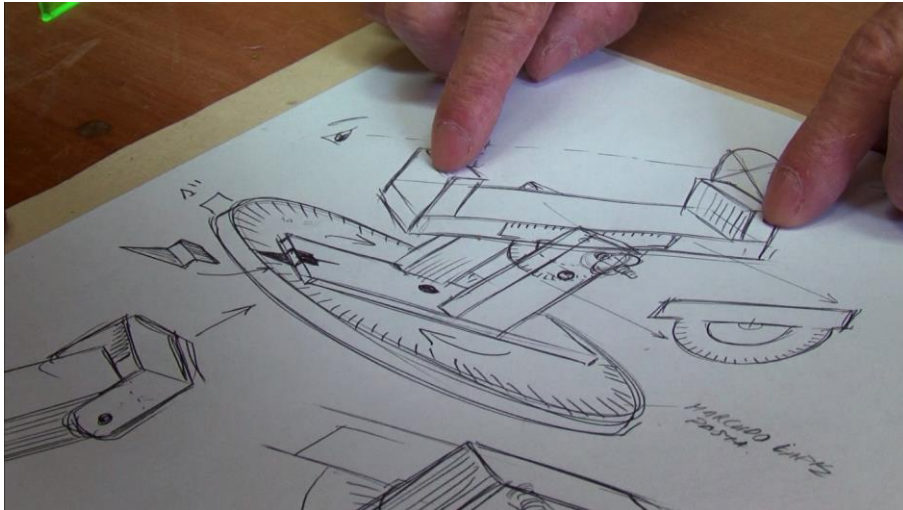


Figure 2.14: Nostalgia for the Light (2010): Reproducing the drawings made at the Chacabuco prison camp

This scene is one of many in the film where the limitless space of the sky seen through the telescope is contrasted with the restrictions and imprisonment of the earth; the mines, the prison camp, and the graves beneath the desert. The astronomers in the film who study the sky and the stars gain great comfort from the vastness, seeing it as a symbol of freedom. This contrast is reinforced by the film's aesthetic which conveys the past of the mines through a series of still, black and white photographs, linked by a series of straight cuts. In contrast, the representation of the stars and galaxies are full of movement as the camera glides in and out of swirls of coloured lights, with one shot dissolving into another; a cinematic analogy for an infinite freedom of movement. Another survivor of the camp, Miguel Lawner, has translated his memories of imprisonment into the recreation of the camp's layout and dimensions, a physical form of architectural plans and blueprints. In the film he is further distanced from the site of memory as he isn't at Chacabuco but in his apartment, remembering by pacing out the steps he took each day in his forced labour; the exact dimensions of their layout have been imprinted – or “carved” as the director states – into his memory by repetition. This form of reenactment continues the film's themes of the possibility of remembrance through imagination and creativity beyond the material. As Guzmán reimagines his childhood through film and memory,

Lawner becomes a physical memorial for a site which has no official references to its history.⁷⁹ As Chaudhuri identifies, this remembrance can be interpreted as a form of the corporeal memory referred to in the *Nunca más* report (1984) (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 101). Corporeal memory describes a survival strategy developed by disappeared prisoners and victims of torture which allowed them to survive in an unknown, unseen place. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) explains its significance in the *Nunca más* report:

As to space, corporeal memory was a determining factor: how many steps they had to take before turning to go to the toilet; the sound, the speed and the turnings taken by the car they were being driven in when entering or leaving the SDCs [Secret detention centres], etc. In some cases the abductors, who were aware of these techniques, managed to disturb and even totally confuse memory by means of various tricks. (CONADEP, 1984)

Lawner is still able to draw out the plans of Chacabuco which was his aim during his imprisonment; a deliberate strategy of remembrance, recreating the memory by repetition. His recreation of the camp is part of a process of memory begun while in a Chacabuco. He describes how each night he drew the conditions in the camp and then, to avoid detection, he tore them into tiny pieces and disposed of them in the latrine. In this process though there is no sense of the drawings being destroyed, as they remain in his memory to be reproduced in the future. The constant repetition of movement, witnessing and recording results in the memory which is part of Lawner, it is a mobile and transformative memory rather than an immutable one.

The importance of creativity and expression in the reconstruction of memories, often through drawing, is vital in the film's representation of historical events, based as it is on interpretation and

⁷⁹ The Chacabuco camp is an important site in the battle over remembrance in Chile as there are no official references to its history as a camp at the site. Websites such as *Memoria Viva* (<http://www.memoriaviva.com>, accessed 25/05/2018) are part of a campaign to gain recognition for its past.

creativity, rather than a reconstruction of a single moment. The focus on the repetition of small details which constitute memory through forms other than speech (the traditional witness testimony) is central to the way in which *Nostalgia for the Light* represents the events and effects of the past within “the limits of representation” (Friedlander, 1992). These memories are represented as experienced by the characters in the film through the implied sense of touch, the physical repetition of drawing and pacing, so that the past becomes part of a physical memory which can be re-enacted.

The detail of Henríquez and Lawner’s memories, reflected in the recreation of mechanical designs and architectural floor plans, are characteristic of a non-fiction aesthetic which can explore small moments of the past in a way which the conventions of fictional forms make more difficult. Rather than being inadequate in the representation of the magnitude of holocaustal events, the minuteness in itself is a way of drawing attention to, by contrast, the overwhelming nature of the trauma. This is a theme explored throughout the film as a link is made between the infinity of the solar system and the tiny fragments of bone found in the desert – the calcium of the stars and the calcium of human remains. The focus on the repetition of small details which constitute memory through physical and material form are central to the way in which *Nostalgia for the Light* attempts to find a way of representing the events and effects of the past. These memories are represented through the sense of touch, the physical repetition of drawing and pacing so that the memory becomes part of a physical memory which can be recreated. The concept of the repetition of small details is reminiscent of the Freudian concept of *Trauerarbeit* or ‘work of mourning’. Eric L. Santner (1992, p. 144) defines this as “a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses; it is a process of translating, troping and figuring loss”. It is this slow working through of trauma and loss which will lead to a new identity, a recovery of sorts from loss. This approach to trauma of “working through”, rather than “acting out” has been identified by Antonio Traverso (2011) as a characteristic of Chilean documentary: “rather than repetitively *acting out* fixed traumatic memories – often the mark of trauma cinema – post dictatorship documentary in Chile encourages strategies of representation that *work through* the

damage and suffering caused by the military regime” (Traverso, 2011, p. 180). For Traverso this concept of working through is evident in the way that the documentaries focus on the resilience of the survivors and provide examples of living in the future. *Nostalgia for the Light* is a further development of this approach with survivors discussing their experiences more obliquely and featuring individuals who do not have direct experience of the traumatic events.

The formal qualities of *Nostalgia for the Light* repeatedly draw attention to this idea through contrasting imagery, such as in the exploration of the relics of the mines through the focus on physical remains and personal items, still present in the desert many decades later. A series of shots delineates the mise-en-scene of the miners’ daily lives – long since past - through small, everyday objects which are both of their time and place but also part of the cosmos; a close up of a light bulb with its bare filament, the glass of the bulb covered in tiny dust particles, is reminiscent of the film’s earlier representation of the constellations. The camera moves very slowly like an observer’s eye over the personal effects, the fossilised leather boots, aged and cracked, cutting to a still life of glass bottles, layered in dust. This series of ghostly images of objects left behind culminates in a shot of a miner’s jacket hanging, gently swinging in the wind, as dust particles fly from it in shafts of sunlight, another repeated motif in the film which indicates the universe beyond the material. Guzmán’s voice-over sets up this connection in his exploration of the open graves of the miners who ‘died working’. Here he makes an explicit correlation between the mineral matter of humans and that of the vast desert, describing the desert as “an ocean of buried minerals, geological layers of miners and Indians”. The details of the past are the things that remain after trauma, the focus on the presence of the ossified relics of the mines, Lawner and Henríquez’s repetition and recreations, are an attempt to shore up the present, of making a space and time from which to exist in an infinite present.

The Configuration of Temporality as Recovery from Trauma

The aesthetic form of the temporal gateway films is a way of exploring the theme of memory as a continual antagonistic process of remembering and forgetting. This struggle over memory is reflected in film form itself, with its inherent contrasts of stillness and movement, the continual appearance and disappearance of images. This aesthetic is further linked to temporality as it is a way of representing on the one hand, a character's need for movement in time and on the other the temptation to remain still, either in the past or in an endless present – which doesn't exist. It is through emphasising this relationship to time that Patricio Guzmán attempts to address the dilemma which faces nations which have experienced national trauma; how to remember 'enough' but still be able to function in the present and move into the future.

The relationship between past, present and future is central to *Nostalgia for the Light* and can be read as a filmic representation of Deleuzian ideas about time. *Nostalgia for the Light* is full of doubles, splits and reflections which act as either mirror images or seeds within the 'theatre' setting of the Atacama Desert and the sky above it, reinforcing the ambiguity of its reference to the past and understanding of the multiplicity of past narratives. The desert functions as a consolidation for the characters trapped in the crystal-image, the diegetic setting of the film is a trap containing years of historical splits and doubling; the visible and invisible, above ground and below, alive and dead, past and present. This is seen in the film as the archaeologist reveals layers of history as he walks the modern road through the desert which was built over a pre-historic route. The road cuts between the mountains on which pre-Columbian images of masks are carved. The Chacabuco concentration camp where political prisoners were sent during the dictatorship was constructed on top of the ruins of a nineteenth century miner's camp. The double image of the desert and the mine is an ambiguous metaphor, it may be the representation of the covering up and denial of the past, but as with other images and themes in the film there is an anxiety about the desire to search into the past.

The grieving women, whose search in the desert for the bodies of the disappeared is a space of limbo, are unable to experience the present without a public understanding of their suffering, but are

also unable to return to the past, its absence signified by the missing human remains. Two of the women represent this paradox in the film. Vicky Saavedra has found some of her brother's remains, including his foot which she poignantly describes as still being in its burgundy sock and shoe. As she movingly speaks of the connection she feels to her brother in being able to hold this physical relic, it is clear that the recovery of the remains is an important stage of her mourning; the acceptance of the death of the disappeared.⁸⁰ In contrast to the solace provided for Saavedra though is the account of Violet Berrios, whose experience is given greater emphasis in the film. Through the figure of Berrios, the film shows the impossibility of being reconciled with the past, that there can be no resolution for many of the people mourning their loss. This is apparent in Berrios's reaction to the discovery of the jawbone of her husband Mario, she argues that she will not stop searching until he can be returned to her whole, 'they took him away whole, I don't just want a piece of him' is her devastating comment. In this way Berrios is trapped in the events of the past due to her infinite search which cannot be completed; the body can never be wholly recovered and as she states she no longer believes any of the explanations provided as to what happened to the men and where their remains might be. *Nostalgia for the Light* suggests that there is no satisfying mastery over past events to provide resolution and integration; the vast setting of the desert and the universe are a constant visual reminder of this. The astronomers investigating the past of the universe at the ALMA observatory have a similar perception of time; their study is of phenomena which existed billions of years in the past before becoming visible in the present. This figuration of temporality as an ongoing struggle between the desire to slow down time passing and the impossibility of fixing the past is a way of representing the experience of living in a society struggling with the aftermath of traumatic events. The women searching in the desert, destined to endlessly repeat their actions, are trapped in the crystal-image, a memory trap, unable to move forward, while the astronomers with their appeal to the universe which collapses past, present and future, find a way to be reconciled with the trauma of the past.

⁸⁰ This is a similar motif to Wanda's uncovering of the bones of her son in *Ida*.

By exploring the experience of trauma and mourning through temporality *Nostalgia for the Light* finds a way of dramatising the impossibility of returning to the historical event, rejecting the consoling idea of humanity's ability to control time through narrative, but also suggests ways in which nations and individuals suffering the effects of these events may be able to live in the present and future. *Nostalgia for the Light*, as do the other films discussed here, represents the paradox of needing to remember the past and the impossibility of doing so.

Conclusion

In the films discussed in this chapter, time is configured as a constant struggle between the desire to slow down time passing and to fix the historical moment, through memory and reconstruction, with the need to move forward for individuals and countries. I have shown how the focus on the past as a range of temporalities, experienced divergently though contrasting perceptions of time and space, subverts conventional narratives of the past as a neutral container of cause and effect events. The contrast of the infinite universe and the vastness of the desert, with the tiny fragments of bones of human remains and the detail of the drawings of the Chacabuco concentration camp, reinforces the impossibility of adequately remembering the past, even while recognising the immensity of events that actually occurred; a narrative motif repeated across the temporal gateway films. The impossible struggle at the centre of the films, to make time material in order to examine the past, is a way of representing the experience of living with the effects of trauma which can never be adequately remembered. In the next and final chapter, these themes are further explored through an analysis of the films of Lucrecia Martel. In these films, I argue, the concepts of remembering through testimony and reconstruction are further problematised through narrative and aesthetic strategies which investigate the relationship between the desire to remember coupled with the urge to repress the past.

Chapter 3: Temporal and Spatial Disruption in the Films of Lucrecia Martel

The first three feature films by Lucrecia Martel examine lives in an ongoing state of anxiety and apprehension; this is not the response to a specific moment of trauma, but a widespread sense of unease. The three films, *The Swamp* (*La Ciénaga*) (2001), *The Holy Girl* (*La Niña Santa*) (2004) and *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*) (2008), are set in Salta,⁸¹ a Northern province of Argentina and made by a film-maker who is Argentinean. These facts clearly inform the work but don't define it; the films move away from their national foundation and exist, in production, distribution and meaning, across borders. The films can be read as specifically responses to the past traumas and future uncertainties of Argentina, but, as with the other films in this wider study, the focus on the characters' experiences of temporality is an address simultaneously to a national and transnational audience. In this way the films provide the audience within and outside of the national (or regional) with an often haptic experience which also transmits a more prevalent perception of contemporary existence.⁸² Through this approach, Martel simultaneously addresses an impasse in Argentine national cinema about the past, which had become focused on the autobiography of those directly affected by the dictatorship rather than on a wider experience of the period, but also addresses a broader audience through providing a perceptive experience of traumatic events. This understanding of trauma, for characters and audiences who have not directly experienced it, is constructed through the breakdown of established perceptions of time and in the characters' experiences of their – highly circumscribed – worlds.

⁸¹ Although the three films are often referred to as a trilogy (Andermann, 2012) and more specifically the *Salta Trilogy* (Martin, 2011), Martel has commented that she "never saw the films as a trilogy", but rather as a "slow evolution" (Spilsbury, 2009), which would suggest a mutable process rather than the more fixed framework of a planned trilogy. It is also the case that the setting is never explicitly referred to in the films - either verbally or through the mise-en-scene - as Salta, suggesting that the connection is influenced by the fact that Martel grew up there.

⁸² Martel's fourth feature film, *Zama* (2017), was released in the UK in May 2018 and is discussed at the end of the chapter.

The disruption to the perception of temporal and spatial relationships is characteristic of the temporal gateway films where characters cease to experience these relationships as others do. As with the other films discussed in this project, the central characters in Martel's films are trapped by their lack of knowledge and understanding of events in the past. Their attempts to move forward are constantly thwarted by their ignorance, leaving them in a state of limbo. In chapter 1, I showed how the temporal gateway film employs the narrative motifs of allegory and mise-en-abyme to transmit the experience of a character trapped in time, while chapter 2 focused on the characters' perception of different types of time and space as a political intervention; a way in which the temporal gateway films are able to engage with the aftermath, but also the present and future of political and cultural conflicts. Martel's films can be understood through the prism of this analysis, but I will also show how the detachment in time and space results in a loss of language and the ability to communicate, a silencing which is translated into gesture, a repeated attempt to retrieve moments from the past.

