# World Cinema and Cultural Memory

Inez Hedges

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# World Cinema and Cultural Memory

Inez Hedges
*Northeastern University, USA*

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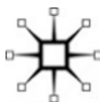

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*To the filmmakers whose works of imagination have helped people find the narrative truth of their lives*

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*Author's note*: Translations from French, German, and Spanish are mine unless otherwise indicated. First mentions of film titles are in their original language; subsequent mentions use the English title. English translations of book and film titles are given in quotation marks when the works are not available in English; otherwise they appear in italics.

# Introduction

In 2001 the French historian Pierre Nora remarked that the last quarter of the 20th century was marked all over the world by a profound transformation of how we relate to the past – a tidal wave of memory that manifested itself in the critique of received historical "truths," a turn to the search for roots and genealogy, the creation of new museums, a new emphasis placed on the archival, and the cultivation of heritage (*patrimoine*). Turning to his native France, Nora, and with him Michel Foucault, located the origin of this new obsession with memory in the rekindling of public discussion of Germany's wartime occupation of France (1940–1944).[1] In place of "resistencialism" (the popularly held belief that most French citizens had played a part in the Resistance), the French State after 1980 began to acknowledge the role of the French police in the deportation of nearly 76,000 Jews to Auschwitz and other camps between 1942 and 1944.[2]

Nora is contrasting memory with history. He develops this distinction further in the introduction to his encyclopedic edited work, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (*Realms of Memory*), which he created for the bicentennial of the French Revolution and published between 1984 and 1992: "Memory is… a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past."[3] Paradoxically, Nora links the intense contemporary preoccupation with memory to modern societies' fear of losing their hold on the future, in what he calls (quoting Daniel Halévy) "the acceleration of history." *Les Lieux de mémoire* focuses on the commemorative object, place, or image that is intended to preserve memory. He argues that, in our times, memory has become the business of archives – people are impelled to record everything in case it might be relevant to the future: "[Modern memory] relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image." He worries,

however, that any archive, where "visible signs of what has been" are heaped up indiscriminately, becomes the alibi for forgetfulness – a mere prosthesis.[4]

Nora also sees a problem in the "memory culture" that he holds himself partly responsible for unleashing: Already in his 1989 essay he anxiously notes that memory has taken a disturbing turn in that every group has now gone "in search of its own origins and identity."[5] In 2001 he takes an even more critical stance, arguing that the new "memorialism" has become a tool of aggression against others: Former colonized populations reassert their roots against their former colonizers; minorities (sexual, social, religious, regional) insist on having their "particularism" recognized by the larger community; peoples formerly subjected to ideological control recover the memory of an earlier social order.[6]

The idea that the privileging of memory is fueled by our anxiety and disorientation in a too-rapidly changing world is echoed by Andreas Huyssen, who perceives global society as media-saturated, temporally foreshortened, and commodified. But in contrast to Nora, who worries about the fracturing and balkanization of the world due to memory, Huyssen argues for a *productive* use of memory: "In the best-case scenario, the cultures of memory are intimately linked, in many parts of the world, to processes of democratization and struggles for human rights, to the expansion and strengthening of the public spheres of human society."[7]

Investigation into the social uses of memory derives in large part from the work of French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, whose 1925 *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*The Social Contexts of Memory*) studied the relationship between the beliefs held by individuals and the collective memory of the various groups to which they belonged. In a later work, he explored the way that Christianity in successive eras adapted to the requirements of the time the "memory sites" of Jerusalem and the "Holy Land." Thus the "via dolorosa" or "stations of the cross" that are even now part of tours in Jerusalem were actually the creation of a 13th-century monk before they were popularized by Franciscan monks in the mid-15th century.[8] Halbwachs notes that many of the sites of devotion that became part of European religious practice are in fact completely imaginary.[9] As Paul Ricoeur remarks in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Halbwachs asserts the possibility of *shifts* in collective memory as individuals' relationships to their various milieux change.[10]

Memory, although retrospective, can have a prospective function. As Michel Foucault notes, "Memory is actually a very important factor in struggle (really, in fact, struggles develop in a kind of conscious moving forward of history); if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experiences, their knowledge

of previous struggles."[11] The idea that understanding and wisdom are achieved through a combination of memory and experience goes back to Aristotle, who argues that memory is not unique to humans, since even bees and other living things clearly have it – what is unique is humans' ability to use the memory of experience in order to develop reason and to apply that faculty to science and art (*Metaphysics* 980b-982a).

