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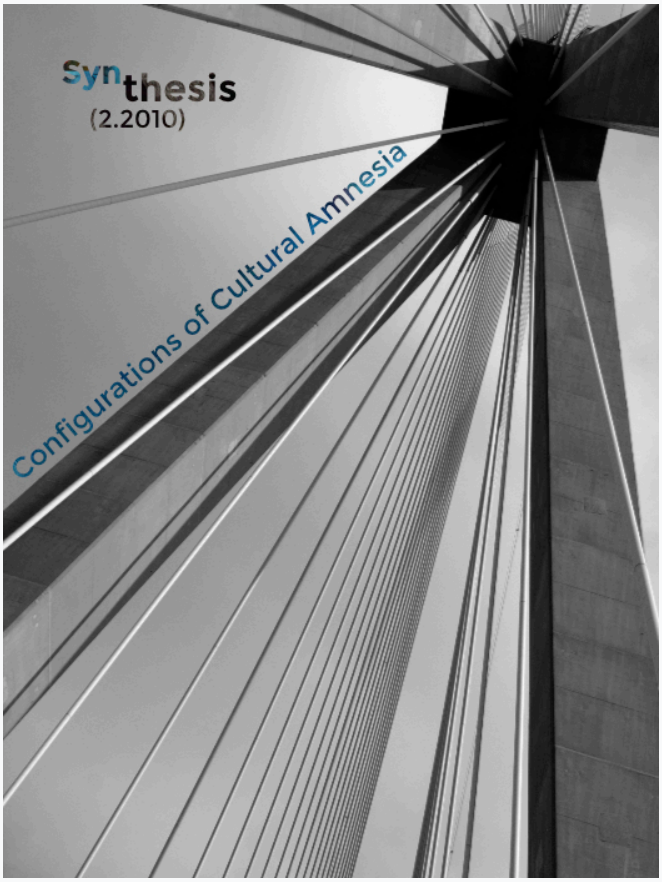
Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



Spelling out amnesia, or "forgetting me on the pretext of understanding me"

Apostolos Lampropoulos

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To P. T.-L.

In the middle of the famous madeleine story recounted in the first volume *of Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust says:

> When from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (37)

Smell and taste are described here as the last and most persistent remnants of memory; they are fragments of a lived past that, albeit lost for good, is deeply rooted in the body and (im)patiently awaits the moment of its reemergence. Notwithstanding its instantaneousness and flimsiness, sensorial experience manages to outlive the death of people and the vanishing of objects that inhabited this past. More than mere retentiveness, it is a paradoxical reminder that can affect the praxis of memory, and, potentially, become the basis of "the vast structure of recollection." Sensorial experience can set in motion a firsthand nostalgia and ground the melancholic reflection on what is no longer there, as well as on the distance that a subject has, often laboriously, gained from its own past. At a first glance, smell and taste are too weak ("still, alone, more fragile") to placate a desire or cure a wound; but they are also haunting enough ("like souls") to symptomatically indicate what would have been possible but did not materialise as a possibility. In this way, they conjugate a future anterior, but do so only as a mutter; and if "unsubstantial" smell and taste sustain the traces of memory, they equally moderate its surfacing, binding it to a specific here-and-now. But if the madeleine episode, emblematic of what a tiny sensorial detail can do, gave rise to eight volumes on the poetics of memory, what would its absence mean? What would happen if the ocean of such details was all of a sudden erased? What could a kiss signify without the aftertaste of a Benson & Hedges cigarette? (Montandon 42-63) What connotations would "homeland" have for someone from southern Greece if it was not marked by the "thin skin touched with fuzz" covering the peaches known as "Aphrodite's breast"? (Seremetakis 1) What kind of intellectual work could be done on eros without some drops of a *Concentré d'orange verte* mapping the smellscape of a lover's body? (Porteous 92-94) What would follow if even the sensorial experience as the last remnant of memory was missing? Would there be a silence due to the fading of any possible memory, the unpromising pursuit of a recovery, or a 'disembodied' discourse based on anything but memory?