The stasis of the central characters in the films – personified most recently in the eponymous character of Zama – places them in a similar position to Esposito in *The Secret in their Eyes*, Ida in *Ida*, A in *The Dust of Time* and Raffi in *Ararat*, all characters caught in an indeterminate state. There are though evident contrasts in the representation and meaning of this entrapment which is to do with the agency of the characters in the events of the past. As has been explored in previous chapters the central characters of the temporal gateway films tend to be removed from the events of the past that they're investigating: usually because they were too young to remember, or were not even born. This distance from events is much more blurred in the films discussed in this chapter; the period of the Argentine dictatorship isn't directly represented or referred to in detail but the characters have lived through those events. The extent to which they were complicit, or even directly involved, has been part of the reception of the films (particularly, as discussed later in the chapter, in considering how they may be read allegorically). Sosa (2009, p. 255) argues that the narrative of *The Headless Woman*

presents “the un -comfortable script of a collective complicity. The plot that everybody knew and nobody could tell. The script that reveals that someone can disappear can be kidnapped, tortured and murdered without leaving traces.” Sosa argues that the film deals with the “traumatic past in an oblique way” (2009, p. 255) but there are also more pointed references to the period of military violence and the characters connections to it. While watching a home video of the central character Vero’s wedding from over twenty years ago, her sister refers to the guests as ‘state senators’, ‘a family of crooks’ who are ‘your relatives’.

The positioning of the characters as more directly implicated to the events of the past (most explicitly in *The Headless Woman* but the inertia and isolation of the bourgeois characters across the films can also be read in the context of culpability) is in contrast to the ‘innocence’ of the other central characters of the temporal gateway. This shift in emphasis to characters who are in some way culpable in past events provides a way of exploring the ongoing effects of guilt on a society in the context of the lack of acknowledgement of past crimes, here the passivity of the characters is in direct counterpoint to the active investigations found in the other films. In this way Martel’s films are a further way of examining the different processes and motivations for remembering and forgetting: they share with the other temporal gateway films an understanding of the impossibility of remembering the past.

The position of Martel’s films, existing in-between and across categories of national and transnational cinema is evident throughout all the different aspects of her work – filmic and extra filmic. It includes the range of available readings of the films which can be interpreted by audiences in different places, and in the production and distribution contexts which include Argentinean, Latin American and European funding.⁸³ The focus of this analysis though is the characters’ own experiences

⁸³ The production funding for Martel’s first three feature films is typical of the emergent transnational, global art cinema, with money provided from Argentina, a range of European countries, independent production companies, commercial multimedia organisations as well as awards from charitable trusts such as the Hubert Bals foundation.

of indeterminate existence in time and space. This concept is developed through a stylistic and formal hybridity which utilises characteristics from Argentine national cinema, European art house and genre forms, particularly melodrama. As I will show, the use of the melodramatic mode, which has traditionally been closely associated with the construction of stable national and individual identity, is here used to explore instability and trauma through subverting the familiar melodramatic tropes of inarticulateness, embodiment and temporality to convey the experience of contemporary existence.

As with the other films of the temporal gateway, characters in Martel's films are suspended in time and space, they are unable to refer back to the past with any certainty, although they sense that something had happened, there are traces of things left behind. This sense of the past is not comprehended or discussed: it has become misplaced, a form of *parapraxis*. Similarly, the characters are unable to move into, or conceive of a future in a meaningful way, they are people in "pure mediality" (Agamben, 2000, p. 58) who are unable to act, forward or backwards. The position of these characters as existing outside of linear relationships of time and space and the spectator's response to them, is a radical film form but one which differs from the experimentation with classic realist cinema as defined by approaches influenced by a Marxist analysis of cinema. In such approaches, exemplified by the argument for a counter-cinema put forward by film makers and theorists in the 1970s,⁸⁴ the form of resistance and subversion was always in direct opposition to the dominant form: finding an equivalent counter for each characteristic of realist cinema. Building on this approach, Christian Gundermann (2006) contends that the style of Martel's first two feature films, its minimalism, lack of cause and effect and use of ellipsis, links the films to the time-image and denies the spectator the visual and narrative pleasures associated with mainstream cinema. Gundermann

⁸⁴ For example, Colin MacCabe (1974), identifies the characteristics of classic realist cinema as closed and ideological and explores strategies of subversion through which to challenge it. Peter Wollen (1972/1985) identifies a code of counter-cinema which can be used to dismantle the homogeneity of mainstream cinema. The notion of a counter-cinema which resists a conservative mainstream style is also found in feminist film theory, see for example Claire Johnston (1973/1999).

cites the interrogation of the gaze throughout the films which produces a distancing effect associated with the political aims of counter-cinema theory and practice of the 1960s and 1970s. I will argue, by contrast, that Martel's work provokes a sensory response to film which can be read in relation to Giorgio Agamben's (2000) idea of a cinema of gesture, a concept which refers back to the representation of movement in early cinema in order to envisage meaning in cinema independent of the logic of narrative progression.

Martel's films are a cinema of gesture as a form of articulation, where a character's life in a suspended state has become the normality, transmitting the experience of trauma beyond the specifics of national experience to address a more pervasive sense of loss and guilt. The trauma experienced by the characters in the films is not the trauma of those who have been directly affected by events,⁸⁵ whether as victim or perpetrator, their experience is a much more common one. In Cecilia Sosa's (2009) analysis this is a type of mourning, shared by those on the side-lines who either saw and chose not to act or witness, or who were numbed to events, unable to fully comprehend them. The characters' experiences of the material and temporal world in the films is markedly different to conventional cause and effect representations in film, but in Martel's oeuvre, this becomes the norm, pervading all aspects of experience; this mourning isn't something which can be left behind through a return to an earlier state. While Martel's films often feature a disturbance such as an accident or injury, the characters exist in a world where the definitions of normal and disruption have been dissolved; they have crossed a negative qualifier of what it might mean to live in normality (the negative disruption which proves the normality of everyday life) and now live in a space where what was extraordinary has become every day. In this way the films do not suggest a way through trauma or the possibility of reconciliation, they are instead a manifestation of traumatised life as it is. As with

⁸⁵ In the context of Argentine history these would include the period of the dictatorship and what became known as the Dirty War (approximately 1973 to 1983) as well as the economic crisis starting in 1998.

many of the films discussed in this project, Martel's films suggest a way of reflecting on the past without constructing definitive narratives and categories.

The hybrid and open nature of the films in their existence across borders of all kinds is one of the reasons for the differing responses to the films. As has been indicated above, all three films focus on family relationships and have very circumscribed settings, encouraging readings which are both specific and metaphorical; the domestic a motif ubiquitous enough to have a range of meanings attached to it. Although the films are noted for their minimal narrative (something which has provoked controversy in their reception,⁸⁶ the following summaries provide a context for the discussion of the films. *The Swamp* focuses on a crumbling country estate, just outside Salta and is set during an oppressively hot summer. The film follows the interactions of an extended family, particularly the mothers, Mecha (Graciela Borges) and Talia (Mercedes Morán) who are cousins, the activities of their children who are preoccupied with romantic and sexual relationships, childhood games in the woods and scaring each other through telling folk tales, which become intertwined with reports of religious miracles. The film starts with a minor accident when Mecha drunkenly cuts herself with a broken glass and ends with a much more serious accident when Talia's young son slips and falls from a ladder. In *The Holy Girl* a hotel displaces the traditional home as the primary location, but the focus is again on the feverish and claustrophobic atmosphere created through the domestic setting. The hotel is run by Helena (Mercedes Morán), a divorced woman who lives there with her teenage daughter, Amalia (María Alche) and her brother who is staying after his own divorce. The hotel is hosting a medical conference on hearing impairment. One of the delegates at the conference, Dr. Jano (Carlos Belloso) becomes obsessed with Amalia, provoking Amalia to believe that it is her religious vocation to continue a relationship with him. Not knowing of Jano's behaviour, Helena is attracted to him and attempts to seduce him. The film ends with Jano's actions about to be revealed to Helena. *The Headless Woman* has the most conventional narrative structure of the three films due to its allusions

⁸⁶ On its premiere at the Cannes film festival *The Headless Woman* was booed and regularly appeared at the bottom of critics' lists of recommended films (Foundas, 2008).

to the thriller genre, although the enigmas set up by the plot are not fulfilled in a conventional way. The central character, Veronica (Maria Ornetto) known as Vero, a dentist, may or may not have hit someone – or something – with her car on the way home from a family gathering. Her decision not to investigate at the time of the accident appears to haunt her throughout the film, rendering her near mute as she continues her everyday existence, visiting family members, going to work, shopping and attending social events. The nature of Vero's accident remains ambiguous and in the final scenes of the film it seems that she may have imagined it, as she returns to her previous life.

The move away from established boundaries and categories of narrative coherence, of film language, has been interpreted in different ways. Joanna Page (2009), whose work on allegory in Martel's films is explored below, poses the question of whether the emphasis on the domestic sphere in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl* is a retreat from the politics of the public sphere, rendering the films non-political, unable to address national politics and history.



Figure 3.9: Dark, domestic scenes dominate in the films of Lucrecia Martel: *La Cienaga*

The idea of the domestic with its attendant meanings of privacy, subjectivity and desire and connotations of the feminine, has been interpreted in opposition to the public realm of political

discourse.⁸⁷ All three films take place in enclosed worlds where the setting of the home and interiors dominate; the sense of the space and even existence of the external world is limited (Figure 3.1). There are some variations to this domestic representation. In *The Holy Girl*, the hotel becomes a stand-in for a traditional home, while in *The Headless Woman*, which has the most extended periods of scenes outside the home, the road is the site of accidents. Page argues, drawing on Giorgio Agamben's (2005) concept of the state of exception,⁸⁸ that instead of a withdrawal from the public and political conversation, the emphasis on the domestic creates "a collapse of distinctions between public and private spheres on which more conventional political filmmaking has been predicated" (Page, 2009, p. 192).⁸⁹ Martel has also been interpreted through the prism of feminist film theory and analysed as a queer director. Both approaches have focused on the way her films subvert and destabilise established categories, particularly in the context of 'looking' in cinema. For example, Katy Stewart

⁸⁷ Definitions of the public and private sphere can be traced back to the Enlightenment and John Locke's dualist distinction between the two: the former associated with intellect and reason, the latter with desire and emotions. Jurgen Habermas (1989) contends that the public sphere of the eighteenth century – of coffee houses, literary salons, newspapers etc - provided a space for critical debate in contrast with the private sphere which was associated with the home, although these spaces are not always clearly delineated. The association of the public sphere as ideological, as a male space which excluded women, has been critiqued by feminist theorists who argue that societal relations influence gender identity. As Doreen Massey (1994) argues: "The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity" (Massey, 1994, p. 179).

⁸⁸ In his philosophical exploration, Agamben (2005) shows how, when a political state of exception, such as in response to a terrorist attack, becomes the rule, the divisions between the public and private sphere are collapsed, resulting in a breakdown of the obligations of the state to its citizens, a state of anomie. This removal of protection and its associated feelings of betrayal cause a profound shift in the comprehension of the meaning of everyday existence and the divisions between the private and public spheres. This removal of protection and its associated feelings of betrayal of individual liberties, cause a profound shift in the widespread comprehension of the meaning of everyday existence.

⁸⁹ As an Argentine film-maker, Martel's work will always be discussed in part through the prism of the political. This is part of the history of Argentine national cinema and the expectation that it will respond to national events in a way which challenges mainstream conventions (as discussed in chapter 2 in relation to the reception of *The Secret in Their Eyes*).

(2015) contends that the films are “deconstructing the male gaze” (Stewart, 2015, p. 211) by creating obstacles, through the film style and content, to spectator identification with characters, which the gaze relies on. In ‘Analysing the Woman Auteur: The Female/Feminist Gazes of Isabel Coixet and Lucrecia Martel’,⁹⁰ Jennifer Slobodian (2012) also analyses Martel as a feminist filmmaker with a “distinctly female gaze” (Slobodian, 2012, p. 160). In this case the gaze is both a destabilising of subjectivity through the film form but also a reversal of the male gaze (Figure 3.2) in the storyline focusing on the relationship between the schoolgirl Amalia and Dr. Jano in *The Holy Girl*, “it is Amalia who embodies the traditional voyeuristic look as she follows Jano and observes him from afar” (Slobodian, 2012, p. 172). This interpretation of the gaze in *The Holy Girl* is reinforced by Deborah Shaw (2013):

Amalia’s gaze exists in opposition to that theorized by Claire Johnston (1973); the patriarchal gaze which objectifies woman and coverts her into a 'sign' created from male fantasies. Neither is she a woman without a look of her own, who is reduced to being the object of the male gaze as theorised by Laura Mulvey (1975)” (Shaw, 2013, p. 71).

⁹⁰ It is notable that Martel is frequently referred to as an auteur, in a way which is still uncommon for female directors. For example Oscar Jubis (2010) bases this designation on Martel’s control of the production process as well as recognisable style and themes.



Figure 3.2: *The female gaze: Amalia and Josefina in The Holy Girl*

Shaw (2013) states that this feminist influenced analysis of the gaze has been the dominant focus of readings of Martel's films, but argues that the subversion of established forms of looking is part of a wider queering of art cinema aimed at a global audience: "An analysis of the main characters of *La Niña Santa* ... illustrates the way that queer representations and textual strategies function to provide access to the global art cinema networks" (Shaw, 2013, p. 184). Shaw states that "European funding streams have helped create a new category of transnational global art films with new queer protagonists with diverse sexual identities and defiant disturbing gazes" (Shaw, 2013, p. 171). Deborah Martin (2016) identifies Martel as perhaps "the best known of contemporary Argentine film directors" arguing that her films have had a global reach. The unusually high level of distribution in Europe for Martel's films is, Martin claims, in part due to "the privileging of themes and styles currently popular in global art cinema such as the subversive take on child sexuality (which echoes Almodovar's own *La mala educación* [*Bad Education* 2004] and which has become an established theme of European art cinema)" (Martin, 2016, p. 7). Rosalind Galt (2013) claims that Martel's work is part of a new development which links Latin American and global art cinema with "queerness as a

significant mode of world cinema and responses to economic crisis as a significant site of queer politics” (Galt, 2013, p. 62). This development is also a way of reading the advent of global co-productions as progressive, despite being a model which is often negatively characterised as a feature of a neo-liberalist myth of “the market as a level playing field, as the sole impartial judge of quality, which raises up those films deserving of private finance and international audiences” (Page, 2009, pp. 10 -11). For Page (2009) the transnational model as it applies to Latin American films will always be characterised by a relationship of inequality, with Latin American countries the less powerful partner. Galt argues, however, that these debates and developments are obscured by Anglophone ignorance of Latin American films which fit neither the traditional national nor transnational model but are instead part of “a queer world stage, delineating a different pathway for Argentine cinema which challenges conventional models” (Galt, 2013, p. 70).⁹¹

In defining Martel’s work as queer, whether as an authorial or institutional category, it is through the films’ exploration of a society outside of heteronormative experience – the questioning of binary categories of gender and sexuality, and of conventional morality - that queer has become the dominant reading of Martel’s representation of human desires and relationships.⁹² For example, in *New Queer Cinema* (2013) B. Ruby Rich explores how “Martel’s films are concerned with lesbian desire in both vague and offhand ways, but her characters engage that desire within worlds that lie beyond the formal control or norms of society”. In discussing her own work, Martel has made explicit reference to the theme of incest as an ignored aspect of family structure which doesn’t have an inherently moral expression: “I do not encourage incest, but I think that human sexuality goes beyond

⁹¹ Galt (2013) cites Page (2009) and Falicov (2007) as two examples of writers who don’t consider this position.

