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The mirror and the mask: the simulacrum of memory and the self as text

Abstract:

This paper takes the theme of ‘rewriting the historical event’ and situates it within the context of individual memory operating as a form of postmodern simulacrum. Adapting Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum to the identity-forming process of episodic memory, this paper has two main purposes. It delves into the methodology of recontextualising media theory to apply to an individual’s personal history, and also explores the consequences of that new context. Informed by semiotics and phenomenology, the paper argues that the memory simulacrum is a process of unverifiable creation, the products of which cannot easily be termed real or false. It draws on the work of Baudrillard, Freud, and Dylan Trigg to describe a subject whose very self is vestigial to the means of its own creation, defined by repetition, indifference, and alienation. In this conception, the original text is the subject’s past, into which re-interpretations build to ultimately alter the notion of the past itself – interpretation affects the source.

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When most people think about their pasts, they think about the things they have already done or things that have already happened to them. There are common platitudes expressing this idea of the past: ‘you can’t change the past, but you can change the future’, and so on. Most narratives relating to time travel, for example, suggest that the past is something concrete that, within the science-fiction world of the narrative, may be revisited, and that altering the past merely adjusts the future, maintaining a linear trajectory from past to present. One of the earliest philosophers of memory, St. Augustine, described memory as a ‘palace’, through which one could wander (Augustine n.d.).

What these conceptions of memory have in common is the notion that the past is somehow fixed, a concrete entity that cannot be altered. One of the goals of this paper is to contest this apparently obvious point, and the crux of this contention is in the means by which we generally access the past: memory. The philosophers Martin & Deutscher (1966) defined memory in 1966 as necessarily conforming to ‘certain limits of accuracy’ (Martin & Deutscher 1966). This means that for something to be a memory, it must correlate rather precisely to the way things ‘happened’ (Martin & Deutscher 1966). This is a very condensed summary of one point of their definition. Regardless, each act of memory Martin & Deutscher build their argument upon is one for which there is a way of validating its veracity. One problem here is that for most of the events of our lives, we have no such objective touchstone for how things happened outside of memory itself. There is usually no way to assess the veracity of our memories. Furthermore, and perhaps more troubling for a common conception of memory, since the past is locked in time, memory in fact *becomes* the past itself. Leonard Lamm differentiates the ‘idea of the past’, a form of memory, from ‘past presents’, or the moments that were once experienced directly. ‘The past’, in his conception, is not delegated to a temporal site outside of the present; rather, it is constructed and re-constructed within the present: through memory.

Since people draw on their pasts to make sense of themselves and their lives, what we have is a situation in which the raw matter of an individual’s identity is filtered through an extremely unreliable process. Not only is it unreliable, but there are few means by which to assess what reliability it may have. Since memory is both a process and a source of material, the ‘raw matter’ out of which a person constructs their identity is actually simultaneously the process by which they do it. Perhaps oddly, this situation shares some remarkable similarities with Jean Baudrillard’s conception of the simulacrum. It may, as I will discuss later, also evoke an uncanny effect.

Jean Baudrillard outlines his conception of the postmodern simulacrum in his seminal 1981 essay, ‘The Precession of Simulacra’. He describes a ‘hyperreality’ in which the signs society uses to represent reality in fact end up comprising it. These signs then take precedence over the things they represent until they are more familiar, more widely referenced, or even more real. Most broadly, Baudrillard’s conception of the simulacrum should be seen as what Michael Seats describes as a means to ‘enable the richest possible array of readings of specific cultural forms’ (Seats 2006: 107). These ‘cultural forms’ – anything from novels to advertising to economics – are shot through with the basic logic of the simulacrum. This paper will take episodic memory,

the means by which an individual constructs a narrative of self, as something akin to these 'cultural forms'.

Since memory is purportedly a representation of a past present, which is inaccessible, we could say that a memory image is, in Baudrillard's terms, a 'model of a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard 2010: 1). But is there enough cause to say that memory has no origin or reality?

'Reconstructive memory' (Koriat & Goldsmith 1998) is a term given to various ways of conceiving of memory that share the idea that memory is not, in fact, a reliable representation of a stable or objective past. Psychologists who study reconstructive memory draw attention to the fact that memories are influenced by other cognitive processes and contexts, including social and cultural ones, both at the time of encoding a memory and at the time of recollection. There is not, as Martin & Deutscher prescribe, necessarily a reason to argue that memory must adhere to concrete facts.

Frederic Bartlett's 1920 study into memory demonstrated that when exposed to folk tales from outside their own culture, participants later recollected the tales as containing more intimate cultural details (Bartlett 1995), going so far as to change the essential message of the tale to better coincide with their own values. Loftus & Palmer's 1974 study, similarly, showed that when shown a photograph, and then were prompted by different words, participants described the same image very differently (Loftus & Palmer 1974). Such studies suggest that memory is in fact a working process rather than a storehouse, or 'palace', in Augustine's language. Most important are the moments of encoding and recall. They are intimately bound with the subject's cognitive state at both times. Firstly, the observer is not making an objective imprint of the past, and secondly, they are recalling that already subjective image from a new subjective position. This line of enquiry leads one to the conclusion that the past is not so much a thing as an idea, a construction built in the present and continuously rebuilt in subsequent present moments.