I think this is precisely the point where the question of amnesia occurs. Lacking even the most basic links to a past, amnesia could be seen as the return to or a quest for a state of unconditionality. Accordingly, talking about it might sound like an impossible and necessary task: impossible, because no empathy with the condition of the amnesiac is conceivable, whether such empathy would be useful or not; necessary, because it is perhaps the only way to approach the dubious potential of utter forgetting. Amnesia would then be placed beyond an inevitable and useful forgetting that can heal and make space for new memories and it would be nothing like a forgetting as "loss of a limitless phonetic arsenal [which] is the price a child must pay for the papers that grant him citizenship in the community of a single tongue" (Heller-Roazen 11), that is to say, a forgetting that enables one to speak. But, then, one could focus on amnesia in its extremity to experiment with the suppression of a number of certainties which have marked the landscape of contemporary thought. For example, one could explore a missing sense of historicity (the incapacity to place oneself in a *hic et nunc*), a rootless and errant identity (as a consequence of one's detachment from any origin and belonging), or a radical, even though unilateral and ephemeral, negation of norms. Amnesia could then become the

sound proof chamber where the obvious and the understandable will be reconsidered, and comfortable thinking habits will be called into question. Moreover, even if amnesia is automatically added to the conceptual stock of memory studies, squeezed between overworked yet significant topics such as memory, forgetting, renegotiations of the past and historiography as fiction, one should be cautious about both its capacity to challenge their interrelationship and its frequent disappearance from relevant debates, as Markidou and I argue in our introduction to this issue.

My working hypothesis is that neither should amnesia's intelligibility be taken for granted nor should amnesia be carelessly classified as another impossible concept labeled as such before its latent dynamics is painstakingly unfolded. In what follows, the main question that I will try to address is whether amnesia fits the pattern of those Derridean concepts for which the impossible is a "constitutive feature" (Attridge 54)—such as the gift, responsibility, decision, love, the event, and hospitality. My approach will rely on the strategy of reconsidering and defamiliarising quotidian concepts through the lens of impossibility, a tactics that has proved to be embarrassing to those "who resist [Derrida's] thought because it pushes them beyond the point where they feel comfortable" (Attridge 56). If this adds both to the clarity with which one can perceive a concept and to the feasibility of its political implementation, and if this is why, according to Derrida, "deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible" (*Acts* 328), I will try to see in what sense amnesia can facilitate the passage from the desired impossible of deconstruction to the imperative possible of politics, and transform the impossible into a solid basis for the possible. In other words, I will attempt to see what the "imaginative grammar" of amnesia will be and how it can be seen as "the place of what to come" (Karavanta and Morgan 332). In order to do so, I propose a symptomatic reading of amnesia through three films: Jean Pierre Jeunet's *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004), Gabriel Le Bomin's *Les Fragments d'Antonin* (2006), and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000). The choice of the films was based not only on the fact that they are among the most well-known ones explicitly engaging with the issue of amnesia, but also on the fact that, in my opinion, they seem to raise important theoretical questions and explore their narrative implications. At the same time, I discuss three theses by Jacques Derrida—on amnesia and finitude, the exteriority of the archive, and the eruption of amnesia, respectively—that, although indirectly, seem to respond to the films. Juxtaposing filmic narratives and philosophical arguments, I do not intend to offer a complete analysis of the films or to scrutinise the consequences of some Derridean passages. On the contrary, I seek to better understand some ways in which the limits of visual or textual discourses on amnesia are conceptualised; more simply, I try to offer some indices on what can (and, thus, has been) said on amnesia.

Amnesia, Elsewhere

Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, based on Stéphane Japrisot's identically entitled novel, tells the story of Mathilde, a young disabled woman attempting to find out what happened to her fiancé Manech, who was a soldier on the Franco-German front during World War I. Despite the fact that Manech has been declared dead, Mathilde gathers information both from state archives and from people who were present the day Manech and four other soldiers were sentenced to death for self-mutilation. Mathilde remains zealously focused on the events of that day (Hurcombe 88) and she loses herself in a labyrinth of testimonies, each of which refers to a situation in which not even a person's name is reliable. One of the five soldiers, called "That Man," informs her: "I can promise you this, a name signifies nothing. Mine was given to me by chance. I took someone else's name by chance" (Sherman 327). Even though Mathilde seems to be unaware of the political repercussions of her actions, she destabilises the official version of the events, which "did not so much repair a deficient history as [they produced] a historical fixation" (Shapiro 129). In her tireless effort to discover the truth, she moves to several places around France and makes extensive use of her quasi deconstructive skills; in that sense, the film "is a reflection on the ways in which the trauma of war effects the dispersal, substitution, and identification of bodies and words [...] in a cryptic terrain at once psychic and geographical, at once individual and national" (Goulet 181).