⁹² An emerging category in the analysis of Martel’s work focuses on the meanings of animals in her films. This approach can also be linked to queer readings in its rejection of anthropocentrism. See for example Sarah O’Brien (2017), ‘Sticky matter: the persistence of animals as allegory in Lucrecia Martel’s *La Cienaga* and *La Mujer sin Cabeza*’. Lucy Bollington’s paper ‘Martel’s Visual Zoopoetics’ presented at the symposium *The Work of Lucrecia Martel*, (Cambridge, May, 2018) also explored this area.

all taboos. Those are imposed by men but human experience does not rest on them. Life always ends up escaping from all our attempts of organisation, classification...the only healthy thing I find in the family is eroticism'' (Martel cited by Martin Moran, 2003, p. 238). Deborah Martin (2016), in her book-length study which further develops queer approaches to Martel's work states that: "Despite narrative gestures to notions of guilt, innocence and responsibility, moral polarities are rejected, as the films refuse to pass judgement on characters'' (Martin, 2016, p. 18). Although never explicit in their representation, the films hint at incest between brother and sister, aunt and nephew, aunt and niece. *The Holy Girl* represents a convoluted series of relationships: the sexual desire of an older man (Dr. Jano) for a teenage girl (Amalia) and her reciprocation, the girl's mother's desire for a relationship with the same man, who is married with children and who reminds her of her father. All these possible relationships are presented without intellectual judgement, with the emphasis instead on touch and physical sensuality. The ambiguity in the films which is the context for many of the queer readings, also drives the debates around the status of the films as political or otherwise, specifically the relationship between symbols, allegories and interpretations.

Allegory and Political Film-making

The lack of explicit political themes in Martel's films such as a focus on the period of the dictatorship or social and economic inequality, has meant that her work has been approached as an "oblique examination of Argentina's post-dictatorship period'' (Sosa, 2009, p. 252) constructed through style and subject; the unsettling atmosphere created in the films suggesting a post-traumatic response which also draws on gothic horror themes of repression and the uncanny. In David Oubina's term Martel's style is a representation of the " 'social nervous system' produced by the dictatorship'' (Oubina cited by Andermann (2012, p. 80), an organic experience of unease rather than one constructed by specific, political events. Central to the definition of Martel's films as political or otherwise is the question of whether they can be read as allegorical, a recognisable characteristic of

Argentinean film-making both during the dictatorship, when it was “a vital tool in political expression” (Page, 2009, p. 182), but which continued in the work of film-makers post dictatorship, when the need for a cover or screen behind which to explore political ideas was no longer the main purpose of its use. Myrto Konstantarakos (2006) argues that the New Argentine Cinema (identified as the period starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s) is non-allegorical, an effect of the film-makers’ positions as independents who didn’t expect their films to make money or reach a mass audience, therefore, “they do not feel the need to include either average or strongly metaphorical characters ... allowing them to be more specific” (Konstantarakos, 2006, p. 135). Other critics have gone further, seeing these film-makers’ rejections of allegory as a reaction to previous modes of Argentine cinema and the way in which it has been interpreted. Gonzalo Aguilar (2011, pp. 16-17) states:

One of the definitive characteristics of the new cinema is its avoidance of allegorical stories. These films distance themselves from those that preceded them (for allegory had been the privileged mode by which Argentine cinema referred to context) and from the imperative to politicize to which, according to several critics of distinct orientation, all texts from the Third World are subject [...] The films of the new cinema, in contrast, insist upon the literal and tend to frustrate the possibility of an allegorical reading: the hotel in *La Nina Santa* is not Argentina; it is, quite simply, a hotel.

Deborah Martin’s (2011) analysis of the denial of allegory in Martel’s work also contrasts it to traditions in Argentine cinema. Martel, she argues, “refuses to represent” the child in *The Holy Girl* and that the film “refuses the symbolic potential, the futurity of the child, through a filmic language which privileges texture and surface”(Martin, 2011, pp. 69-70). In this way Martel counters the tradition in Argentinian cinema to use the child symbolically to either represent an innocence destroyed by trauma or the possibility of future hope. In a similar context, Sarah O’Brien (2017) agrees that Martel’s films do not conform to traditional definitions of allegory as: “a submerged political

reading of a text that obtains from a sustained, systematic use of metaphor; the critical power of Martel's films rests in the sustained, if not entirely systematic, interplay of individualized human characters and haunting animal figures, and it is this negotiation that renders the films' political critique legible" (O'Brien, 2017, p. 464). However, O'Brien does consider the function of animals – often dead animals – as akin to allegorical, the only aspect in Martel's first three films to retain that purpose: "Certainly the cow in *The Swamp* is a cow and the dog in *The Headless Woman* is a dog, yet these animals are also proxies for the human children who bear the brunt of the adult characters' destructive negligence; more to the point, they are allegorical stand-ins for the powerless who fall in the path of those bent on blotting out the past" (O'Brien, 2017, p. 464).

Page (2009) also argues that it is problematic to read Martel's films as allegorical, despite the temptation offered to read the characters and situations as symbolic of Argentine culture, stating: "One of the questions that continues to tax critics is the extent to which we can interpret the indolence and parochialism of the middle-class families depicted, together with the suggestion of incest, as symbolic of a broader social decline in Argentina" (Page, 2009, p. 183). Page understands the desire to read the films as allegory⁹³ but argues that they do not allow "for a fully allegorical interpretation" (Page, 2009, p. 184), due to the ambiguities of form and meaning apparent in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*. Page demonstrates how the repeated symbols in the films of "inertia, stagnation and disorder" (Page, 2009, p. 183) and the attempts by the characters to demarcate the fine line between order and chaos, does invite a reading of the films as about wider social contexts. However the symbolic aspects of the films which invite this interpretation, simultaneously cut off the diegesis from a connection to a material, social world and thus deny the possibility of allegorical representation. Page argues that this is part of the reflexive nature of the films which deconstruct the possibility of allegory as part of a series of destabilising categories, "a reflexive staging of the breakdown of allegory suggests a broader collapse of distinctions between public and private sphere" (Page, 2009, p. 184).

⁹³ Page (2009, p. 183) also refers to the way in which Martel's own comments on her films shift from rejecting allegorical interpretation to encouraging it.

This construction, whereby the film continually sets up expectations for the spectator – in this case that symbols will provide social meanings – only to remove them, is one of the qualities which positions the audience to understand the character experience of temporality as a constant frustration. Building on Page's analysis of "destabilising categories" (Page, 2009, p. 184), I will show how the characters' experiences of limbo in the films are represented through the continuous possibility of movement which is also thwarted, an experience similar to the characters in the other temporal gateway films.

Cecilia Sosa (2009) also argues against Martel's work, specifically *The Headless Woman*, as being allegorical. In applying Judith Butler's concept of counter-mourning Sosa argues that the film:

performs a narrative of counter-mourning that works not as a sort of allegory but rather as the material embodiment of an old guilt that offers a new layer for the nation's present. In this way the film emerges as a *test* for a new public culture in which all citizens have become permeated by the effects of mourning, not just the direct descendants but rather the entire expanded society, including the new *faceless* emerging at its most marginal borders" (Sosa, 2009, p. 258, italics in original).

Sosa interprets Martel's films as a challenge to the dominant conventions of post-trauma Argentine cinema in the way they open up the response to the dictatorship to represent the nation, rather than those personally affected as individuals and their descendants as in mourning. In this way it is problematic to read the films as an allegorical process with an individual or group reflecting a wider experience, as they are about that experience of mourning. Building on this approach, I would argue that while Martel's films do not operate as a screen or code for a specific society, a traditional interpretation of allegory, they can be read as allegories of temporality. As discussed in chapter 1, Walter Benjamin's (1963/1998) concept of allegory is a way of exploring the experience of existing in time, specifically how it refers to the absence or void at the centre of existence, with characters searching for an understanding of their past which is lost. In these films the characters' state of limbo

is constructed through the continual attempt and inevitable failure to reach something which is absent.

In the different approaches to Martel's films discussed above, it is apparent that her work is not fully contained by singular approaches (national, global, queer, allegory) but intersects across these ideas, often referring to them rather than being defined by them - continually performing a deconstruction of these categories. In this analysis I will show how it is the exploration of temporality which is the defining feature and which means the films can be read beyond borders and definitive categories. The representation of time and space reflects the experience of living in a contemporary, globalised society with its transformation of temporality.

New Argentine Cinema and Political Readings

As has been outlined above, Martel's work can be read, through its relationship to allegory, as rejecting some of the previous conventions of Argentine cinema. The use of temporality and embodiment and - as will be discussed later - gesture, as an attempt to articulate what can't be said is a further way in which Martel's films are marked as a different kind of Argentine and Latin American cinema. This is particularly evident in the films' refusal to represent the process of testifying about the past. In this way the films reject a central characteristic of Argentine national cinema as political films which bear witness, often through subjective testimony, to past events. In placing the films in a national context, Martel's work has been defined as both apolitical but also as an example of "new ways of understanding political significance of contemporary Argentine films" (Page, 2009, p. 182). This debate over the political or otherwise nature of national cinema as well as the very definition of political in this context is ongoing. Martel is often linked to the New Argentine Cinema of the 1990s but this is problematic for several reasons. New Argentine Cinema is difficult to define as a movement, as the film-makers "lack a declaration of principles and a single set of ideas" (Konstantarakos, 2006, p. 132). But Konstantarakos also argues that there is a series of connections which link the films: an

interest in gritty and urban themes focusing on the marginalisation of urban groups, a shift to diverse geographical locations in Argentina outside of the capital, the low budget nature of the film-making leading to a new realist aesthetic and the inclusion of more women film-makers (Konstantarakos, 2006, p. 133). While Martel's films conform to some of these conventions, one of the seemingly defining features, the idea of a 'gritty' style and content is largely absent. As Konstantarakos states, "the difficulty with the New Argentine Cinema label is knowing to whom it applies" (Konstantarakos, 2006, p. 133). In an interview, Martel herself has spoken of the complexity of defining or feeling part of a movement:

I'm an "Argentinean director." But I think that the word "movement" implies that you engage in conversations about philosophy, aesthetics, and politics. That doesn't really happen with us. I know most but not all of them. Some of them I only have contact with every two or three years. We are not friends. So there is no movement or wave. But what you can see in Argentina is a group of directors who belong to the same generation, and there was a gap during the dictatorship. There were students of cinema who disappeared, and then we appeared. So it looks like a movement, but it's really just shared experience. We have history in common. For certain, I feel like I'm a part of Argentine cinema. It's impossible to avoid (Wisniewski, 2009).

Martel's analysis is indicative of the way her film-making is about emergence and change rather than being a definitive comment or point of view. The concept of a movement that she outlines here would suggest an objective or goal to be reached by a group, something which is the antithesis of the openness of her film style. Interestingly her comment about the film-makers disappearing and reappearing seems to reflect something of the ghostly qualities of the films which is related obliquely to the period of the

dictatorship.⁹⁴ For Cecilia Sosa (2009), the films which became known as New Argentine Cinema were connected by narratives told “without moral engagement that similarly rejects any sententious political statement” (Sosa, 2009, p. 251), a deliberate and in Sosa’s view very welcome rejection of the “rhetorical declarations of their predecessors” (Sosa, 2009, p. 251).⁹⁵

Joanna Page’s (2009) analysis demonstrates how Martel’s films can be read as political statements in their focus on the domestic, drawing on Giorgio Agamben and also Hannah Arendt’s concept of the breakdown in the division between the public and private sphere. However, the definition of New Argentine Cinema as apolitical is more often a criticism based on the seeming “retreat into bourgeois domestic spheres” (Page, 2009, p. 181) in the films of the period. The apolitical interpretation has also been considered as a product of a specific institutional context where filmmakers rebelled against the existing film industry, valuing independence and new avenues for distribution over political manifestos: “Like post-Cinema Novo, however, new Argentine filmmakers, including the acclaimed Pablo Trapero and Lucrecia Martel, are less interested in politics than in developing a diverse and vital film industry; they too prefer a traditional, conservative aesthetic” (Badley & Barton Palmer, 2006, p. 7).⁹⁶ As Ana Martin Moran (2003) attests, the more recent films express “unquestionable

⁹⁴ Martel’s studies at film school (National Experimental Filmmaking School, Buenos Aires) in the late 1990s were disrupted due to the financial crisis when the school closed due to lack of funds, meaning that there was less opportunity to establish the type of connections with a cohort which might lead to a movement. In fact Martel states that she received very little formal training, suggesting that her main achievement during this period was “learning how to drink gin” (comment made during a roundtable discussion at a symposium on her work, *The Work of Lucrecia Martel*, Cambridge, May, 2018).

⁹⁵ Sosa (2009) identifies the following films as examples of New Argentine Cinema: *Rapado* (Martin Rejtman, 1992), *Picado Fino/Fine Powder* (Esteban Sapir, 1998), *Pizza, Birra, Faso/Pizza, Beer, Smokes* (Bruno Stagnaro and Israel Adrian Caetano, 1998), *Mundo Grúa/Crane World* (Pablo Trapero, 2000), *La Ciénaga/The Swamp* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001) and *La Libertad/Freedom* (Lisandro Alonso, 2001). These are read as a rejection of earlier allegorical and magic realist film-makers such as Eliseo Subiela, Fernando Pino Solanas and Hugo Santiago.

⁹⁶ The description of Martel’s aesthetic as conservative is problematic here – but isn’t discussed further.

disappointment” in Argentine society but their focus on descriptions of situations rather than criticisms differed from more explicitly political examples of national cinema: “They do not try to offer solutions, or to defend any cause”, instead they offer a new kind of representation which Moran argues are ‘facts’ enclosed “in personal narratives and poetic structures” (Martin Moran, 2003, p. 238).⁹⁷

In the following readings of the films I will demonstrate how Martel’s films do explore aspects of Argentine political history and the effect on contemporary culture. While agreeing that they cannot be read as explicitly or conventionally political films in the manner of earlier Argentine cinema, the ambiguity of style is central to commenting on the effects of the past on the present. As Martel herself states she is part of Argentine cinema and this relationship is evident in the way in which her films comment on and subvert aspects of that tradition.

Subverting Argentine Cinema as Testimonio

The concept of the testimony, or *cine testimonio*, is central to definitions of post-dictatorship filmmaking (as discussed in relation to *The Secret in Their Eyes* in chapter 2), whether through the radical documentary form of the 1970s or the semi-fictional films which provide a witness to the events of the past. As Sosa (2009) argues, films produced about the dictatorship from the mid-1980s had taken on the form of an official, state authorised form of remembrance which told the stories of the victims and survivors in films which were often autobiographical, to the point, Sosa suggests, of excluding the wider survivors, the population as a whole, from being able to take part in this process of memorialisation through testimony. Martel’s films complicate this tradition by making the position of the characters in relation to the dictatorship at best ambiguous but likely complicit: they are not film told from the position of a witnessing victim.

⁹⁷ In addition to those cited by Sosa (2009), Martin Moran also includes *Waiting for the Messiah* (Daniel Burman, 2000), *Just for Today* (Ariel Rotter, 2000) and *Saturday* (Juan Villegas, 2001).

Martel's films explore the complexity of the idea of witnessing. They refer to the paradox of testimony as identified by Agamben (2002), which will be explored further below, where the true witness is unable to testify. They also consider the witness's refusal to look and their complicity in events, the impossibility of ever being certain about what was seen, questioning the idea that seeing is the same as knowing.⁹⁸ These ideas are found in several of the narrative developments in the films, for example: Vero's failure to investigate who or what she hit after her car accident, Helena's ignorance of her daughter's romantic relationships and desires, Tali's attention is elsewhere when her son falls and dies. This way of considering the idea of being a witness, of, in national memory terms questioning the possibility of recovery through the recuperation of past events, is deliberately troubling within a tradition of national cinema about the past and is another way in which Martel's work signals its separateness from the form.