In the 20th century, Ernst Bloch wrote in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*) about the role of active, dynamic memory in his concept of humanity's "dreaming forward" toward a utopia in which people will finally learn to "walk upright" – a utopia at once oriented toward the future and grounded in the remembered past of a classless society.[12] For collective memory to become liberating and forward-looking, it has to metamorphose itself into what Aleida and Jan Assmann have called "cultural memory." Jan Assmann distinguishes between individual and group memories that circulate within a limited sphere and cultural memories that become part of identity formation. Often, he argues, they have this power because they are embodied in literature, works of art, or other media.[13] Aleida Assmann lists several factors that have led to the recent interest in memory: the shift in ideological formations after the end of the Cold War; the re-evaluation of identities in the postcolonial historical situation; the resurfacing of post-traumatic memories of survivors of the Holocaust and the two world wars; mediatized forms of memory created for those who did not experience these traumas; and new forms of circulating information in the digital age.[14]

The role of cultural artifacts in preserving memory was noted by Hegel, who remarks in the *Phenomenology* that the ancient singer of epics is the conveyer of memory and the expression of the spirit of a people (*Volksgeist*) through language. Memory, he asserts, is a force that fuses societies together (VII.B.c).[15] In our own time, film has become an important force in cultural memory. The "memory wave" in France was in fact unleashed, in part, by a film: Marcel Ophuls's 1968 documentary about the German Occupation, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*).

## Cinema and cultural memory

Against Nora's critique of memorialization and an artificial, prosthetic memory, one can pose various active uses of cultural memory: for the purpose of creating or strengthening the identity formation of a group or nation; for processing collectively experienced trauma; or for reinterpreting the past according to a new paradigm. The uses of

memory discussed in this book are oppositional ones that have arisen out of struggles – struggles against forgetting, against forces that work to suppress memory, against hegemonic claims that counter the resurgent acts of memory with arguments that the world has to be the way it is.

I argue that one of the crucial influences on cultural memory in all parts of the world since World War Two has been cinema. The mass distribution and exhibition of film makes its narratives more accessible to large, popular audiences than does the written word. Film and video are able, paradoxically, to embody both extreme photographic realism and dreamlike fantasy. Film can persuade as well as inspire. For the purpose of fostering cultural memory, the particularities of film spectatorship make it an especially useful instrument. The narrative film invites the spectator to identify with characters on both the unconscious and conscious levels. The French critic Christian Metz contrasts the initial or "primary" fascination with the moving image (which he relates to the Freudian notion of *scopophilia*, or passion for looking) with what he calls the "secondary" identification with a character or characters on the screen (an identification usually linked to the privileging of a character by the camera).[16] These processes assure a strong affective relation between the narrative and the spectator, whose sympathies are thus powerfully engaged.

The spectator's identification with a character also gives a sense of immediacy to the events depicted on the screen. The fact that the story is an artificial construction that was filmed in the past can be temporarily forgotten. Of course, the present-ness of the characters' actions and the reality of the represented world are illusions created by methods of montage that either (a) erase the apparatus of cinema by the use of continuity rules and so-called invisible editing, or, on the contrary, (b) foreground the artificiality and invite the spectator to become complicit in a kind of superior connoisseurship. Either way, the experience of the film results in the creation of a memory, albeit a fictive one not based on one's personal experience.[17]

Perhaps we should not be overly concerned about the fictiveness of these mediatized memories. As Huyssen points out, memory is always partial and virtual, whether it is of something lived or just imagined.[18] Moreover, these fictive memories can have a social impact. Films that address unresolved historical traumas, that recall buried utopian aspirations, or that help to define identities in the process of formation – these films create memories in the minds of the spectators who see them. These individual memories, shared as they are in the public space, can in turn become the sources of new cultural memories. The process is

similar to the creation of the social subject itself, as described by Stephen Heath in his essay "Screen Images, Film Memory": "It is not…that there is first of all the construction of a subject for social/ideological formations and then the placing of that constructed subject-support in those formations, it is that the two processes are one, in a kind of necessary simultaneity – like the recto and verso of a sheet of paper."[19] To paraphrase Heath, films can become part "cultural memory" in the sense that they can contribute to cultural identity. As Aleida Assmann notes, "*History* turns into *memory* when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation."[20]

Cultural memory is always evolving. Film contributes to what Stuart Hall has called "imaginative rediscovery" by re-telling the past in new ways. This is a stratagem that, he notes, has been particularly important for post-colonial societies, since "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within the narratives of the past."[21]