At the end of the film, this trajectory brings Mathilde to the amnesiac Manech who, totally unconscious of what has been going on around him for several years after the end of the war, is shown to be quietly living in an atmosphere of euphoria. Amnesia has almost enabled his rebirth (Jeannelle

108-109): Manech has found a new mother, the widow Desrochelles, and started living the life of her son who was lost during the war. What is more, "Manech triggers the events of the film but is unable to recall his actions (he appears to be the only character in the film who does not recall what happened during the war). The implication [...] is that traumatic memory is not compatible with survival" (Ezra 113). The paradoxical principle of simultaneous event-making and escape through amnesia is perfectly respected by Mathilde, when she takes the crucial decision to follow That Man's advice and, instead of burdening Manech with painful memories, concentrates on creating new ones with him. She keeps the painstakingly assembled "prosthetic memory" to herself (Ezra 115) and the spectator is left to believe that, in a rather voluntaristic move, the couple will "set out together in a new relationship not defined by the past, but, through Mathilde's narrative, in partial awareness of it" (Hurcombe 93). On the one hand, memory is laboriously reconstructed against all odds, despite anonymity and pseudonymity, drawing on the meticulous interpretation of a large amount of hidden or encrypted information. On the other hand, amnesia is recognised not only as the reason for the separation and the root of the problem, but also as a source of relief, as a condition both respected and kept at bay, thus exploited as a tool without being entirely integrated into the future to which it is conducive. By establishing a clear-cut distinction between memory and amnesia, Mathilde (who undertakes the entire responsibility of re-membering) and Manech (who enjoys the innocence of complete detachment) seem to maintain amnesia as a mechanism for perpetually inventing possible futures. What is the meaning of these two distinct roles? Where exactly does a quest for something hidden in and by amnesia stop? How could Mathilde's and Manech's relationship to amnesia be justified? Could it be described in terms of relative continuity or absolute discontinuity between the amnesiac and the non-amnesiac? Or is it better conceivable as a relationship of clear-cut interiority and exteriority *vis-à-vis* amnesia itself? More generally, how could this peculiar dialectic be theorised?

Speculating on the possible meanings of the phrase "life.after.theory," Derrida says that "the word 'after' may move around a double meaning: 'after' as in coming after, or 'post;' and 'after' in the sense of 'according to' – *d'après* ... following without following" (9). Derrida pursues this double possibility by discussing the idea that "after" means being consistent with what is left, or with what is over, and by laying special emphasis on continuity with and fidelity to something past that is expected to be explained. This kind of fidelity is also inextricably bound to a form of betrayal, because "if I just repeat, if I interpret 'following' as just repetition, following in a way, in a mechanical way, just repeating, not animating, it's another way of betraying" (10). Hence, repeating as an act of fidelity can only obliquely reiterate what has already been pronounced, because, quite predictably, it talks about— and even around— instead of plainly retelling what it has to say. At the same time, repeating something excludes what is in line to be articulated *a propos* of it, although it announces what lies beyond the already said. One's finitude is the very condition of this ambiguity between fidelity and betrayal, because an infinite being would not need to prove its fidelity to anything, for the simple reason that it would include everything and could forget nothing. A passage from "Following Theory" reads:

> As for [...] the problem of finitude, well, it is because we are finite beings that forgetting, or distraction is irreducible in a certain way; but it is also because of finitude that we need oath and fidelity – it is precisely because there is this amnesia, this possible, always possible destruction or amnesia. Otherwise we wouldn't need oaths and fidelity. This means that finitude produces at the same time both the possibility of evil – that is, destruction, amnesia and infidelity- and the urge for fidelity. It is the same system. An infinite being cannot forget, and for that very reason doesn't have to promise anything. The promise itself attests to the fact that we are finite, that we may forget; which means that the possibility of evil is part of the opposite – again *acoluthia* and *anacoluthon*. (17)