In *The Headless Woman*, *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl* the experience of living in a post dictatorship society is represented by a series of disruptions to conventional cause and effect. This is evident in the character's relationship to chronological time and defined space, as if their understanding of chronology has been ruptured, meaning they can no longer communicate in a conventional way. The most explicit way in which Martel's work subverts the testimony-focused characteristic of Argentine cinema about the past is in her characters' loss of language. This is at its most extreme in *The Headless Woman* where the central character, Vero, loses the ability to speak beyond the simplest, briefest responses, but is also evident throughout the films where characters continually struggle to communicate with each other, constantly questioning and mishearing. The repeated memorising and reciting of biblical and literary passages in *The Holy Girl* which have no connection to the character's situation or to the person they're supposedly talking to emphasises the lack of conventional

⁹⁸ Martel has referred to the way in which her films explore "the things I try not to see but which exist" (comment made during a roundtable discussion at a symposium on her work, *The Work of Lucrecia Martel*, Cambridge, May, 2018).

communication through language. Dr. Jano's lack of communication means that Helena misunderstands his feelings and motivation. Gesture takes the place of articulation through language, with the central characters continually gesturing to something, unable to communicate what has happened.

The loss of language in the case of *The Headless Woman* and the loosening of communication in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl* suggest a different way of exploring the concept of testimony and the state of becoming a witness. Each of the films contains one or more moments of accident, trauma or tragedy which the characters (and spectators) can't make sense of: they can't put their experiences into words, can't be sure of what they've seen. In defining the concept of testimony in their work on witnessing and the holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) describe how works of art of the twentieth century "instruct us in the ways in which testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our time – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: The Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 5). However, they saw the act of testimony as continuing and performative, not a finalised account but an ongoing experience: "What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 6). The practise of testimony, the "emergence of the narrative which is being listened to - and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 57). The survivor is unable in this context to register the event before the performance of testimony. For Felmann and Laub the importance of the testimony in constructing subjectivity for the witness was mirrored in the importance to the person hearing the testimony, the person who has the testimony 'inscribed' on them. This relationship is a form of reconciliation in which the experience is articulated for the first time, but this is achieved through a traumatic effect on the listener as they feel "bewilderment, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 58). In Felman's account of showing her university class a filmed testimony of Holocaust survivors, she

details their experience of crisis, demonstrated through a loss of language and feeling of being suspended from their previous knowledge of the world (Felman, 1992). In this way the idea of testimony as a form of completion and reconciliation is always problematic; even as the experience may be articulated it has a devastating affect on the person who hears it, making the effects of the trauma ongoing.

Agamben's exploration of the practice of testimony also sees it as incomplete but in a more profound way than in Felman and Laub's and analysis. Agamben argues, in relation to the survivors of the camps, that testimony has an inherent lack, that there is a 'lacuna' at the heart of testimony because the true witness is 'the drowned' or 'musselmann' who did not survive; those who did survive to give testimony were exceptional in some way. In this way testimony is a form of bearing witness to something which cannot be witnessed, it is a "a language which cannot signify", when listening to testimony Agamben argues, he is "listening to something absent" (Agamben, 2002, p. 33). This loss of language of the silenced dead of the camps and the impossibility of speech functioning as a signifier of what happened, accentuates the human condition; the possibility of the loss of language reinstates the possibility of being human, of having language. This understanding of testimony as incomplete and ongoing, as something which might ultimately be impossible, is explored in Martel's films, particularly in *The Headless Woman* where the paradox of testimony is examined through the thriller narrative.

The Headless Woman: Not Looking

The idea of the absence of language and the impossibility of testifying are central to Martel's films. This subverts the tradition of Latin American *testimonio* films and withholds a process of becoming which is associated with the effects of witnessing and reconciliation. The characters don't know what they've seen or how to articulate it, they are in a temporal limbo in response to the aftermath of dictatorship and crisis. This is a state which is mirrored in the spectator's response as the films can't

provide any sense of working through or change, the inscribing which will complete the testimony; a state which relates to a wider experience of existence than the specifics of Argentine history.

The state of not seeing or not understanding what is seen reinforces the idea of testimony as inherently lacking, challenging the understanding of the process as it is more commonly used in film as a form of memory and reconciliation. The final line of dialogue in *The Swamp* is “I didn’t see anything” (Figure 3.3), and this ‘not seeing’ is also foregrounded in *The Headless Woman* at the moment of the car accident near the beginning of the film, an event which forms the foundation of the minimal narrative.



Figure 3.3: “I didn’t see anything”: *The Swamp*

The central character, Vero (the allusion to truth in the name further contrasts with the events) drives along an empty, winding, highway having just left a social gathering at her sister’s. As she reaches into her bag to answer her phone there is a sudden, violent sound as the car hits something, making Vero jolt violently, her sunglasses flying off with the force of the impact. Vero continues to drive but slows the car down and finally comes to a stop. This sequence reinforces the idea of seeing and not seeing and its voluntary and involuntary causes. The collision happens as Vero takes her eyes off the road to

look into her bag. When she stops after the accident there is a moment in which she considers whether to look back or not. The performance of Maria Onetto as Vero captures this process. First she glances to the left to the wing mirror which presumably doesn't reveal the event behind her, she then gestures towards the door with her hand as if she's going to open the door, get out and investigate, but instead her hand pauses mid-air and is withdrawn, finally she turns her head to the right as if she is going to look behind, but again pauses and instead turns to look straight ahead (Figure 3.4). In a seemingly closing gesture, a symbol of finality about whether to look or not, she retrieves the dark glasses from the floor and puts them back on, a further symbolic barrier to seeing. This finality is again reinforced through performance, as she drives away Vero's expression and body language alters slightly, she straightens her arms, lifts her chin and almost smiles, as if putting on a new persona to continue her journey.



Figure 3.4: Deciding not to look: Vero after the accident in The Headless Woman

The desire to know and the frustration of being unable to satisfactorily identify what Vero hit - even when shown it - is destabilising for the viewer. Unlike Vero, the spectator wants to see and to know; viewing the film at home encourages this desire as the image can be frozen but its exact nature remains elusive. It isn't that it might be the body of the animal (or a person), probably a dog, but that the certainty needed to identify it is too great. In this scene therefore the concept of witnessing and

the ability to provide testimony is made uncertain, emphasising both the moral issue of deciding not to look and to know but also the impossibility of ever being able to return to an event in the past and to be able to tell exactly what happened.

Vero is a failed witness, but anyway her testimony is never welcome in the diegesis and is often deliberately obscured in darkness. As the narrative progresses and Vero starts to believe that she may have hit a boy on the highway and not a dog, this belief is shaped more by her feelings of guilt and anxiety created by uncertainty, rather than specific evidence. She begins to link together events - the boy who should be delivering some pots for her garden has disappeared, the police are investigating an accident on the road, there are rumours of disappearances - as evidence that what she hit was a boy. The scene of the accident is physically revisited twice in the film, but the event resonates through allusion throughout, each iteration providing further exploration of the idea of witnessing and seeing. By the central point of the narrative, Vero's feelings of anxiety and guilt lead her to confess to her husband "I killed someone on the road, I think I ran over someone". The couple return to the highway at night time to investigate, but the image is so dark it's impossible for the audience to make out what the characters see – if anything. Vero's husband is certain that it is a dog but doesn't stop to look further and Vero remains unconvinced or unknowing; when he asks if she wants to go back again to look she refuses. The second time comes just after Vero has convinced herself that it was a dog that she hit and not a boy. She is a passenger in her sister's car, sitting in the back seat next to her niece; Vero is sleeping as they approach the dam and scene of the accident. Several lines of dialogue and aspects of performance foreground the desire to look coupled with the inability to see: Vero asleep, her eyes closed, the niece's command to keep driving, to keep going and pass the scene, once Vero's sister draws up at the scene a bystander tells her that no one will say what is happening. While the conversation takes place the figure of the bystander is obscured by the extreme close up of Vero, filling the spectator's field of vision. This is a frequent choice of shot in the film and it coalesces the idea of seeing and not seeing for the spectator: we are so close to the apparent subject (Vero), but the shot works to obscure everything else that is happening in the wider world of the film (figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5: Vero in *The Headless Woman*: Repeatedly looking the other way

The scene of the accident also works on another level for the spectator, that of intertextuality and film as memory, drawing as it does on two American horror films; *Psycho* (1960) and *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962).⁹⁹ The mise-en-scene, the hairstyle and performance refer back to *Psycho*, when Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is making her escape after stealing money from her employer. As she drives from Phoenix to meet her lover, Sam, she suddenly sees her boss, whose money is in her bag, and he sees her. The moment foregrounds her look at him and his recognition of her. As with Vero, Marion keeps going, her look and recognition of the situation – she will be caught, her employer will know what she’s done – makes no difference. *Psycho* provides another sequence exploring guilt, with a character who seems to be in limbo, driving forward but never getting anywhere, which becomes part of the spectator’s reading of *The Headless Woman*. Martel has referred to the influence of *Carnival of Souls*, a B-movie which has acquired cult status, on the film.¹⁰⁰ *Carnival of Souls* also focuses on the effect of a car accident and the impossibility, for the characters and the spectator, of knowing exactly what happened. A young woman, Mary, (Candace Hilligoss) takes part in an impromptu drag race with her friends and as they race across a wooden bridge, she loses control of the car and crashes into the

⁹⁹ The titles of Martel’s first three feature films can also be read as references to horror films.

¹⁰⁰ See the round-table discussion (Martel, 2009) with film critic Scott Foundas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ti4Pi496TmM> (accessed 11/06/18).

water. Mary miraculously climbs out of the water sometime after the crash, but her friends die. The accident is rarely referred to again but Mary experiences hallucinations, seeing monstrous versions of human figures: the carnival of souls. As will be discussed below, Vero becomes an increasingly ghostly presence in the film just as Mary, at times, doesn't seem to exist at all. In a department store Mary is initially welcomed by the shop assistant but then ignored by her and the other shoppers, as if she doesn't exist. The exploration of subjectivity in the aftermath of an accident, the continual questioning of what has been seen, and the alienation of the central character in the two earlier films are all evident in *The Headless Woman*. This creates intertextual references, adding another layer to versions of events which is central to the themes of the latter film.¹⁰¹

At the half way point of the film there is a transformative reimagining of the accident that took place at the beginning. It is much more oblique than the re-enactment undertaken by Vero and her husband when they drive again along the highway in order to detect the aftermath of the accident, but it is more resonant in this less literal version. This iteration reflects the experience of the workings of the past in the present, the traces and remains which can't be held on to or clarified. Vero, with her sister, is taking her nephews to a sports ground. While the setting is completely different to the site of the accident a series of props, sounds, composition and moments of touch recall it across time and types of experience. As Vero walks around the playing field, the image is suddenly bleached out with a flare effect to suggest the glare of the sun. This moment resonates again minutes later through a sound effect as Vero walks into the changing rooms: an electric light flashes on and off suddenly, the distorted, blistering sound which accompanies it suggesting a burning out of an element, a shock as the caretaker touches it. It is another moment of destruction which takes place off screen but is constructed as an image in the viewer's mind. In the glare of the sun Vero puts her sunglasses on. This physical prop recalls the original accident when Vero puts them on very deliberately as a shield, the

¹⁰¹ There are also references to *The Headless Woman* in Martel's other work. In the surreal short film *Pescados* (2010), a group of carp in a pond remember a dream or nightmare in which they were "driving down the road", "driving, driving, driving". They also comment that "There weren't any dogs". The film is available at <https://vimeo.com/25136079> (accessed 18/06/18).

flash of bleached light and the flash of the strip lighting is reminiscent of the process of involuntary memory – for Vero and the audience – something that suddenly flashes in the mind, which can't be grasped or deliberately recalled but sets a series of fragments of the past into movement. As Vero continues to walk around the track, there is an off-screen sound of a crash, of glass smashing, another accident. Vero turns and looks off screen, her body turning fully to look, exactly as she didn't at the earlier accident; the other people in the scene ignore it, don't look and continue to walk, unconcerned. The reverse shot which shows what Vero is looking at is present this time, highlighting its previous absence. The disclosed shot is reminiscent of the composition of the earlier rear view shot taken from the back of the car as Vero drove away from the accident, revealing the 'body' in the road, this time though it is clearly seen in mid-shot, the prone - but unharmed - body of a young man.

The Headless Woman continues its theme of non-witnessing once Vero re-enters her everyday life. Here Vero's refusal to look at the accident is reiterated by its opposite, her seeming constant looking throughout the film, but the object of her gaze is often either incomprehensible to her or withheld from the spectator. The incomprehension of looking is coupled with her inability to speak beyond a few phrases. After the accident and throughout most of the film Vero says very little and repeats some phrases: "it was the weekend of the storm but it hadn't started raining yet". Now objects that she looks at have been separated from their meaning, they no longer signify. In the kitchen of her home she looks blankly at objects in cupboards unable to recognise everyday items. At work as a dentist she sees the patients in the waiting room reading magazines and does the same, as she cannot identify her own role; in the car park she looks at each car unknowingly before being led to her own. At the hospital where she is taken after her accident the nurse has to tell her that it's her name she needs to put on the form – not the nurse's. This inability to recognise her own milieu is a product of the trauma caused by the accident, of her refusal to look and to make connections.¹⁰² This is reiterated

¹⁰² As has been shown, Martel's films are often discussed in feminist terms in part because of the use of the female gaze. In *The Headless Woman*, Vero's gaze is often foregrounded but what she sees has no meaning to her, which would complicate the idea of a simple reversal of the male gaze.

when Vero watches the home movie footage of her own wedding to Marco. She watches with her sister and her Aunt Lala, who suffers from dementia. As they watch the film Lala repeatedly asks questions about the lives of the people on screen – Vero and her family – which Vero can't answer, not recognising herself. The gradual disappearance of Vero (Lala twice comments that Vero doesn't sound like Vero, that she has a "strange voice") seems to be barely noticed by others around her. People do things to her, speak to her, and make assumptions without seeing that she isn't 'there'.

The loss of speech and with it the ability to testify is reinforced by the paradoxical nature of Vero's gaze in the film, foregrounded through a repeated stylistic motif which represents Vero's inability to perceive, as well as the response of those around her. The form of the film in these instances prevents the spectator sharing the central character's gaze, it removes the recognised spatial relationships usually constructed through techniques such as shot reverse shot, thus changing the space of the film and reinforcing the absence of seeing. The belief that testimony is a form of becoming which constructs subjectivity finds its opposite in the character of Vero; her loss of self indicates the post-traumatic disassociation and affect-less state. The theme of the film in the context of a cinema of national memory is to address the impossibility of recovery when there is nothing concrete to remember or authoritative witnessing to testify to.

Characters in Pure Mediality

The situation of the characters in the films suggests Giorgio Agamben's concept of gesture which identifies humanity's infinite, but futile, desire to recapture the past, that renders life as a state of in-between or pure mediality. In his analysis, the twentieth century art forms of dance and film are testament to this experience, they are a response to the awareness of the vanishing past, of what will be lost, a time when "humanity tried for the last time to evoke what was slipping through its fingers forever" (Agamben, 2000, p. 53). The trauma of losing the past cannot be articulated in words but can be gestured. When understood as a gestural rather than aesthetic form, cinema is a way of transforming and representing the past itself through the experiential or haptic; the gesture is an

endless reference to something which happened but which cannot be called back into existence. Film, in its representation of actions but also in its material form, becomes a way of attempting to reclaim and record lost gestures, a loss which Agamben traces to the period of the emergence of early cinema when film attempts to restore the gesture which humanity has lost (Agamben, 2000, p. 51). This loss of gesture which is simultaneous with a loss of naturalness and ease, is characteristic of life which has become “indecipherable” through a move to interiority (Agamben, 2000, p. 52). The value of the gesture in film is to break down and foreground the moments of the real, of lived experience, an attempt to reify the abstract or psychological. Deleuze’s (1983/2005) analysis of the transformation of cinema from the movement to the time-image, where the strong sensory motor situations leading to action faltered and disintegrated, is in contrast to the concept of the cinema of gesture. Agamben’s gesture does not have the sense of a moment moving towards something defined which could be completed. Instead the gesture is not even “the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality” (Agamben, 2000, p. 58). The gesture is not trying to become something else, to break through into a different period or form, it is not defined through a lack of what it has not reached, but has meaning in itself. This meaning cannot be expressed in language as there is no memory of what has happened in the past and the loss of speech is a symptom of this.