A word should be said about the kind of film that encourages this dialectical engagement with audiences. I have chosen to focus mainly on fiction feature films that in their form invite reflection; ones that finish, in David Bordwell's classic description of art cinema, with a "pensive ending."[22] Another characteristic of many of these films is the way they explore the idea of "lived time," in that they sometimes downplay temporal ellipsis and montage in order to allow the spectator to slow down and experience duration along with the characters. Beyond being entertaining as stories, such films encourage their spectators (in Dudley Andrew's apt formulation) to "discover" the world.[23] The "aesthetics of discovery," he suggests, "asks us to accommodate our vision to the conditions of visibility given by the world."[24] This is not to deny that the films are made from a specific point of view and may, in fact, be quite polemical. Foucault worries that film can actually be used to obstruct popular memory, to substitute a false memory for genuine remembrance.[25] Examples of films that manipulate the historical record are legion. Like any text, film has to read carefully – perhaps even more carefully than the written word, since by its nature it produces a powerful illusion of reality. To quote Huyssen again: "[M]uch depends…on the specific strategies of representation and commodification and the context in which they are staged."[26]

Even in discussing documentaries, it is important to differentiate between types. In her poignant examination of the French Shoah, Cécile Clairval relies on the testimony of survivors, along with voice-over narration, newspaper clippings, documents, and statistics on the successive

convoys that left Drancy for the death camps. On the other hand, Kamal Aljafari's *Port of Memory* is constructed as a visual poem about his lost connection to the Palestinian homeland. Patricio Guzmán's epic series on the Allende years and their aftermath starts with the immediacy of an eyewitness report and turns elegiac and meditative when he returns from exile to examine the remnants of the past. Volker Koepp takes a biographical approach to the documentation of social change by following a group of women factory workers in the GDR (German Democratic Republic) through many years. Chris Marker sifts through his and others' film memories to reconnect his audiences to the dream of a better future.

Whether fiction or documentary, however, the films I discuss are ones that contribute to cultural memory. In that sense they fulfill the purpose that Stuart Hall sets forth for the emergent Caribbean cinema; the films are not "a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists," but are instead a "form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak."[27]

## The uses of memory: eight typologies

Traumatic memory is one of the recurrent themes in my discussions of cultural memory. Films about the French Shoah; about the bombing of Hiroshima; about the Spanish Civil War; about the Palestinian *Nakba* (*Catastrophe*) of 1947; or about the 1973 coup against Chilean president Salvador Allende revisit events that have not yet been fully absorbed into the historical narrative and the cultural memory of the nations or peoples subjected to violence. As Cathy Caruth notes, the salient characteristic of trauma is the gap of amnesia that surrounds the event. Trauma involves at first a temporal delay, followed by an obsessive return that is unwilled.[28] Overcoming trauma requires storytelling, the ability to recapture the event in a way that inserts the event into a history.[29] The first part of working through a traumatic experience, I would argue, goes through memory, as the various retellings coalesce into a shared story. As those stories become fixed in writing, film, and other media, they become part of cultural memory.

As previously mentioned, the Holocaust has occupied a prominent place in the memory debates of the last quarter century. My first chapter discusses "living memory," which I describe as the effort of survivors to impart memory of the Holocaust to those who have not directly experienced it. The term comes from Paul Ricoeur's discussion of Maurice

Halbwachs's "transgenerational memory" in *Memory, History, Forgetting* and is similar to what Marianne Hirsch has named "postmemory."[30] Alongside the change in official rhetoric, a number of recent French literary works and films have created a new space for the memory of the Shoah in France – historian Henry Rousso has even analyzed the historical evolution of France's memorialization of aspects of the German Occupation in terms of stages of mental health.[31]

In the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the recovery of memory has become the project of survivors of the atomic bombing of those cities by the United States on August 6 and 9, 1945. Here the effort has been directed toward the overcoming of amnesia and memory suppression. Victims initially hesitated to come forward lest they face ostracism. In the 1980s survivors began to form organizations that promoted their appearance in public in order to highlight the atrocity of nuclear weapons. Film has played an important role in dramatizing, successively, the social amnesia surrounding the bombings, the silencing of the victims, and finally the effort to convert "amnesiac memory" into active memory.

Like the Holocaust and the catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Spanish Civil War was a site of trauma. During the Franco years the trauma continued over two generations, as the progressive elements in society continued to be suppressed. Oppositional writers and filmmakers reacted with subversive texts and films in which the revolutionary aspect of surrealism played an important role. I examine the work of Luis Buñuel and Fernando Arrabal during the Civil War and the Franco years, and of Pedro Almodóvar in the post-Franco era. Almodóvar's films emphasize the body as transgressive performance; the body becomes a metaphor for the body politic. The "convulsive memory" that gives this chapter its name refers back to André Breton's concept of "convulsive beauty" in surrealism – an aesthetic of shock achieved by the collision of distant realities.