The possibility, or rather the danger, of amnesia is irreducible because of our (as well as Mathilde and Manech's) finitude, while the most efficient antidote seems to be the oath, that is to say, a statement both confirming and exorcising the imminent arrival of amnesia: 'I don't forget,' or 'I will not forget,' or even 'I should not forget,' 'I promise not to forget,' and maybe 'I cannot forget.' Such performatives place the object of potential amnesia within our finitude with the purpose of protecting it and guaranteeing or at least prolonging our fidelity to it; in a way, this is reflected in Mathilde's trajectory. In a slightly different sense, they extend our finitude by increasing its capacity for memorising and finally remembering, but without being able to transform it into a quasi infinitude. When it comes to

what lies beyond this finitude, Derrida plays with a number of terms: "distraction," "destruction," "amnesia," and "infidelity." Trespassing the *finis mei* is an un-focusing diversion, an un-settling dismantlement, an anti-mnemonic gesture with an ethical dimension: all three are different versions of the "possibility of evil" and, almost mechanistically, result in "the urge for fidelity." In that sense, if one is to talk about the evil of amnesia, one has to participate in what lies beyond him/her just as Mathilde tried to do with Manech's life at the front, while the consequent lack of assurance justifies the very need for fidelity to himself/herself. More simply, one has to save himself/herself first and then reflect on amnesia to which one should never succumb. Interestingly, the relationship between one's finitude and amnesia recalls the roles of Mathilde and Manech: this relationship seems to be one of violent rupture between the one who remembers and the one who does not, which, in my view, is closer to the *anacoluthon*. At the same time, there is no clear-cut mutual definition of the two, as the one who remembers can only de-naturalise, reconsider and finally remember his/her very remembering in the view of the other's amnesia; and this might be said to establish a kind of *acoluthia*.

One interpretation of this schema maps onto what could be described as the 'conventional' Derridean notion of impossibility: given that amnesia is situated both at the edge and well beyond one's finitude, its study would be simultaneously liminal as well as impossible. Amnesia would be approachable to the extent that it is disconcerting yet contingent upon one's own experience. But it would also remain undecipherable to the extent that it can be remedied neither by an oath nor by a promise; according to this approach, amnesia could only be part of an undesired evil. Nonetheless, I think that another interpretation, differentiating amnesia from the usual Derridean impossibility, might be more plausible here. While concepts like "gift," "decision," and "hospitality" are rigorously impossible, yet thinkable in a lighter 'possible' version and to a certain extent political, the very thinkability of amnesia is subject to a self-fulfilling assumption (an oath or a promise not to forget) which keeps amnesia away. Discursively as well as conceptually, amnesia does not circulate within philosophy's common currency: one might understand hospitality or decision through a compromise (the everyday and 'empirical' notion of hospitality or decision), but one should only keep away from the very amnesia that one has to grasp. In other words, any conceptualisation of amnesia's constitutive finitude always runs the risk of being transformed into a version or instance of a supposedly total forgetting which is untroubled and untroubling, and, once exported into the political realm, bears little resemblance to amnesia as such. But if amnesia is something to be avoided, it is also something to be observed, expressed and perhaps supplemented; if no empathy with it is desirable, allowed or achievable, the most appropriate way to approach amnesia might be via a speculative gaze. It is no coincidence, therefore, that when Mathilde and Manech finally meet, the voiceover draws the viewer's attention to the fact that Mathilde "looks at him. Looks at him. Looks at him." Staring at amnesia, thus both contemplating about it and keeping it away, is a powerless and inquisitive gesture; it is perhaps the most one can do either about or with it without compromising it and without surrendering to a lotus-eating complacency with a weakened version of it, namely without turning it into 'ordinary' forgetting.

The Amnesia of the Non-archivable

Gabriel Le Bomin's *Les fragments d'Antonin* is another French film that deals with World War I. It does so through the story of Antonin Verset, a French soldier who served as homing pigeons carrier and had an affair with a military nurse called Madeleine. The film moves back and forth from Antonin's experience at the front to his life in a psychiatric hospital as a patient suffering from shell shock. When Antonin is found, he can only repeat five names but is unable to make any connections between them or mould them in any narrative whatsoever. On several occasions, he compulsively repeats a number of movements he had either made or experienced in his previous life, such as touching the pigeons, wiping from his face the blood of a fellow soldier, and Madeleine's caress on his face. Antonin is under the care of Professor Labrousse, a military doctor who methodically stimulates reactions from him (for example, by repeating the drum sound announcing an execution), films him and systematically comments on his case in private discussions as well as during seminar sessions. According to Labrousse's diagnosis, which is repeated at least twice in the film, "Antonin Verset is far from an amnesiac. On the contrary, his memories are very precise. He experiences them like a

physical reality. His body is marked by gestures gathering the images of the past." In exactly the same way, Antonin is re-living "the physical reality of the battle" and his memory is "coagulated on what the war made him live, like ghosts he cannot get rid of." Antonin's therapy aims to reshape his fragmented and displaced memory and thus enable him to reintegrate his experience into the present, appease his corporeal symptoms and make peace with himself (François-Denève 187-88).