The concept of characters in a state of pure mediality – of a suspension in space and time – has been interpreted in film theory as a type of counter-cinema which disrupts “narrative linearity, the logic of cause and effect” (Mulvey, 2015, p. 7). As with a Marxist analysis of the psychological deceit of classic narrative cinema, gestures have been read as disturbing “the cinematic illusion of realism and solicit the spectator’s recognition of the failures of ideologically complicit forms of representation” (Chare & Watkins, 2015, p. 4). In the disruption and fragmentation of a film’s narrative coherence, the gesture makes demands on the spectator to piece together seemingly disparate moments, constructing an active response, “a process of reading for connections between disparate images and characters” (Chare & Watkins, 2015, p. 4). This process of making connections can be directly linked to different processes of memory: the memories, or amnesia, of characters within the diegesis, of the spectator’s

memories of the film as it is watched and passes, of other films and of their own lives. This appeal to memory is the “desire to make sense of a disassembled narrative” (Chare & Watkins, 2015, p. 4): in Freudian terms an attempt to put things in place, to make an order from the past. In Martel’s films the attempt to make an order or coherence from events is continually frustrated for the characters and the spectator. Narrative logic is displaced by the sensory experience of the world of the film, again for characters and spectators, through the repetition of moments through gesture, repetition which makes the familiar strange and reinforces the inability to put experiences into words.

The nature of the pure mediality of the gesture, its suspension between a past which can’t be placed or ordered, a future which may exist and have meaning but which can’t be reached, is inherent in Agamben’s interpretation of the materiality of film form. For Agamben, the photographic image is both “reification and obliteration” (Agamben, 2000, p. 54) of the gesture through fixing it in a static image. This analysis of the photograph is similar to André Bazin’s interpretation of photography as a form of embalming, “as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber” (Bazin, 1960, p. 8). Photography in Bazin’s argument is a form of stasis, halting time, freeing it “from its proper corruption” (Bazin, 1960, p. 8). It is only the cinema which can deliver photography from its position outside of time and space, identifying the nature of cinema as a tussle between the properties of the still and moving image. In Agamben’s analysis the specific nature of the image which moves (which must later be reinforced and extended by editing) links the gesture to a whole, making it dynamic. The inherent conflict between the static and dynamic in photography, which takes something which has duration and fixes it in one point, is liberated into movement by cinema, restoring the image to dynamism. This restoration is not though a slice of a journey towards a different time and space, instead film both liberates and traps the gesture, a continual closed but dynamic action.¹⁰³ This relationship is apparent in Eadweard Muybridge’s moving images which are Agamben’s

¹⁰³ This relationship is reminiscent of the dynamic of the ritornello and the gallop of the crystal image discussed in chapter 2: “the one being the hastening of the presents which are passing, the other the raising or falling back of the pasts which are preserved” (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 90).

touchstone for his idea of gesture in film. Muybridge's series of films showing the human body in motion – a woman jumps over a stool, a couple dance, a woman twirls the train of her evening gown – show specific, repeated actions with purpose, in other words a gesture, which have meaning and dynamism, but which are also trapped (Figure 3.6). The nature of film form and exhibition at the end of the nineteenth century reiterates this: gestures are endlessly looped, having a significance in themselves which is not linked to any other time or space. The dynamism within the frame is in counterpoint to the ratio which encloses it, which can't allow a movement beyond the frame of the screen, the character is trapped. This sense of entrapment and movement is central to the experience of temporality for the characters in the films; this experience of stasis is a form of gesture, an attempt to recreate the past. This construction provides an intimate relationship with the spectator as this experience is transmitted through the sense of touch.



Figure 3.6 Stills from Muybridge's series Victorian Ladies (1885)

Fragments of the Past – Capturing the Past through Gesture

Gesture in Martel's films is also haptic in nature, transmitting to the spectator the experience of touch where the tactile becomes a way of foregrounding traces that remain through time. The haptic gesture is a type of reification, to make time passing solid, an attempt to moor characters and the viewer in time. In her analysis of live performance, Rebecca Schneider (2011) has identified the concept of the reiterative gesture as an attempt to call up the past, the gesture potentially containing physical aspects or traces of the past: "To find the past resident in remains – material evidence, haunting trace, reiterative gesture – is to engage one time resident in another" (Schneider, 2011, p. 37). The reiteration might be through a physical object, a repeated gesture but also through the body itself,

the way in which it contains traces of past events, “the past is given to remain but in each case that remaining is incomplete, fractured, partial – in the sense of both of fragmentary and ongoing” (Schneider, 2011, p. 37). The remnants of the past which are only partially evident, out of reach, blur the boundaries between past and present – crossing time through touch and suggestion. The reference to the tactile nature of gestures is reinforced by Nicholas Chare (2015) in his discussion of gesture in *Shoah*, where it is defined as frequently emotional, “allowing the past to be felt in the present” (Chare, 2015, p. 33). This combination of repetition, emotion and touch allows the spectator to feel the gesture as it appears from the past in the present. The emphasis on touch is an acknowledgement of the inability of the past to be expressed through spoken language, its loss too traumatic. This is a trauma which can be read locally in the context of Argentina’s dictatorship but also as a wider human experience, the trauma of losing the past. For human beings the lost past is also a constant reminder of the nearness of a lost future, death.

The reiterative gesture and the partial reappearance of the past is apparent in the three films through touch, material objects and bodily traces. There are frequent references to hair, to colouring, conditioning, blow-drying, brushing, always in an attempt to maintain and preserve it. These references can be read as social and cultural positioning; Vero’s bleached blonde hair signifies her apparently deliberate separation from the indigenous characters who provide services for her milieu, in *The Swamp*, Mecha’s husband, Gregorio, is signified as vain and uncaring as he stands in front of the mirror carefully blow drying his hair while his wife is taken to hospital after her accident. Similarly, in *The Holy Girl*, Helena helps her brother Freddy dye his thinning hair back to the darker colour of his youth. Characters discuss the quality and condition of their hair, suggesting various solutions for a silkier texture and more vibrant colour; one of the fears expressed of contamination in swimming pools is that it may alter the colour of dyed hair. The health of hair seems to have a direct relationship to the characters’ sense of self in the world, reflected in Vero’s repeated stroking of her hair in moments of unease.

The tactile nature of the allusions to hair and the characters' obsession with it can also be read as a form of gesture across time. Hair is an unusual aspect of human physiology as it combines life and death,¹⁰⁴ with the visible hair shaft already dead matter as it grows out of the follicle. This reminder of mortality – a form of *memento mori* – is something which the characters literally carry around with them, a physical trace of the past which is difficult to erase. The focus on hair reminds the characters of their existence in the past, their attempts to alter and manipulate it an attempt to reify and control time. Aspects of remnants across time are also evident in the materiality of the world the characters exist in. Full of crumbling and decaying brick, the walls and décor of their homes are full of reminders of the past. A sequence in *The Holy Girl* is typical of the construction of the haptic in the films, playing on the contrast between touching and not touching in conveying the character's experience of their world. Amalia, who is convinced that the religious vocation she is searching for is to do with her desire for Dr. Jano, follows his path through the hotel, recreating his past presence through touch and then smell. As she stands behind him in the lift she reaches her hand out to touch him (a reversal of an earlier scene when Jano stood behind Amalia and touched her), very slightly grazing his skin. Amalia attempts to recreate this slight sensation of touch as she walks along the corridors of the hotel, her hand tracing a variety of textures, the stone wall, the metal bars at the window, the leaves of a plant, each carrying reminders of the recent and distant past. This sensory experience is extended as Amalia takes some of the shaving cream belonging to Jano – she had seen a tiny smear of it on his cheek – and rubs it into the collar of her shirt to create the same scent. This attempt at reconstruction is in competition with the constant spraying of air freshener by the chambermaids in the hotel, an attempt to obliterate any remnants of the past in the present.

The sensation created by the desire to touch and the impossibility of holding on to things permeates the film, creating the cinematic haptic. These 'things' include the materiality of bodies and physical

¹⁰⁴ The common belief that hair (and fingernails) continues to grow after death, while false, is also the kind of image which would fit well with the gothic readings of Martel's films. For an analysis of the gothic in Martel's films see: Martin (2011) and McVeigh (2018).

settings, but also the more insubstantial and ephemeral, including music and emotions. Such sensations are personified in the use of the Theremin - an early electronic instrument which is played without physical contact - the playing of which provides several moments of performance within the film and the only instance of non-diegetic sound as it is heard over the final credits. The first time Jano touches Amalia he is pressed up behind her, part of the small crowd which has gathered in the street to listen to the Theremin player; the sensation of touching and not touching clearly contrasted (this is also characteristic of the deadpan humour of Martel's films). The desire to touch is reinforced in other character's responses to the Theremin. When the player auditions at the hotel, Mirta, the housekeeper, darts her hand towards the instrument, snatching it back as the non-contact produces a sound. The sound of the music is physically expressed by the Theremin player who produces the music through his bodily relationship to the instrument, physical actions repeated by those watching him. The tension in the counterpoint of touch and distance is expressed in the shot immediately following the performance, and is in direct contrast to the scene of the Theremin, full of material texture and physical connection. A medium close up follows Amalia's hand as it traces the contours of a plastic screen beside the hotel pool. The sound of her fingers on the material creates a distinct squeaking sound, which, along with the scratches on the material creates a haptic response for the spectator. Amalia is obscured and blurred behind the sheeting, only a partial aspect of her face, her eye and part of her cheek, becoming distinct between the sheet and the wooden frame, creating three contrasting textures in the shot (Figure 3.7). The opposing aspect of the scene in relation to the previous one becomes foregrounded as Amalia flicks her fingers against a metal reinforcement in the sheet in front of her, now creating through touch a musical note with which she attracts Jano's attention.



Figure 3.7: The contrasting textures provoke a haptic response in The Holy Girl

The tension between the different connections to the world apparent in this range of sensory experience is also explored in a repeated theme dealing with the concept of authenticity and copies. In Amalia's religious studies class, the students are following a series of instructions about religious vocation, challenging their young teacher with continual questions about how they will recognise their vocation, how will they know they're not mistaken? The anxiety around recognition and knowledge is reiterated in the focus on photocopying. The students are repeatedly told to bring photocopies of relevant material to class in order to read and discuss it; the material is referred to as photocopies rather than by title or author. Amalia's best friend, Josefina, reads a passage aloud to the class and when asked for the source by her teacher answers, "it's a photocopy" as though the form of the material was more meaningful than its original source. Frustrated, the teacher states that "you must know the source". When another girl tells a lurid story drawn from folk tales, she is told that the story is not appropriate, and she should bring a photocopy to discuss instead. The reliance on the photocopies of an anonymous text, to discuss an undefined vocation is another way of expressing the feeling of being removed from meaning. This foregrounding of the idea of multiple copies, each one further removed from an original that cannot be returned to, is an example of *mise-en-abyme* (as

explored in chapter 1). Here mise-en-abyme functions as a way of transmitting to the spectator the experience of the characters, adrift from any certainty and embodiment in time and place.

The idea of reiteration as part of a complex experience of temporality is intensified by the film style, where scenes in the present reference back to earlier moments in the film through their form, suggesting the fragmentary and partial nature of the past and its appearance in the present, as it is experienced by characters but also by the spectator. Each reiteration is transformed and altered in the present, referring back to a lost moment, unable to recreate it. In *The Headless Woman*, Vero's simultaneous need to remember and refusal to look back to the accident is transmitted through her temporal limbo, her suspended position as events are repeated in the form of a series of gestures and through the film form which articulates what can't be expressed verbally.

The reiterative nature of *The Headless Woman*, where moments from the film reappear in different transformations, is part of the temporal dislocation experienced by the spectator and characters. In the aftermath of the accident, Vero is driven to the hospital by the unseen rescuer and the camera is positioned at the left shoulder of Vero picturing in close-up the silhouette of Vero's head, her face turned away from the camera, looking out of the window. The shot is composed of light and texture: the window patterned by beads of rain, channels of water streaking it clear in places, the outline of the landscape obscure in the distance. The streaks of rain on the window are also a reminder to the viewer of the earlier shot of Vero's car window, smeared by the hand-prints of the children who surround her in the first shots of the film. In the frame of the window a blurred moving shape of a girl on a bike appears; her face isn't distinguishable but her hair flies out behind her. The girl moves forward and backward, in and out of time with the motion of the car and then disappears as the rain drops multiply, now swarming like a constellation, obscuring the rider of the bike completely. The sound of the bike's engine, along with loud beating of the rain on the car, gives a reality to the figure which otherwise appears as a figment of Vero's imagination, a memory or a dream. This sensation of unreality is reiterated when this moment is also repeated later in the film but without any indication

of a connection to this moment. The second appearance comes on one of the failed attempts to buy the pots for the garden. As Vero's sister drives she talks, while Vero listens, turning her head from side to side in a now familiar gesture. The girl on the motorcycle – now clearly visible in bright light, once again appears and reappears, as Vero's head turns away from the audience to watch her. The reiteration of scenes – as well as individual gestures - which are shifted and transformed with each version, function in a similar way to the photocopies; they are a continual attempt at replication. This replication reinforces the impossibility of returning to the original event and strands the characters in limbo.

Melodrama: The Visible and Invisible

The films' mute expression of emotionally extreme situations, placed within the focus on central female characters in a domestic context, often struggling with family relationships or moral dilemmas, alludes to melodrama. The melodramatic mode is, as Carla Marcantonio (2015) argues, a useful framework for understanding the in-between nature of contemporary, global, art house cinema, a style which is, "tied to ... local contexts and histories while they simultaneously address a larger, global reality" (Marcantonio, 2015, p. 4). As a form which emerged in the nineteenth century and was associated with the development of narratives of the nation state, the contemporary use of melodramatic modes illustrates the complications and transformations around films which exist across national borders and are received globally. Marcantonio sees the melodramatic mode explored by art house filmmakers as a way of expressing the experience of globalisation by nation states and their citizens. As globalisation has proceeded by combining a homogenising effect while still referring to the specific and authentic, melodrama's traditional function of representing a particular time and place has opened up in order to explore the experience and transformation of globalisation:

Melodramatic modes of representation necessarily shift when forced to contend with the reality of the increased porousness that globalization has heralded,

complicating the structures that organize the imaginary of the nation: sanctioned modes of embodiment and kinship, as well as specific arrangements of spatial and temporal continuity (bounded space, chronological time) (Marcantonio, 2015, p. 10).

The oblique style (or “shift” in Marcantonio’s terms) in which Martel’s films engage with melodrama is another way in which her work finds an indeterminate space from which to reference specifics of national experience amid a wider experience of displacement and anxiety, due in part to the transformations affected on modern temporality. The national aspect of melodrama in Martel’s work is identified by Dominique Russell (2008), who argues that melodrama is “arguably the dominant mode in Latin American cinema and still central culturally through hugely popular soap operas” (Russell, 2008). As with the film’s relationship to the *testimonio* film, Martel shifts the conventions of melodrama associated with Latin American film traditions in order to question a series of representations of living in a post-trauma society.

