

Memory and the Movies

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This book is a fascinating incursion into the multiple oppositional uses of memory in world cinema. It shows, in a lively and insightful way, how movies bring the memory of past struggles forward into the present, to serve as an inspiration for the future.

Inez Hedges distinguishes eight types of cultural cinematographic memory, which correspond to the eight chapters of the book:

Living memory: the memory of survivors of traumatic events, such as the Shoah. This is illustrated by films about the French urban concentration site Drancy—such as *Drancy Avenir* (1996)—a place from whence thousands of French Jews, including many children, were deported to Auschwitz.

Amnesic memory: cultural memory that struggles against collective amnesia, such as the Japanese films about Hiroshima (for instance Kurosawa's *Chronicle of a Survivor* from 1955).

Convulsive memory: films that react by using shock effects and black humor, for example in dealing with the trauma of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. Among those: Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961), as well as movies by Fernando Arrabal and (in the post-Francoist context) Pedro Almodovar.

Performative memory: films that contribute to creating a national identity by reflecting on the experience of exile, loss, and oppression. This chapter discusses Palestinian films and the way they refer to the Nakhba, the collective expulsion of Palestinians in 1948.

Radical memory: anti-colonialist poems, manifestos, and films that celebrate the African philosophy of Negritude (Aimé Césaire, Leopold Cesar-Senghor), the return to African roots (Amilcar Cabral), or the struggle for national liberation, as in Rachid Bouchareb's film *Outside of the Law* (2010), on the Algerian war of independence.

Obstinate memory: films such as *Le Fonds de l'Air Est Rouge* (1977) by Chris Marker, or *The Battle of Chile* (1975-79), and its sequel, *Chile, the Obstinate Memory* (1996) by Patricio Guzman, which try to retrieve the memory of past struggles: the French rebellions of the 1960s, and Salvador Allende's Chile.

Productive memory: films such as those of the Cuban Tomás Gutiérrez Alea that aim at helping a revolutionary society to keep "dreaming forward" (Ernst Bloch).

Reclaimed memory: the active rethinking of the past in oppositional terms to the hegemonic narratives, as in Peter Weiss's *Aesthetics of Resistance*, based on the history of workers' struggles in Germany from 1918 to 1945.

Of course this typology is fluid and many films belong to various categories at the same time. Although movies are the central object of the research, other cultural artifacts, such as poems, novels, or manifestos, are also discussed from the viewpoint of their radical and subversive use of memory.

One very interesting topic, which is not treated separately but runs through the whole book, is the role of surrealism, the movement that, according to Walter Benjamin, was able to win "the energies of intoxication for the revolution." The concept of "convulsive beauty," for instance, is essential to

understand Buñuel's movies, from the scandalous and subversive *L'Age d'Or* (1930)—forbidden by the French police for decades—to his later works. André Breton, the founder of surrealism, defined convulsive beauty as being at the same time “explosive/fixed, veiled/erotic, and magical/circumstantial.” As Inez Hedges emphasizes, in films by Buñuel, Arrabal, and Almodovar convulsive beauty and convulsive memory “function both as explosive counter-memory to the Franco years and as reconnection to the fractured moments of the national past.”

Surrealism is also a key component of anti-colonial radical memory. Since the beginning of the movement, the surrealists denounced the French colonial wars in Morocco (1925) and the French Colonial Exposition (1931). In Michel Leiris and George Bataille's journal *Documents*, surrealism and ethnography joined hands. As Franklin Rosemont, the Chicago surrealist, later wrote, the surrealists recognized so-called primitive arts as a radically new kind of beauty, which he called “convulsive”: a disturbing and subversive form of art, inseparable from revolt.

A decisive moment in the history of radical black culture occurred in 1941, when André Breton, visiting Martinique on his way to New York, met Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, the editors of the surrealist journal *Tropiques*. Breton was completely fascinated and wrote about Césaire, “Defying all by himself an era of general abdication of the mind, a black man guides us today into unexplored regions on a path of sparks (étincelles).” Soon after, Suzanne Césaire wrote a beautiful essay commenting on this meeting, “Surrealism, tightrope of our hope” (1943). And Aimé Césaire's famous and explosive anti-colonial poem and manifesto, *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* (1947) is shot through with electric surrealist images.

Inez Hedges doesn't mention films in this context, but a documentary picture on the so-called primitive arts such as *L'Invention du Monde* (1955) by surrealist movie director Michel Zimbarca, with a text written by the surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, is a striking example of surrealist “radical memory.”

Surrealism is also present, in one way or another, in films by Chris Marker, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and others, as faith in the immense subversive potential of imagination and dream.

Each reader of this book has of course their own list of films that embody oppositional memory. Among my favorite are two pictures by Italian director Gilles Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966, briefly mentioned in the book) and *Queimada* (1969, missing from the book), about a black slave rebellion on a tropical island. But Inez Hedges has done beautiful work, bringing together an impressive collection of radical, critical, or “convulsive” masterpieces of world cinema and exploring the ways they were able to produce cultural memory.