The character of Labrousse remains slightly ambiguous throughout the film: he oscillates between the loving care of a father and the curiosity of a scientist working on a topic by means of experimentation. In a way, Labrousse tries both to unpack Antonin's case and to perpetuate his condition so as to achieve an understanding that is as thorough as possible. It is exactly in this context that he even questions the hypothesis that Antonin is suffering from amnesia: in this specific case, amnesia is localised and analysed, screened and watched rather than experienced, but it is also denied and remains unuttered as such. Antonin's movements literally duplicate experiences of his past life, but they also remain to a large extent illegible. In a way, his memories take on a solid corporeal form that prevents him from acquiring new ones and it is as though Antonin suffers from amnesia of the living present. Instead of retrieving his past from a distance, Antonin has become identical to his own archive of not so haphazardly chosen names and gestures. In so doing, Antonin fails to maintain some exteriority *vis-à-vis* his depository of memories and, both immediately and cryptically, he offers everything he has managed to keep salvaged. In a way, he is engulfed in his past while his therapy aims to provide him with some space for amnesia or, at least, some helpful forgetting. It is only at the very end of the film, when Antonin recognises Madeleine's touch taking place here and now, that his fixed past is dissociated from his lived present and both of them become, once again, archivable. Consequently, it is exactly at this point that Antonin's atypical amnesia is smoothened into unsystematic remembering and disorderly forgetting. By placing particular emphasis on some clinical aspects of Antonin's case, *Les fragments d'Antonin* tackle the question of the archive. To be more precise, the film shows that a specific type or usage of the archive intersects with amnesia. I could summarise some of the broader issues raised by the film as follows: Does archiving take place against amnesia? Is amnesia a demarcation of the non-archivable? Could amnesia coexist with the archive in any way? Is Antonin's incorporation of the archive an example of the passage from amnesia to archive and vice-versa?

I think that some answers to these questions are given by the very relevant reflection that recurs in Derrida's *Archive Fever*, where amnesia is said to be the extinction not only of memory as mneme or as anamnesis, but also of the archive, which is "consignation, the documentary or monumental apparatus as hypomnema, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum" (11). According to this rationale and like Antonin's movements, the archive is both irreplaceable as such and external to memory, a kind of add-on which precedes memory, makes it possible and keeps away from it. Nonetheless, the archive cannot be easily defined just as Antonin's reactions to Labrousse's experiments could not be straightforwardly decoded. Perhaps, and only to a certain extent, the definition of the archive can be achieved through its opposition to the experience of memory. Derrida says that:

> the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside. (*Archive* 11)

In that sense, the archive is not so much an experience of memory as what emerges when memory collapses and is no longer retrievable. What is more, if the archive is hypomnesic, it is thanks to its secondary and ancillary nature that it brings memory about or, as happens in Antonin's case, promises the advent of memory. It is not situated at the centre of memory, but somewhere next to it, on the side, and apart from it; if memory itself is a kind of recurrence or reiteration presupposing the function of the archive, then "there is no archive without consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression" (*Archive* 11). Unlike what happens with Antonin, the so-called "structural breakdown of the said memory" takes

place outside the space that will be filled by the memory itself, in the anteroom where the very possibility of memory is decided. Derrida reminds us that, according to Freud, repetition is closely related to the death drive and, hence, to an always imminent destruction (11). Furthermore, the archive attempts to repeat the by definition unrepeatable event (something that is particularly clear in Antonin's case) and is distortedly repeated itself as soon as it is memorised. That is the reason why "right on that which permits and conditions archivisation, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction [...]. The archive always works, *a priori*, against itself" (11-12). Hence, it is a self-destructive archive that, on the one hand, guarantees memory and, on the other hand, carries amnesia within itself.