The key characteristics of melodrama are present in the films but are all but displaced, shifted in a way to remove certainties around time and space as well as in the Manichean moral conflict associated with the traditional form of melodrama. In her summary of the central tropes of melodrama, Marcantonio (2015) demonstrates how the structuring aspects of melodrama have remained the same but are malleable enough to be explored in novel ways. These include the tropes of recognition (including representations of ‘virtue and villainy’ which position the spectator), the temporal organisation of action and stasis, the paradigm of muteness and excess of emotion, the focus on embodiment as a form of signification and the home as a place of belonging. Many of these tropes can be identified in Martel’s work but are continually shifting so that the meaning is unstable. For example, in *The Headless Woman*, the representation of privileged Argentines’ treatment of the indigenous people who are their servants and Vero’s actions in not reporting her car accident, could be read as a form of recognition and moral conflict but there is no clear complicity for the spectator

to respond to. The non-representation of indigenous characters and the ambiguity of the accident, work to prevent a reading of virtue and villainy. Similarly, while all three films focus on the domestic, the representation of the home is often alienating and uncanny.¹⁰⁵ In *The Holy Girl* the displacement of the family home by a hotel with its connotations of transience and impermanence are a direct challenge to notions of home and belonging. The disruption to the stability of melodramatic space in home and nation is an example of the in-betweenness of the films, which may signify a local location to national audiences (the setting of *The Holy Girl* is a famous hotel – Hotel Terminus – but this is not evident in the film) but remove all reference to specifics within the mise-en-scene of the films, including the use of establishing shots.

Martel's use of melodrama as way of alluding to national and transnational concerns are particularly evident in the representation of temporality and the way in which characters embody that experience. The construction of temporality in melodrama is one which, in its traditional iterations, is able to conceptualise opposing forms of duration, which Linda Williams (1998) defines as the "spectacular essence of melodrama [which] seems to rest in those moments of temporal prolongation when 'in the nick of time' defies 'too late' " (Williams, 1998, p. 74). This form of temporality, which is frequently used in the final moments of melodramas, is contrasted with periods of waiting, another type of elongated time where waiting becomes associated with a central character's suffering; waiting for a change of heart, of circumstance, to be noticed. As is typical of Martel's experimentation with melodrama the latter aspect of melodramatic time – the delays and deferrals – is foregrounded as the dominant mode, while the time of action and progress is only hinted or referred to, never experienced.

The films are full of references to the experience of suspended time, of a lack of connection; the narratives don't progress, their strands are about stasis rather than action. As they can neither remember nor look forward, characters rarely develop or move in space, people wait for things to

¹⁰⁵ The representation of the home as a site of repression and anxiety – particularly for women – in melodrama has been identified in feminist re-evaluations of the form. See for example Gledhill (1987).

happen, things which they cannot define and which therefore never appear. The concept of deferred experience in time and space is evident in the authorial themes which repeatedly explore the confounded attempt at a search for meaning and vocation, a need for authenticity which is elusive but, if discovered, would give life meaning. All these ideas are evident at micro and macro levels in the films. *The Swamp* predominantly takes place in a crumbling country mansion, La Mandagora¹⁰⁶ and follows the interactions of two families, particularly focusing on the middle-aged mothers of each family, the cousins Mecha and Tali. The minimal events of the plot are characterised by drunkenness, boredom and repressed desires, where characters are rendered in an indeterminate state. Images of the world suspended are apparent in the narrative framework but evident also in delicate, specific motifs in the films. The second image of *The Swamp*, after a shot of the landscape around La Mandagora, is a still life of a mass of ripe red peppers (the family business and source of their now precarious wealth is a vegetable distribution company), the sun glinting off their skin which is starting to blister (Figure 3.8) Repeated reference is made to the transportation of an order of peppers which has either not been sent or never arrived.

¹⁰⁶ The mandagora – or mandrake – plant has toxic properties and can induce stupor and unconsciousness.



Figure 3.8 Still life of peppers in The Swamp

Ice cubes are repeatedly referenced in the film through sound and image, making them symbolic of the state of suspension from progress and movement of the characters of the characters. As frozen – or suspended – water, ice cubes are made up of particles without the energy for movement, synonymous with the characters in the films. *The Swamp* starts with an amplified, distorted sound which is revealed as the clinking of ice cubes against glass in the drinks of the adults who are splayed around the pool in a drunken stupor; Mecha's accident is the result of the need for sudden movement as heavy rain starts. The adults are unable to coordinate their movements, swaying violently without direction. Throughout the film, one of Mecha's complaints is that the servants never bring enough ice for her drink, a repetition without conclusion. In the final scenes of the film Mecha is shown filling an ice tray with water, taking it to the fridge in her son's room and sitting in front of it, waiting, laying her hand on the fridge as if to encourage its transformation. The repeated reference to water throughout the films – swimming pools, rain, dams, etc. - has been noted in Martel's films as part of an allegorical expression of contamination. The stagnating, dirty water of the pool in *The Swamp* means that it cannot be used, the characters just sit beside it (making it one of the many examples in the film of

things which don't work). The motif is repeated in *The Headless Woman* where the characters gossip about the inappropriateness of the plans to open a swimming pool adjacent to the veterinary surgery ("that's disgusting") with vague but strongly expressed fears that it will be invaded by water turtles carrying disease. When the pool finally opens and the characters do visit it they continue to question its cleanliness, making sure they keep their heads up as they swim, careful not to swallow any of the water. In contrast to the references to disease and decay, Sophie Mayer (2010) discusses the water as part of the transformative, fluid imagery of the films, a form of excess and obliteration, washing away characters' actions. While the use of water in Martel's films clearly makes reference to contamination and sickness, the repeated motif operates at another level of meaning to do with the trapped space and time in which the characters exist. The swimming pool at the hotel in *The Holy Girl* is, in Deleuzian terms, a seed in which the characters exist, a space within the outer seed of the hotel itself: enclosed purposeless space. This use of space removes the film's narrative from the particular of Argentinean history and society and attempts to reify an abstract experience of distress in a space separate from everyday realities. As with the temporal relationships in the film which refer back to the melodramatic mode of competing forms of stasis and action, the imagery of water, either stagnant or cascading in a flood, mirrors this form, in turn alluding to the entrapment of characters.

The narrative (non) events of the films include a great number of references to stasis and immobility. In *The Holy Girl*, characters are continually planning journeys which never happen: Mecha and Talia plan a trip to Bolivia to buy school supplies, Mercedes, an employee in the family business is going to visit La Mandrega but never arrives. Mercedes's plans are further disrupted as her telephone calls to the house are rarely answered. The motif of the phone ringing endlessly, but when it is finally answered people can't hear or understand each other, is another form of deferred events but also an example of the impossibility of communication, which is a theme across Martel's films. In the final scenes of the film, Jose (Juan Cruz Bordeu) attempts to ring his aunt Talia to express his condolences for a family tragedy but is unable to get through because his sister Veronica is simultaneously trying to ring him. In *The Holy Girl*, Helena ignores her ex-husband's phone calls while her brother Freddy

keeps putting off a call to his children who he rarely sees due to divorce. Characters in *The Holy Girl* and *The Swamp* spend a lot of time in bed due to a feeling of lethargy reinforced by the oppressive heat. The hotel setting of *The Holy Girl* foregrounds the mise-en-scene of bedrooms, as these dominate the layout of the hotel setting, with no other shared family spaces. Helena and Amalia spend hours in the darkened rooms (Figure 3.9), where it is difficult to gauge time, sleepy and languid. Even when the film moves out of the hotel to Josefina's house, the dominant setting is her grandmother's bedroom. Mecha is unable to leave her house and refers frequently to her fear that she will end up like her mother who, she reminds her cousin Talia, went to bed one day and then remained there.



Figure 3.9: Helena and Amalia in *The Holy Girl*

In *The Headless Woman*, Vero's aunt Lala (María Vaner) has taken to her bed and her world is contained within the walls of her bedroom. As Mecha spends much of her time in bed, often in a drunken state, so do the rest of her family; the mise-en-scene focusing on the damp and dirty tangle of sheets which bodies are wrapped in, too hot to leave the house. Sexual desire is both acted on and repressed in these scenes, but is part of the same existence of the near sleeping characters, rather than something separate or active.

The sexual relationships in *The Swamp* are another example of a situation of stasis, where events in the past are opaque and never explicit, but resonate in the present. Two groups of complicated

relationships which aren't made explicit infiltrate the meaning of the film and add to the air of foreboding. Mecha's relationship with her husband Gregorio (Martín Adjemián) is distant, he sleeps in another room and barely appears after her accident at the beginning of the film. The rupture may have been caused by an affair with his employee, Mercedes (Silvia Baylé) who is now sleeping with his son, José. José's waning interest in Mercedes is replaced by his unrequited desire for Isabel (Andrea López), the family's maid, who his sister Momi is also infatuated with. These interlinked connections based on desire and rejection, construct a form of limbo in which none of the couplings become established or explicit.

The meaning of the immobile nature of the characters and the narrative is personified in the final scenes of *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*, which both end on an arrested moment in time and space. At the end of the *The Holy Girl* there are a series of moments of waiting which all draw on spaces with specific resonance in relation to suspension, arrested time and a possibility of transition which never comes into fruition. The ending of the film moves between a series of narratives which might suggest a move towards closure but instead are postponed. These are a series of shots of moments about waiting for something to happen: the final seminar of the medical conference, frequently referred to in the narrative of *The Holy Girl* with anticipation and planning, is about to start; Josefina's parents are waiting in the hotel lobby to reveal to Helena that her daughter, Amalia, has been sexually assaulted by Dr. Jano; Amalia and Josefina swim in the pool, one aware and one unaware that they are waiting for anything.

The closing seminar of the conference is represented through allusions to the theatre, again reminiscent of a seed where characters are trapped, trying on various identities, but here there is no sense of finding an authentic role and expression, of a "bursting forth" (Deleuze, 1985, p. 85). Helena has agreed to appear in the role of the patient at the final seminar of the medical conference, in a

role-play with Dr Jano.¹⁰⁷ The scene is constructed to foreground the theatrical nature of the moment; Helena is glamorous in a red dress, a costume chosen for this appearance, her hair and make-up done. She is introduced and welcomed on stage to applause, like an actress appearing in a play. Dr Jano is similarly helped by a 'dresser' to put on his costume, the white coat of the doctor, in the wings of the stage. The long take stays with him as he hears his introduction, but he remains rooted behind the curtain unable to move forward; the shot is followed by Helena waiting on stage, swinging on her chair, the audience a blurred image behind her. The enclosed, theatrical space, a space separate from the world, is followed by a sequence of other trapped spaces: the hotel lobby and the swimming pool, the enclosed, echoing space where the two girls swim, waiting, unknowing about the (non) events around them (Figure 3.10). These bodies suspended in the spaces of the lobby, behind the curtain of the stage, the final event of a conference which can never close, the swimmers suspended above the water, exist in a place separate from the material reality of the rest of the world.¹⁰⁸



Figure 3.10: Bodies suspended in time and space in *The Holy Girl*

¹⁰⁷ The use of the medical conference to explore ideas of communication and identity is similar to Pedro Almodovar's focus on the hospital setting in several films, including: *The Flower of my Secret* (1995), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002).

¹⁰⁸ In her audio-visual essay, *The Senses of an Ending*, Catherine Grant (2017) further explores the meaning of the swimming pool in *The Holy Girl*.

The ending of *The Swamp* follows a similar structure, organised around a series of events which suggest a progression in narrative development but leave the spectators in a state of not knowing, but with a terrible sense of tragedy hanging over the diegesis; in this case the belief that Luci, Talia's innocent, mischievous young son has died due to a freak, domestic accident. The aftermath of the accident isn't stated explicitly but is suggested through the representation of absence. A series of shots show empty, silent interiors of Talia's house which had previously been crowded with her family, the final shot revealing Luci's prone body on the floor where he fell.

The final scene of *The Swamp* underlines the closed nature of the world of the characters and their entrapment; the closing shots reconstructing almost exactly those of the start of the film, a form of reiteration as identified in *The Headless Woman*. Momi and Veronica, Mecha's daughters, lie by the pool, the sound of a chair being scraped across the concrete provides the discordant noise similar to the glass smashing in the beginning. Again the sound of an imminent storm is heard and the shot cuts to a landscape of mountains with grey clouds overhanging them. The final words of the film, "I didn't see anything" refers to Veronica's trip to see the virgin miracle in town but reiterates the repetitive, closed nature of the narrative and the characters' limbo; there is no recognition or understanding of what has happened in the past.

Melodrama: Temporal Paradox and Embodiment

The concepts of temporal paradox and embodiment associated with melodrama are evident in the structuring framework of the films, which alludes to narrative progression through genre plots although time is in limbo for the characters. This in turn affects the way in which bodies in the frame appear and disappear. This relationship, a form of ritornello between temporality and embodiment, is particularly evident in the final scenes of *The Headless Woman*, where the narrative references to the melodrama and thriller are in counterpoint to the gradual disappearance of Vero. The spectral quality of the characters in Martel's films suggests an insubstantial, underlying aspect to their relation

to presence, and Vero appears to disappear rather than come into being in the film. The temporal experience of Vero is one which moves in reverse of the expected pattern, she begins the film as a physical and vocal presence but progressively becomes less substantial, less precise; as the narrative progresses there is a loosening of her grip on the world and the events that have happened.¹⁰⁹ As Vero doesn't provide testimony she slowly disintegrates, becoming less manifest; this is not a violent process but one where the character is perceived – and perceives herself – in a more blurred state, lacking substance and discernibility. Vero's increasing invisibility and lack of agency is emphasised throughout the film and reaches an intensification at the end. Although Martel's films are rightly considered minimal in terms of narrative and lacking conventional cause and effect, there is a progression to the character of Vero which reaches a conclusion of sorts in the final shots of the film. This allusion to a narrative framework is reinforced as these scenes are the part of the film which most reflect the film's noted relationship to *Vertigo*; setting up an enigma which the viewer wants to solve. While the ending is ambiguous in terms of the nature and reliability of the knowledge presented to the viewer, the disappearance of a person as an individual with an identity is complete at the end of the film. The final scenes of *The Headless Woman* have been interpreted as Vero returning to her privileged milieu, the forgotten trauma of the accident read as a metaphor for the Argentinean middle class and their complicity in the dictatorship, as well as a warning that the conditions which allowed those events to happen have not gone away. These readings must ignore the state of limbo which Vero experiences, her inability to witness leads to her own annihilation, rather than a recuperation into her old life.

In the final scenes of the film Vero is caught between actual and virtual states as she attempts to make visible her identity as someone who did or did not run over a child and leave the accident, but the film narrative and aesthetic prevents this. In these scenes, Vero retraces her recent actions, another attempt to return to the moment of the accident and to make it actual. In these moments of

¹⁰⁹ This theme of a suburban, middle class woman who gradually recedes from her own life is also explored in *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995).

detection Vero discovers that the past event has been removed as if it didn't exist. There is no record of Vero at the hospital, the x-rays, particularly symbolic of revelation and investigation, apparently were never taken. As Vero asks for information about her history at the hospital information desk, her visual disintegration begins. In a film which is dominated by close-up images of Vero's face, accentuating her large eyes and the slightest change in her facial expression, she now stands with her back to the viewer, her reflection, blurred and indistinct, only occasionally visible in the glass.¹¹⁰

The following scenes take Vero through a sequence of attempts to reinstate who she is, to create an actual version which makes good the aspects of her life which are missing. She dyes her hair again, returning to her 'natural' colour, the pots from the garden centre which have been subject to endless delays are finally delivered, perhaps by the very boy she thought was missing. It is a sequence which attempts to fill a lack, to return to a time before the accident. The harmony of these events in the diegesis, the way in which they repeat or draw to a close earlier events, is extended with the closing scene taking place in the hotel where Vero stayed at the start of the film. The reassurance of repetition is absent though, as the familiarity becomes unsettling, another reminder of the shift in perception about what did and didn't happen. At the hotel Vero again finds no trace of herself, no record; the room she occupied was apparently empty that weekend. The characteristic stylistic feature of Vero staring around her uncomprehendingly returns, the world about her retreating into silence. The film ends with Vero's lack of subjectivity reflected through images of insubstantiality where the corporeal nature of her body has been compromised. The hotel is the venue for a social occasion for Vero's extended family and friends, a well-to-do, privileged group. As Vero enters the function room through glass doors the viewer remains behind, just catching her blurred image through the glass as she moves around the room, sometimes lost behind the guests before reappearing, finally disappearing into the

¹¹⁰ This trajectory away from the close-up over the course of the film is in contrast to films such as *The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959) and *The Story of Qui Ju* (Zhang, 1992), which end with a freeze frame close-up as an image of the character's uncertainty and displacement.

darkness, and the film finishes (Figure 3.11). Vero's detachment from temporal and spatial security is characteristic of Martel's conception of a mode of non-being in the present; a state of limbo which is a combination of not seeing and not comprehending, that has been identified as a characteristic of post-trauma existence.