Ricoeur's emphasis on the narrative and linguistic aspects of memory leads him to the observation that, although the facts of the past cannot change, their meanings can: For instance, a group might marshal the memory of past injustices in order to advocate for redress. Memory thus becomes both present-oriented and future-oriented. Ricoeur describes the way groups may use memory to establish a claim against others.[32] In my discussion of the trauma of the *Nakba* and the subsequent stronger emergence of Palestinian Arab identity, I associate this use of memory with the idea of the linguistic performative utterance that acts rather than merely describes. The concept of "performative memory"

can clarify the way that the ongoing memory project of the emerging Palestinian culture plays an important role in the *intifada*, or the awakening/revival of Palestinian identity. By embodying the experience of exile, loss, oppression, and diaspora, Palestinian cultural manifestations create the shared world that has helped to define what it means to identify oneself as Palestinian today.

Another recurrent theme of these chapters focuses on what Stuart Hall describes as a "positioning" of nations or groups within the narratives of the past in order to assert an identity that is oriented toward the future.[33] In each case, what is at issue is a form of "reclaimed memory": that of Palestinian identity, of African culture, of socialist ideals, of working-class culture.

The conflict-ridden search for identity, a search so criticized by Nora, has certainly characterized the "négritude" movement and its search for roots – something I call "radical memory." However, I take a positive view of the conflicts arising from a population's project to rediscover its cultural roots after decades of oppression. At its height, négritude championed black identity against the self-proclaimed superiority of the European colonists and consequently played a role in 20th-century struggles for independence. Amilcar Cabral's "return to the source" is another form of radical memory. Although these struggles were violent at times (and continue to be), in Huyssen's words, they do amount to a struggle for human rights and for recognition in the public sphere.

I began by saying that memory about the past can be oriented toward the future. I call works of "obstinate memory" the cinema of Chris Marker, whose films address the issue of bringing the memory of past struggles forward into the present to serve as inspiration. A similar impulse animates the cinematic work of the Chilean Patricio Guzmán, which documents the election, overthrow, and subsequent memorialization (after the return to democracy) of socialist president Salvador Allende. Guzmán's films play an important role in *preserving* a suppressed collective memory that can become an inspiration for future generations.

The most intense instrumentalization of memory is its agency in the service of revolution. In Cuba, the films and critical essays of Tómas Gutiérrez Alea (1928–1996) have contributed to the articulation of the goals and aspirations of the Cuban revolution. In his use of surrealist dream sequences and even direct quotations of surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel, Alea makes use of what I call "productive memory." In doing so he responds to Walter Benjamin's call "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution."[34] I relate this to Bloch's utopian concept of "dreaming forward" into a new age.

In his *Cahiers du cinema* interview in 1974, Foucault worries that the working class has lost the sense of its own history. Peter Weiss's novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is an attempt to reclaim that memory. His protagonists perform a re-reading of the cultural past through a working-class perspective. I relate that project of "reclaimed memory" to that of the official culture of the German Democratic Republic. Traditional bourgeois art forms, from the novel to painting to theater, were adapted in the GDR to portray the concerns of factory workers, and the government encouraged the workers themselves to create art. At the same time, the ruling SED party maintained tight control over cultural productions through censorship: filmmakers and writers often found themselves in opposition to their own government. After the 1989 transition ("Die Wende") and German reunification, a wave of nostalgia for some of the aspirations of the "worker-state" carried over into film and literature.

## The memory debates, continued

As these wide-ranging examples indicate, memory in our time has become a contested field. In France the government has stepped in to create so-called memory laws. In July 1990 the Gayssot Act made the denial of the Jewish Holocaust a crime; in May 2001 the Taubira Act recognized the slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity. On the other hand, French schoolbooks are now legally required to emphasize the "positive" effects of colonization on France's former colonies. Meanwhile, in 1987 the European Parliament officially recognized the Armenian genocide and used Turkey's dissent to block its entry into the EU. In 2013, a Guatemalan court convicted the former president General José Efrain Ríos Montt of genocide and crimes against the country's indigenous population during his rule in 1982 and 1983. Though the conviction was later overturned by Guatemala's Constitutional Court, one of the parties in the case commented: "Symbolically, and for the historical record, a judgment was made[;]…it is now known that in Guatemala there was genocide."[35]

In response to these attempts to legislate memory, Pierre Nora once more raises concerns: He wonders whether the medieval Crusades will now be labeled crimes against humanity, as we parse history in the light of contemporary moral values. Recently he has compared memory unfavorably with history: "History is an intellectual construct that results from the work of scientific objectivity, whereas memory is a psychological phenomenon, unstable and full of subjectivity."[36] In the same interview, he worries that the opening of the mass graves in Spain and