An amnesia imminent and immanent in the archive can only be different from and more complex than the simple omission of the unavailable material. Moreover, an archive prone to its own destruction is probably not an archive incapable of repeating, something which brings us back to the incommensurability between the event and the trace or the testimony (Chare, Bailey and Kilroy 2-16); it is not an archive which is unlikely to be repeated either, despite, for example, the programmatic calls for a historiography attentive to the rhetoric through which it treats this archive (LaCapra 36-43). On the contrary, it is mainly an archive that tends to repeat its own exteriority *vis-à-vis* the subjects of memory and forgetting, even when an amnesiac like Antonin literally incorporates it. The trouble with the archive would not reside in what it has forgotten or excluded—thus in the material that is still waiting to be archived—but in the degree to which the archive can include what was up to now non-archivable, precisely because it was inconceivable as achievable. Although it might seem that the amnesia incited by such an archive resides in its yet unopened drawer, in the promise made by the archive, or even in the announcement that there is an archive to be explored, I tend to think that this remains a case of quasi-amnesia that is obliterated every time the archive is explored in more depth. What concerns amnesia, at least to a certain extent, is what doesn't fit in the archive; and the archive points, always *a posteriori*, to an ex-amnesia which has to be thought of. As happens in Antonin's case, amnesia becomes intelligible the moment it ends and only as the advent of the totally unknown which has also been, until then, unknowable. Amnesia, in short, might be the breakdown of memory, but it becomes comprehensible the very moment it is pointed out as such—or, perhaps, touched by (a) Madeleine—and is hence prone to its own breakdown.

Erupting Amnesia

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* is perhaps the most emblematic film of the last decade dealing with amnesia. It proceeds in reverse order and traces "the impossible backward look of the historian from text to referent" (Thomas 204). The main character, Leonard Shelby, suffers from anterograde amnesia and is incapable of absorbing new information after his wife's death. Convinced that she was murdered by two men and that one of them managed to escape (neither of which is proven in the film), Leonard seeks revenge. Therefore, he takes full responsibility for his actions (Smith 44; Bragues 74-75), starts collecting and combining information and develops a sophisticated, yet ultimately unreliable, method of maintaining direct access to it: he uses polaroids on which he takes notes in order to remind himself who is who and what action to take, and he tattoos information of vital importance on his body. For the purposes of my argument, I will briefly refer to three elements of the film.

First, at a certain point Leonard talks about amnesia (about "his condition," as he usually says) with the receptionist of his motel: "What's it like? / Like waking. Like you always just woke up. / That must suck. All backwards... Well, like you got a pretty good idea of what you're gonna do next, but no idea what you just did. I'm the exact opposite" (Whitehouse 335). This short dialogue offers an elementary yet pertinent definition of amnesia: involuntarily turning away from the past, orienting oneself exclusively towards the future, and enabling oneself to realize this future with no other limitations apart from amnesia itself. The second element concerns one of the flashbacks of the film, where Leonard talks to his wife while she is trying to read the same well-worn paperback once more: "How can you read that again? / It's good. / You've read it a hundred times. / I enjoy it. / Yeah, but the pleasure of a book is in wanting to know what happens next. / Don't be a prick. I'm not reading it to annoy you, I enjoy it. Just let me read, please." Quite obviously, Leonard's wife has withdrawn to "a

duration of recurrent narrative pleasure apart from the local surprises of plot and climax" (Garrett 132) as opposed to Leonard's perception of what is interesting and what is not. But this withdrawal is not without its own kind of deliberate and partial amnesia, one that encourages a re-reading and remains unaffected by a given beginning or end, or a kind of rediscovery which is not bound to the linearity of storytelling. For Leonard's wife, this re-reading is a persistent re-petition, the reading of an "as if something had not taken place already," and eventually a re-discovery or a voracious re-consumption of what survives consumption; for Leonard himself, the same re-reading can only lead to or work through the same text. Third, Leonard depends on malleable testimonies like commented photographs and tattooed reminders. His point of reference is what his vision has once captured and what he has considered to be important enough to be put on his body; interestingly, one of the tattoos reads "Memory is treachery" (Little 72-73). However, contrary to what happens in *Les fragments d'Antonin*, amnesia is negotiated on the surface of Leonard's body: outside him, unassimilated, undigested and unabsorbed, it takes on the form of an archive condemned to be misused and to remain forever incapable of finding its place in Leonard's memory. Those elements constitute a maze based on the "randomization of temporal tenses" and on "a sort of 'no rules' space leading inescapably to contrivance" (Lyons 128). Leonard obsessively and hopelessly tries to navigate it, but the absence of a filtering and structuring force does not allow him to build a trustworthy interpretation, which is why *Memento* constantly oscillates between a process of archivisation as crystallising constellation and repetitive delirious reconstructions of the past.