Figure 3.11 Vero begins to disappear at the end of The Headless Woman

This focus on the nature of the physical body and the corporeal in the films of Lucrecia Martel has been discussed in relation to the scenes of the characters' intimate lives in bedrooms and beside pools, where flesh is on show in a very physical and often unflattering light. Interpreting the tactile, corporeal aspect of the film, Page (2009) has argued that it is part of the signification of the breakdown between the public and private sphere where the biological is no longer private. The focus on the sensuous pleasure of the body is another aspect of the moral ambiguity of the films, removing physical desires from an intellectual or judgemental realm. In melodrama the body is privileged as way of representing aspects of (acceptable) nationality, race and class. Embodiment in melodrama is a way of demarcating what can and cannot be shown, in Marcantonio's analysis the body represents "the paradigm of visibility and invisibility ... deployed in the construction of knowledge, identity, and meaning" (Marcantonio, 2015, p. 3).

As has been shown through the character of Vero in *The Headless Woman* and the spectral quality associated with many of the bodies in the films, the corporeal nature of the representation is frequently counterpointed by its insubstantial status. The focus on the bodily suspension in the pool through swimming, floating or lying inert by the poolside creates a further meaning in the context of arrested time. Here the bodies are in an indeterminate condition, neither living nor dead, they are in an in-between state, a lethargic circumstance reinforced by this place removed from action. The border between life and death is removed here where characters exist in a half light, their stupor and passivity rendering them closer to a zombie like existence. The fragility of this line is emphasised in the characters repeated reference to the mechanics of breathing, of the nature of it, of whether to stop or start, removing one of the defining aspects of organic life. The nature of breathing, its continuous circularity, is something which tends to be invisible, unremarked on. In these films breathing becomes something unnatural and precarious, no longer taken for granted but a site of struggle. Breathing is repeatedly seen as something which can come and go as characters frequently hold their breath. One of the first lines of dialogue in *The Holy Girl* is Josefina's comment to her friend Amalia about the singing performance of their religious studies teacher, "She's short of air. She doesn't know how to breathe". In their class she whispers about how she saw the same teacher kissing a man, "She couldn't breathe". Towards the end of *The Holy Girl*, Amalia, in her sickbed, whispers to Dr. Jano, "sometimes when you're asleep you stop breathing for a few seconds, you could suffocate". This cuts to the next scene where she is underwater in the pool, holding her breath as other children count the seconds, amazed at her ability not to breathe. In *The Headless Woman*, Vero is instructed to hold her breath as she has her X-ray taken at the hospital, putting her in a state near sleeping, when a fellow patient tells her to wake up, "It's bad for the blood supply to the brain". The urge to stop breathing and the need to keep doing so is developed in the physical state of characters who are drunken or lethargic; it's difficult for them to move or act. This lethargy is something to fear, but almost like a folk tale it seems to be something which can strike without warning and characters will be unable to resist it.

Conclusion

Lucrecia Martel's films explore characters in a state of limbo, unable to move forward or to revisit the past, although traces of it are evident, reverberating in the present. This exploration is constructed through the continual disruption to established conventions of film form which removes the expected temporal and spatial relationships. In doing this the films reject the idea of remembrance as narrativization and recuperation which has been a defining feature of national films about memory – particularly in Latin America. In doing so they address a transnational audience through expressing contemporary anxieties about temporality which allows people without first-hand experience – or perhaps knowledge – of specific national history to understand the experience of trauma as an ongoing state. Drawing on the work on testimony developed by Felman and Laub (1992) and Agamben (2002) and through close readings of the film I have demonstrated how the films suggest a different way of exploring the concept of testimony and the state of becoming a witness. Martel's work indicates the impossibility of witnessing and suggests the loss of language as a characteristic of living in the present. In my analysis I have shown how this examination of the paradox of witnessing indicates a different way of interpreting the gaze in the films – that it is about the loosening of connections to the world as it is experienced in the present – in contrast to established feminist or queer focused readings.

Through the exploration of the experience of the living in the present, with its disrupted relationship to the past which is impossible to reach, the films transmit to the viewer the experience of living in a form of stasis; a continual failure to grasp and understand the past. Building on Agamben's (2000) concept of gesture, which identifies humanity's infinite, but futile, desire to recapture the past, I have demonstrated how the films express life as a state of pure mediality. In my analysis of the film form it is evident that the gesture is not trying to become something else; it is not defined through a lack of what it has not reached, but has meaning in itself. This meaning cannot be expressed in language as

there is no memory of what has happened in the past and the loss of speech is a symptom of this. The concept of characters caught in time, in a limbo from which they are unable to escape is further explored in Martel's most recent film *Zama*, which is briefly discussed below.

Afterword: *Zama*: Remaining in Place

Zama, the fourth feature film by Lucrecia Martel premiered at the Venice International Film festival in August 2017 and was released in the UK in May 2018, to glowing reviews and very limited distribution. Although, due to its recent release, no scholarship has yet been published on the film, it is apparent in reviews and wider discussion, that *Zama* has been interpreted as dealing with more explicitly political subject matter than had previously been apparent in Martel's films, and that this has been read as a shift in approach. The dominant focus of the reviews of the film, evident in Argentinean, US and UK reviews,¹¹¹ has been its exploration of colonialism; the way in which the film represents the power relationships of the colonial and colonised as resulting in a form of madness. *Zama* tells the story of Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a Spanish Corregidor, a colonial, administrative position, charged with enforcing a bureaucratic system within a colonised space in the eighteenth century. His posting – he has already been there for some time when the film begins – is in a remote South American location (which isn't identified), and he is desperate to leave and get a new posting to Lerma.¹¹² During the film, Zama's requests are blocked or ignored, governors with power over his situation come and go, while other officials, lower than him in the social hierarchy, do leave. In addition to Zama's situation, the other organising strand of plot is the hunt for an elusive, almost

¹¹¹ See for example: Manohla Dargis (2018), Tim Robey (2018) and Luciano Monteagudo (2017).

¹¹² In her review of the film, Maria Delgado (2018) points out that in Antonio di Benedetto's novel of the same name which the film is based on, Zama requests a posting to Buenos Aries. The change is significant in the world of Martel's films as Lerma is the original name for Salta, the location of her previous feature films. This intertextual reference is, as was discussed earlier, a characteristic of Martel's style and adds an authorial resonance to the meaning of the themes of the film: the desire to return to a lost place.

mythical, bandit, Vicuña de Porto (Matheus Nachtergaele), who is rumoured to have been killed, but who remains a threatening presence throughout the film.

The power of the film's analysis of the damaging effects of colonialism – and the implication that such a relationship is evident in aspects of contemporary Argentine society – emerges through the constant placing of indigenous people in positions of subservience within the mise-en-scene: as servants, slaves and groups of women and children who speak their own language (which is never subtitled). Rather than reinforcing a view of the people as passive, this presence becomes a crucial part of the mise-en-scene; Zama and the other colonials may not notice these figures but the viewer does through composition and sound. For example when Zama meets with the Spanish aristocrat Luciana Piñares de Luenga (Lola Dueñas), her servant is positioned behind them, pulling a fan up and down to provide a breeze, the sound of this movement is a constant presence in the scene, impossible for the viewer to ignore, even if Zama does. In her paper presented at a symposium on Martel's work, Rosalind Galt (2018)¹¹³ argued that the focus on colonialism demonstrated a move from the local settings of Martel's previous films, to a larger canvas where place was no longer configured in the same way. Despite this shift, there were concerns recognisable from her previous work, particularly the exploration of power relations through the gaze. In *Zama*, Galt argued, the spectator is outside of the central character's point of view, separate from the dominant gaze. In this case the gaze belongs to the dominant race and class, but the viewer sees around this, noting the subservient position of the natives.

There is clearly a shift in subject matter, time period and setting in *Zama* in contrast to Martel's other films, however, the theme of examining a response to trauma through the disruption to peoples' understanding of chronology is clearly evident. This continued theme means that although the events of *Zama* are in the past, the connecting theme suggests that it is as much about contemporary society;

¹¹³ "Zama's Figures and Landscapes" presented at *The Work of Lucrecia Martel* symposium, Cambridge, May, 2018.

the effects of the colonial past on the present. As with the other films discussed in this chapter, *Zama* is a character in limbo, always speaking of the place he will move to, but never leaving. The position of Zama is reinforced at the start of the film in a moment which is characteristic of Martel's disruption to coherent time and space. A prisoner, bound and gagged, is brought before Zama the Corregidor, it's not clear to the viewer what the man is accused of, but Zama tells him he's free to go. The prisoner disappears off-screen but delivers a speech, which becomes a form of voice over, and seems to have no link to the scene or his situation: "A fish spends his life swimming back and forth" he says, expending all "their energies on staying in one place". The dialogue is interrupted by the title card, *Zama*, and then continues over a shot of fish in murky, brown water, swimming in circles. That this is an analogy to Zama's situation becomes clear as the shot cuts from the fish, to a shot of Zama, his back to the camera, looking out over the river from the bank.¹¹⁴ This moment, which ruptures a conventional cause and effect in the diegesis, in the shifts from the magistrates court, to the prisoner's monologue, to the fish underwater, suggests from the outset Zama's situation: unable to control events, adrift from chronology. The figure attempting to control and order actions, but who finds that they are constantly slipping away from them is a familiar motif in Martel's films and, as has been shown, in the temporal gateway films discussed in this project. While this loosening of connections in Martel's earlier films are, I argue, a reference to the after-effects of traumatic events in Argentina's recent past, in *Zama* it is used to explore a more distant past, but one which the film suggests has an ongoing effect on the present. In the following, brief analysis, I aim to draw out a few of the ways this is achieved in *Zama*, to show how it is a continuation of the themes of Martel's oeuvre.

Zama foregrounds the experience of temporality in a similar way to that identified in the analysis of melodramatic time earlier in this chapter. The experience of repeated delays and seemingly endless waiting again becomes the dominant mode: the stillness of the camera and the often minimal movements of the performers at times give the impression that the film is in slow motion. While the

¹¹⁴ The shot of the fish here, coupled with the disembodied voice-over is another intertextual reference to Martel's short film *Pescados* (2010).

narrative sets up an expectation that the character of Zama will make progress, will reach an end point, this never happens and the disjointed nature of the events that do happen, along with the film form, foreground this experience of stasis. Time, as Zama experiences it, is of a different duration to the world that he wants to reach, time there is experienced at greater speed, suggesting movement in contrast to Zama's stillness. Zama's children are growing up, far away from him in Montevideo, a place where, it is commented, you can "see the future". When Zama visits Luciana the aristocrat, she explains to him that the glasses they're drinking from, admired for their sophisticated design, were delivered from Buenos Aires. To protect them on their journey, she says, they were wrapped in newspapers which were of a later date than those they have access to. The papers have come from the future, suggesting a parallel experience of temporality; Zama's world is unmoving while the world external to him continues.¹¹⁵

This stasis is reinforced by the lack of narrative coherence in the film.¹¹⁶ Events such as Zama's arrival at new lodgings, his journey to capture the mythical villain, Vicuña, should be forward moving events, characterised by progression, but they have no exposition or link to previous actions, in fact it is difficult to be sure where in the chronology of the film they're taking place. As with the narrative of *The Headless Woman*, there are suggestions of narrative movement, but these actually lead the character into a form of disintegration; as the plot seems to crystallise, the central figure simultaneously becomes insubstantial (this includes the literal disintegration of the body in Zama's

¹¹⁵ This temporal relationship between present and future is also alluded to through the use of the soundtrack. The non-diegetic soundtrack (used much more frequently than in Martel's other films), of 1960s recordings by Los Indios Tabajaras, is apparently anachronistic, but suggests the mix of temporalities explored in the film. Its easy listening style also provides a counterpoint to the events and mood of the film.

¹¹⁶ The narrative style has led to some of the few negative reviews of the film (as was the case with *The Headless Woman*). Zhuo-Ning Su (2017) commented: "The level of incoherence is such that the events, whether physical, verbal, dreamed or actual, can only be summarily understood as manifestations of a prolonged wait. Even then, it's difficult to make sense of anything as some characters are inclined to speak in riddles and their supposed identities often unreliable".

case, when his hands are cut off at the end of the film). This disintegration is apparent in the periodic cases that Zama oversees as a magistrate. After his first appearance in court where he releases the slave, he is next seen ruling on the case of a settler family. The setting is formal and Zama sits, in charge, dressed elaborately with a full wig. From this position he rules that the family should be awarded a 'commission' of forty Indians to work their land. Here he is treated with gravity and respect, his rulings listened to as a figure of authority. This is in contrast to his later situation where he sits in a new chambers, with only just room for a table and his assistant; he no longer wears a wig and there is no case to hear. Along with this narrative deterioration Zama also demonstrates a loosening of connection to the world around him, also evident in Martel's previous films, reinforcing the idea of his suspension in time. Zama is often positioned spying on events, trying but failing to see what is happening, looking through doorways at partial scenes. His gaze has little power as he is continually spotted and mocked for his furtive looking. This inability to see the world around him is heightened as he begins to see things which may or may not be there. As with the character of Vero in *The Headless Woman*, the reality of what he sees can no longer be established: at the dilapidated and decaying Inn (another reference to a hotel in Martel's films) Zama moves to, he sees and follows two female guests who - it seems - do not exist (Figure 3.12).



Figure 3.12 Zama may or may not see figures in the landscape

Zama's conception of the world around him, its disconnection in time and place, is, as with the other films discussed here, transmitted to the viewer through the film form. Establishing shots are absent; the setting is never named. In comparison to Martel's other films there is much more focus on landscape and exterior shots but the many shots of the beach (ironically titled the Getaway Beach), and the river, are cut off from the wider world; they are as enclosed as the interiors. The interior shots still dominate and lack the establishment of external space needed to situate them. These shots are often very dark and the composition of repeated frames of windows and doorways, which function as a form of mise-en-abyme within the shot, reinforce the enclosed nature of the world (Figure 3.13).