In sum, Leonard can only envision a deracinated future; he can only bear a new plot even though he is destined to reread the one that he can only provisionally put together and keeps raking through the flares of a memory in the—impossible—becoming. Besides that, if Leonard is desperately looking for his lost capacity to put his traumatic autobiography into words, he does not manage to properly spell it out as reliable history. Instead of a coherent and convincing narrative, it is his amnesia that continuously erupts, becomes a major impediment to his will to recount his story appropriately and, after all, prevents him from articulating anything else than his amnesia. In a word, amnesia leaves little space to discourses other than its own. Exactly like the first two films I referred to in this paper, *Memento* raises a number of crucial questions: How can amnesia itself speak? What will its topic be? If "memory is a treachery," what would amnesia's truth look like? Would an amnesiac discourse give place to the autobiography of what is not yet lived?

I think that, in an oblique way, *Memento* invokes what Derrida attempts to do *in Monolingualism of the Other,* where he gives an account of his childhood in Algeria in terms of a double interdiction: access to non-French languages was impossible and access to French was denied to him in an "apparently roundabout, and perverted manner" (31). The specific timing of his Jewishness condemned him to a kind of aphasia, or, to be more precise, of induced self-silencing reminiscent of Lenard's incapacity to talk about his past. The absence of a legitimate thus speakable mother tongue made memoirs literally unspeakable and autobiography almost inconceivable. While Leonard Shelby was in need of a past, Derrida was short of a language that would enable him to put it into words. Despite this difference, however, the crucial question for Derrida seems to apply to both cases: "how does one utter a worthwhile 'I recall' when it is necessary to invent both one's language and one's 'I', to invent them at the same time, beyond this surging wave of amnesia that the double interdict has unleashed?" (*Monolingualism* 31) The absence of a serviceable language, of a pronounceable past, or of an operative subject attests to the emergence of a hardly imaginable amnesia which is nowhere close to a state of helpless apathy and in no way equivalent to a tacit erasure of things past. Leonard Shelby zealously reconstructs his narrative, while Derrida insists on the description of amnesia as an "unleashed, surging wave" (a *déferlement* in French, as he insists reminding his readers),

> for it is suitable here to think of tensions and the play of forces, of the jealous, vindictive, and hidden physis, of the generative fury of this repression – and that is why this amnesia remains, in a way, active, dynamic, powerful, something other than a mere forgetfulness. The interdiction is not negative; it does not incite simply to loss. Nor is the amnesia it organizes from the depths, in the night of the abyss, incited to perdition. It ebbs and flows like a wave that sweeps everything along upon shores that I know too well. It carries everything, the sea, and on two sides; it swells, sweeps along, and enriches itself with everything, carries away, brings back, deports and becomes swollen again with what it has dragged away. (*Monolingualism* 31)

In that sense, amnesia can have a *table rase* effect on the already known (Leonard Shelby's professional and personal past, Derrida's Algeria), but it can also mingle with it after having removed it. This amnesia is the emergence of a void which nevertheless remains one's void, different from a *tabula rasa*, a void presupposing one's finitude, touching upon and longing for one's limits (something like the moment of the murder in *Memento*), namely what Derrida calls the "shores that I know too well." Amnesia looks like a wave that comes and goes, moves and replaces, destabilises and starts afresh, manages things without totally wiping them out, and at the same time makes a newcomer out of the old. In a way, it profits from the "generative fury of this repression" and proceeds to a repetitive, yet sometimes radical, re-seeing. This kind of amnesia is perhaps neither irresistible nor inevitable. It may be soothed through narration or historicisation, and it is no coincidence that Leonard Shelby's revenge presupposes both of them. But, according to Derrida, this would be the work of someone else for two reasons: "because I carry the negative heritage, if I may say so, of this amnesia, which I never had the courage, the strength, and the means to resist, and because an original historian's work would be necessary, of which I have felt myself incapable" (*Monolingualism* 53). In that sense, amnesia is remediable through the labor of historiography, but, more than anything else, it can be a kind of tempting heritage which enhances one's urge to speak his/her idiom: "the break with tradition, uprooting, the inaccessibility of histories, amnesia, indecipherability, and so on: all of these unleash the genealogical drive, the desire of the idiom, the compulsive impulse to anamnesis, and the deconstructive love of the interdict" (59), that is to say, the urge to face amnesia through one's unexpectedly owned discourse. At the same time, while these factors intersect to produce a "pathological destructing, growing disintegration: a madness" (59) like Leonard Shelby's, which sounds like an altogether threatening possibility, they nonetheless allow one to speak in a different way, or even in a still unheard language, which is neither one's own nor attributable to someone else. Leonard's repetitive interpretations and Derrida's fear of madness converge in that they long for their unachievable narratives, but they finally produce a number of eccentric non-historiographies by talking against their respective amnesias – and perhaps also thanks to them.