Figure 3.13 The use of frames within frames enclose the characters in a form of mise-en-abyme in Zama

The composition and framing of the shots continually removes Zama from focus, he is shot from behind, frequently the top of his head is cut off, or he is obscured by groups in the frame. The idea of Zama's displacement and tenuous grasp on the world are – as with the ending of *The Headless Woman* – evident in the latter moments of the film. Here, in his meeting with Vicuña, Zama repeatedly states that he is not the Corregidor, a long take from behind Zama – a shot used frequently in the film - adds to the uncertainty. The film ends with Zama's desired journey still prevented. The final shot of the film

is, as with so many moments in the temporal gateway, a moment of simultaneous movement and stasis (one which also makes reference to the final shot of *The Holy Girl*, where the two girls, Amalia and Josefina float off screen). Zama, now severely wounded, is floating in a canoe, moving slowly, directionless. The static, long take shows the canoe wind around the bends of the river while the sudden cut for the end of the film leaves the journey stranded, with Zama suspended in time and space.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to explore a marked characteristic of contemporary cinema across styles, genres and borders; the way in which films explore the disruption to temporality as a condition of living with traumatic pasts in contemporary society. These films, which I've grouped under the term 'temporal gateway', focus on the ways in which characters' experiences of temporality are fragmented, and cause and effect relationships are loosened as a result of their situations. Rather than a recreation of historical events, these films are concerned with questions of how to remember the past without being defined and trapped by it: often exploring past events at a remove the way in which films explore the disruption to temporality as a condition of living in contemporary society. It has considered how this theme opens up new ways of considering the past and present in film; one which has been little discussed within the field of memory studies or the wider critical focus on representations of post-trauma societies. These new ways of exploring the past emerge from the hybridity of film styles, narrative and genre characteristics, the contrast between open and closed film form, and an aesthetic which provokes a haptic response in the viewer. The nucleus of this exploration is a central character whose experience of temporality is one of disruption, creating a form of limbo; they experience a constant attempt to move forward while being held in time and space. I have drawn together these characteristics to identify the temporal gateway film, a term which indicates the way in which this experience of disruption to temporality allows the spectator to understand the sensation of living in the present. In this way it is temporality, rather than the specific events of the past, which is meaningful in conveying experience. In this conclusion, I discuss the implications of the findings of this research project as a whole and consider how it relates to existing scholarship on films about the past, specifically in the field of memory studies. The chapter then evaluates the methodologies used and concludes by exploring some ways in which this area of research could develop in the future.

Conclusions and Contributions

The films which are the focus of this thesis explore the effect on individuals of the past and their response to the need to live in the present. These past events include wars, dictatorships and the holocaust, economic crashes, political infighting and family dramas. The films may refer to the events themselves, but they are always at a remove from the protagonist who is unable to reach them; the flashback is a common characteristic which reinforces this relationship. In some examples, the historical, national events are never explicitly mentioned, and the structure of the thriller genre is used to explore the themes of investigation into the past. All of the films exist across borders, in their production context, reception and in the subject matter: they frequently use the experience of being adrift in temporality as a counterpoint to the rigidity of manmade borders between nations and people.

Throughout the project I have returned to the central motif of the films discussed, that of an individual trapped in time, seemingly buffeted in their position between past, present and a hard to conceive of future, suspended in time. In identifying this figure, I was reminded of Benjamin's (1969) idea of the *Angelus Novus* (the Angel of History), a figure suspended in time, at the mercy of competing versions of history. The films discussed represent the condition of living in the present as one which is marked by a sense of unease about the possibility of finding meaning when the relationship to the past is in doubt. They engage with the question of how individuals – and wider society – can understand the past just as it seems to slip away. These questions place the films in the context of memory studies and memorial culture where the debates about how to remember the past in film (and of course in other examples of cultural products outside of the remit of this project) are examined in the light of political, cultural and social concerns.

In the introduction to this thesis I explored the way in which the debates within memory studies are characterised by definitions of the right and wrong ways to represent the past, definitions which are predicated on arguments around counter-cinema and anti-realist techniques. As I showed in the

literature review these approaches often evaluated representations of the past as unsatisfactory, due to a reliance on narrativization which suggests a coherence and agreement about past events, akin to a teleological view of history. The attack on this film style as inadequate to representing the past, is based on the belief that it is apolitical and ideologically reassuring, an argument evident in White's (1996, 1997) analysis of narrativization, which is explored in the literature review. Drawing on the arguments which emerged in film theory in the 1970s, that only anti-realist techniques could analyse political structures, memory studies has analysed representations of the past through a filter of binary oppositions (although, as highlighted in the literature review, there are exceptions to this such as Huyssen (2001) and Sobchack (1996)): realism versus anti-realism, popular culture versus high art, identification and distanciation, the latter approach in each pair being the more meaningful. In my identification of the temporal gateway film I have demonstrated the limitations of this approach, through an analysis of films which continually blur the boundaries between such divisions.

For example, in chapter 1, by drawing on Benjamin's (1963/1998) analysis of allegory, I revealed how a range of films use that technique in order to reflect the relationship between the past and the present, for characters who are living with the effects of traumatic events. The thematic and structural technique of mise-en-abyme replicates the feeling of being trapped within time, foregrounding the experience of temporality. This is in contrast to the concept of narrativization, but it also develops strategies of identification, as the spectator is aligned with the characters' experiences of limbo. This structuring form is also an allegory for the experience of temporality; the process of being both drawn towards and moving further from an object, works to trap the protagonist in time. The films therefore construct a way of responding to the historical at a time when its link to the present starts to slip away; a way of constructing a memory text which moves beyond the categorisations found in existing scholarship in memory studies. The impossibility of remembering the past in a simple way is constantly highlighted in the films, both through the mise-en-abyme but also in the use of creative artists as the main characters. The role of film in filtering personal and collective memories is repeatedly explored and is part of the way in which the films problematise the idea of remembrance and recollection.

The ideas explored in the films are clearly relevant to theories of the experience of the postmemory generation (Hirsch, 2012), and my analysis of the films provides further examples of how this experience can be represented. In all the films, the use of mise-en-abyme, flashback, and the frequent attempts by the protagonists to write themselves into a past they didn't experience, develops, I argue, the way in which postmemory is represented and received; not just as belonging to the individual whose antecedents experienced it, but to the wider society. Through this analysis I identify mise-en-abyme as a technique which is relatively widespread across films from different countries with different audiences, as a new way of representing versions of the past and the experience of feeling adrift in the present.

The focus on ways of remembering the past relates to the political and historical, not least in the subject matter of many of the films discussed here. In chapter 2, the political concerns of remembrance and reconciliation come to the fore. As was noted in the introduction, films, as part of the cultural production of a society, are part of the way in which events – particularly traumatic ones – are remembered and memorialised. In chapter 2 I argue that there is a paradox in the way in which representing the past in films, particularly in the context of national histories, can reinforce past divisions in order to memorialise events, and are therefore in danger of replicating the original danger of categorisation and oppositions. Through analysing films from Poland, Argentina, and Chile I showed how the temporal gateway provides a mode to explore both the desire to revisit the past and its divisions, the dangers of such a return, and also a way of existing outside of limiting categories. In each film the central character experiences a form of entrapment: by events of the past, by the desire to remember, which runs the risk of remaining fixed in the past. In each case the films offer a mode of escape from existing categories, an indeterminate space in which characters don't have to choose definitive identities or versions of the past. I hoped to show how these films were able to challenge past certainties without suggesting that there is no distinction between fact and fiction, a charge which has been made within the context of postmodern readings. This approach is exemplified in *Nostalgia for the Light* with the astronomers' appeal to the universe, away from the materiality of the earth and

in *Ida*'s suspension in space and subsequent disappearance into the fade to black at the end of *Ida*. In this analysis I reinforced how the films challenge the rigid ways in which films about the past are discussed, showing how the existence of non-space is preferable to the delineated space of borders. This analysis of the construction of space is another way in which I argue that the films find new ways of representing the past and attempt to address the impasse of remembrance in cinema, an area I developed in chapter 3.

Chapter 3 focuses on the work of a single film-maker, Lucrecia Martel, rather than on a range of films from different countries. I chose to focus on Martel, a contemporary Argentine director, because the themes and style of her films have similar concerns to those identified in this project. Therefore, through the analysis of her films, I was able to reinforce the findings of this thesis. Martel's films explore contemporary living as a form of limbo and are the most extreme examples in the context of the temporal gateway. These are characters in pure mediality who are unable to exist in the present, to the extent that they become insubstantial; they are on the point of disappearing. The themes of the films are frequently explicitly structured around something which happened in the past – often an accident – but the memory of that event is always elusive. Drawing together the approaches to Argentine cinema explored in the earlier discussion of *The Secret in their Eyes* in chapter 2, I was able to show how Martel's films address what I identified as an impasse in the tradition of the *cine testimonio*, by questioning the traditional concept of the witness. My analysis of Martel's films suggested a way in which cinema is able to address the experience of post-trauma living for a more general audience, rather than one which has direct – or second generation – experience of the past events.

Reflections on Approaches Used

One of the aims of this thesis has been to question and complicate the existing debate around the representation of the past in film. In providing close analysis of a wide range of films I've opened up definitions of how cinema can reflect on the relationship between the past and the present. In doing this I have drawn on the interdisciplinary scholarship within the field of memory studies as well as engaging with philosophical and art historical approaches as they relate to film studies. This interdisciplinary approach is appropriate to a project where the aim is to challenge and blur borders and has allowed me to draw out the meaning of films in a variety of complex ways.

I found the work of Benjamin invaluable in the exploration of temporality, both through his analysis of historical time and in his demonstration of how *mise-en-abyme* functions as an allegory for temporality. I found this conception incredibly helpful in articulating my understanding of the nature of the characters' experience of entrapment. Benjamin's analysis of *jetztzeit* or "now time" (Benjamin, 1968/1992b, p. 252), was a crucial underpinning for my realisation of how the temporal gateway films foregrounded time as fragmentary. The approach to conceiving of time as material, the constant struggle to reify it, was reinforced by Deleuze's (1985/2005) analysis of the time-image in cinema which provided another way of conceptualising how something so abstract can be alluded to – even made material – on screen. It was this aspect of Deleuze's work, particularly the relationships between structures in film, such as the *ritornello* and the *gallop* (Deleuze, 1985/2005, p. 90), which became a foundation for my analysis. The films I discuss would certainly not all fit into the definition of the time-image (*Ida* is probably the closest) and, in my analysis of the gesture in film I show how the films of the temporal gateway are different to those of the time-image.

The evidence for my findings is demonstrated through close formal readings of the films and the way in which they create meaning for the spectator. This approach is influenced by both film studies and art history methodologies. The exploration of the haptic in film and art was a further way in which I was able to examine how the films constructed time as material rather than abstract; detailed analysis

of mise-en-scene, textures and objects revealed the way in which the films foregrounded rather than narrativized, temporality. This detailed, formal analysis was also shaped by work on the status of the photographic image. My focus here was drawing out the similarities across work by Agamben (2000) and Bazin (1960) which explored the relationship between stillness and movement in photography, a concept I was able to use to examine how the temporal gateway films transmitted the experience of being trapped in time through film form.

In addition to the detailed analysis of film form and spectator response, it was necessary to have some grounding of the films in their wider contexts; particularly crucial given the nature of the subject matter which is often controversial and contentious. One of the dominant features of this project is the diversity of styles and genres of the films studied, from art house cinema to popular genre films, from across nations and continents. This was a choice that was dictated by the tropes of the temporal gateway; the figure of the character trapped in time, whether exploring a murder or the history of their family, reappeared across film styles, not limited by categories and borders.

The focus on such a range of films posed some issues in terms of methodology. Theories of national cinema, while useful for context, were limiting due to the tendency to define films by shared characteristics in relation to geographical borders, an approach unhelpful to my analysis of films which value the blurring of boundaries. The national was however impossible to ignore in this project. For example, my understanding of the Iranian film *A Separation* was informed by knowledge of the constraints on Iranian film-makers, the social and political context of the film, as well as the concept of the open image which, Chaudhuri and Finn (2003) argue, is characteristic of Iranian national cinema. It would clearly be detrimental to the discussion of films such as *The Secret in Their Eyes* and *Ida* if one didn't acknowledge the national reception marked by controversy. In exploring these aspects I've tried to examine some of the problems of defining films as simply belonging to a concept of the national, an approach which tends to be concerned with using the films to reinforce or oppose a particular fault line within a national political context and history. The other way in which I used the concept of the

national was to explore how the temporal gateway film – particularly in the work of Lucrecia Martel – subverted traditions of witnessing and testimony which had become reinforced as a national cinematic characteristic. In addition to the various uses and questioning of national cinema approaches I also examined the films as examples of transnationalism. This did provide, in some ways, a model for describing the production context of the films which are funded by several countries in co-productions and received in a global context. The concept of the transnational is however, often brought back to the national, through the focus on a group of small nations linking together to compete with the global Hollywood industry. I did find the concept of the transnational helpful when the focus was on the idea of movement and indeterminacy, such as in the work of Bergfelder (2005), and it is in this way I've used the term to conceive of the films as, in some ways, transnational.

In focusing on a single director in the final section of the dissertation there is an implicit acceptance of authorship as an organising principal for the discussion of coherent themes and style across a body of work. While I don't interrogate the validity of authorship as a theory in this project, I do refer to some of the consequences of the reliance on authorship as a category within film studies. For example, the relative neglect of Diane Kurys as an auteur film-maker (discussed in chapter 1), is perhaps one of the reasons that her films have also been ignored as memory texts; a situation in direct contrast to the scholarship on the work of Angelopoulos.

This reflection on the methodologies used reinforces the prism through which the films have been discussed – a deliberate attempt to blur and challenge existing modes of categorisation – but also suggests some of the areas not examined by this project. Clearly the subject matter, production contexts and reception of many of the films referred to here, lend themselves to a more in-depth examination of developments in national cinema, and such an approach may produce a different emphasis in readings of the films. At an early stage in the project I did also begin to consider the effect of globalisation on film production outside of Hollywood, and the need to target an international audience, but did not take this further as my project shifted away from institutional contexts. In

addition to considering the areas not developed by this project, I would also like to suggest some ways in which the issues raised by this work might have further relevance and be developed in the future.

Future Developments

The focus of the films discussed in this project is the individual's relationship to the past and present; the way in which the desire to return to the past, to remember, is in a continual relationship with the impossibility of doing so, rendering the figure in a state of limbo. The process of forgetting is clearly implied in this dynamic, and at times in my analysis (e.g.: the discussion of *Even the Rain* and *Ararat* in chapter 1 and *Ida* in chapter 2) I have questioned whether remembering might be a form of entrapment. The idea of forgetting, rather than memorialising, traumatic events is a complex issue and of course can be seen as politically problematic.¹¹⁷ However, the development of this area has become more urgent with the emergence of digital technology as a form of archive, with its paradox of seeming greater recording ability combined with simultaneous forgetting.¹¹⁸ Further exploration of the role of forgetting, along with the concept of technologies of memory (through the characters of film-makers as well as the references to film as memory), would provide a foundation for considering the representation of forgetting in film, a process which is inevitable but little focused on in the field of memory studies.

It has been notable to me, as I've been focused on a project which repeatedly refers to the dangers of classification and borders, examining films and ideas which look for the possibility of finding alternative spaces through temporality, that there has simultaneously been a rise in populist movements, appealing for the reinstatement of such borders (this is referred to in chapter 2). As one of the principals of the European Union, freedom of movement personifies the concept of

¹¹⁷ The historian David Andress (2018) outlines the dangers of forgetting history, a condition he defines as a form of social and cultural dementia, resulting in dangerous forms of political extremism.

¹¹⁸ This is an area being developed by Andrew Hoskins, see for example Hoskins (2018).

transcending borders. Similarly, the Good Friday Agreement (1998),¹¹⁹ which is at risk from the disruption to the EU by Brexit, provided a new way of conceiving of national identities, one which no longer relied on geographical and political lines. The agreement created, as Fintan O'Toole (2018), the Irish commentator, states: "a political space that is claimed by nobody – a space, moreover, that exists not in a physical territory but inside people's heads". This concept, one which is central to the dilemmas facing the characters in the temporal gateway film in their relationship to the past, is central to current political debates and suggests, I hope, the relevance of this project and some of the ways in which its findings could be considered in the future.

¹¹⁹ The Good Friday Agreement set up a power-sharing agreement to bring an end to 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland. One of its key tenets was that people in Northern Ireland could choose to be British, Irish or both.

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