The final scene of *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* is marked by Mathilde's relieved, exploratory and ultimately powerless gaze at Manech: "She looks at him. Looks at him. Looks at him." In *Les fragments d' Antonin*, Labrousse films his patient and studies the living archive that Antonin has become over and over again. *Memento*'s Leonard can either stare at the polaroids which summarise his world in a series of photographic snapshots or read, often through a mirror, the tattoos he has put on his body. In all three cases, amnesia is a mostly unreadable spectacle or a helpless watching: a visible mystery beyond the interpreter's limits, a corporeal and resistant archive, or the reading of an intricate photo-thriller capable of evoking innumerable speculations. Life stories are open to conjecture, narratives are fundamentally unreliable, and complex or even contradictory discourses are enunciated. One of my basic concerns in this paper was to think on the specific regime of discourses on amnesia and, more precisely, on their peculiar and uncertain impossibility. In my effort to tackle this issue, I read three films and some passages from Derrida and came up with some theses regarding what can be said both about and as a result of amnesia: the hard core of amnesia is ultimately inaccessible and impenetrable by discourse; amnesia becomes knowable only following its breakdown through archivisation; amnesia triggers the eruption of a new and hitherto unpredictable discourse. In light of these statements, I will conclude with one last passage from *Circumfession* (Bennington & Derrida), Derrida's idiosyncratic autobiography that serves as a response to Geoffrey Bennington's account of the philosopher's work and might also be seen as a text that escapes from the double interdiction described earlier in *Monolingualism of the Other*. In the sixth paragraph, the text reads:

> I would be trying, against him [i.e. G.B.], that would be my rule here, my law for the duration of these few pages, to reinscribe, reinvent, obliging the other, and first of all G., to recognize it, to pronounce it, no more than that, to call me finally beyond the owner's tour he has just done, forgetting me on the pretext of understanding me, and it is as if I were trying to oblige him to recognize me and come out of this amnesia of me which resembles my mother while I say to myself when I read this matrix there's the survivress signing in my place and if it is right, and it is, faultless, not only will I no longer sign but I will never have signed. (33)

Understanding is here the pretext for performing some kind of amnesia, namely not an amnesia of something distant and unimaginable, but an amnesia of the very substance one is trying to engage with and contemplate on. To be more precise, understanding can only be the memory of what was conceived of, even if only imperfectly, and it can also point to its own imperfection and to the urgent need for its own completion. It would implicitly serve as a proof for the possibility of such a completion and as a promise of another, this time impeccable, understanding. Even so, understanding turns out to be amnesiac *vis-à-vis* what remained unintelligible or was unintentionally ignored. This kind of amnesia can only be healed through a subversive hermeneutics and an entirely alternative interpretive counter-discourse that will achieve the understanding that the initial discourse was longing for, in an utterly defamiliarising and misappropriating way ("to call me finally beyond the owner's tour he has just done"). This discourse would be so unanticipated and so illuminating that only amnesia could describe its state before it comes into being. Even more so, articulating a counter-discourse that deserves the status once assigned to amnesia, in other words, seeing or inventing amnesia *a posteriori*, would be the most demanding critical task, a kind of survival never expected and surprisingly erupting. Like Derrida's amnesiac mother who was progressively unable to recognise her son, the counter-discourse both exposing and cancelling amnesia should recognise the old as totally new. Or, perhaps, like Manech's initial and final question addressed to Mathilde ("Does it hurt when you walk?"), this counter-discourse will always ask questions about the fundamental, the obvious and the painful and receive answers which recall nothing, even though it has gone through an incredible labyrinth of suspicions, traces, cross-readings, hypotheses, and errancies.

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