This is where the simulacrum becomes useful in interpreting acts of memory. If there is such a thing as an objective past, the remembering subject certainly did not experience it, owing to changes occurring during the initial encoding of a memory. Furthermore, the act of recollection is a further abstraction from this, incorporating forgetfulness, imagination, and new perspectives. The memory image cannot possibly be accurate, yet, as Locke and later psychologists observe, people tend to see their memories as such. We have a situation identical to the simulacrum: a system of unverifiable copies purporting to represent something that probably never existed, yet are generally held to be truthful. To quote Umberto Eco's observations of the Ripley museum: 'Everything looks real, and therefore it is real; in any case the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed' (Eco 1990: 16).

When the act of memory is construed thusly, remembering comes to look interpretative. Events and images in memory are the text's content, while the act of remembering is hermeneutic. While there is certainly good reason to suggest that a traditional text such as a novel can have as many ways 'in' and 'out' of it as there are

readers, the words themselves do not change. This grounds the act of interpretation, and amounts to observable evidence; there is no such objective evidence in memory. There would not be much point in interpreting an ever-changing book, since the interpretations would become invalid as soon as the text changed. The subject, however, has no choice but to interpret the memory text. Luis Bunuel writes that ‘Life without memory is no life at all... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing’ (Bunuel 2009: 366). The subject has no choice but to interpret memory, despite the fact that there is no way of determining the validity of those interpretations.

There are several consequences from this situation. One is that the act of interpretation affects the source. Since there is no stable source, continued re-interpretations form a consistency which is then re-interpreted, and is essentially the new source. The means by which we interpret the past become the source that we analyse, rather than the past itself. Another consequence is that the subject attempts to form a sense of continuity (and thus identity) out of something that does not exist outside of the interpretative apparatus used to examine it. These consequences are similar to those of the simulacrum that Baudrillard describes. It is a situation in which reality is modelled not on a fixed referent but on the shifting process that itself obscures the referent, while appearing to be realistic.

If we are to accept Bunuel’s assertion that memory is the material out of which we construct our identities, what are we to say about ourselves in the context of simulated memory? If we look to memory to look for ourselves, what happens to our idea of self when we cannot find comfort in the stable, referential nature of signs? Discussing Magritte’s painting *Les deux mystères* (1966), Scott Durham notes that ‘suspended between its repetitions, the simulacrum of a pipe is at once the pipe we recognize and not a pipe at all’ (Durham 1998: 30). Replace ‘pipe’ with ‘past’ and we have the same point. Memory resembles the past presents it represents, and could be said to nearly be those past presents – in as far as they no longer exist – but it is not quite something we can view and be comforted by. We cannot safely look at memory and say *that is how things happened at the time; that is my life..*

This imperfect resemblance also evokes the uncanny. Other scholars (Beville 2013; Rubenstein 1998) have noted links between the postmodern simulacrum and the uncanny. An awareness of the unfounded nature of memory renders our pasts truly remote, and evokes a feeling of alienation from one’s own past and self. The subject becomes aware that the narrative of memory is not precisely the subject itself; rather, it lies within the subject yet is just off. This is a disturbance of the subject/object dichotomy by which the subject can define itself: *I am me because I am not that*. This lack of distinction gives rise to an uncanny effect.

In her 1976 essay ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms’, Hélène Cixous describes the uncanny effect as what occurs in the subject when ‘everything that ought to have remained... hidden and secret... has become visible’. Freud claims that such hidden things could remind the subject of an earlier psychic stage, a primitive aspect of human development, or troublesome aspects of unconscious life. Notably, he often uses the

term ‘double’ to describe the uncanny effect; it arises as an effect of past and present subjective states intertwining.

Cixous’ analysis of Freud’s notion foregrounds the ungraspable nature of the uncanny effect, and the way it perpetually evades determination. She writes that ‘the meaning [of the terms *heimlich* (secret) and *unheimlich* (unsecret)] reproduces itself or... is stirred up. Opposition has been blunted’. The nature of the uncanny is in the margins, then, the latent space between definitions, or between past and present as Freud implies. Describing Freud’s interpretation of ETA Hoffman’s *The Sandman*, Cixous locates one source of the work’s uncanny effect within the interplay of terms, particularly of reality and falsehood:

What unfolds without fail before the reader’s eyes is a kind of puppet theatre in which real dolls or fake dolls, real and simulated life, are manipulated by a capricious stage-setter... scenes are centred and dispersed; narratives are begun and left in suspension... What in one instance appears a figure of science seems later to resemble some type of fiction.

Already there is a similarity between the uncanny and the simulacrum: both inhabit the spaces between reliable conceptual fixtures, and both engender a sense of uncertainty in the subject. The slippery crux of the uncanny is that its meaning resides in its ungraspable nature, the point at which something familiar becomes unfamiliar, or vice-versa. This is deeply relevant to the simulacrum – the image or artefact that cannot be termed real or false, that challenges our distinctions between the terms.

Following the evasive nature of the uncanny effect, Cixous argues that the viewer’s eye itself becomes multiplied ‘through [the uncanny’s] unending series of substitutions... the familiar work of the eye, in turn, becomes the enigmatic production of its scattered doubles’. This inversion – viewer becoming viewed, producing and produced by its own doubles – has deep relevance to the simulacrum. Douglas Kellner argues that the postmodern subject is created in and by the simulacrum, that fragments of the subject exist throughout it. For Kellner, the subject’s anxiety arises from the realisation that its identity is at once both embedded within the codes and structures of the simulacrum yet fundamentally exterior to it.

If the uncanny is one of the possible psychological responses to doubling or a disturbing resemblance, or to the revisiting of old spaces, then it may also be an effect of the individual’s engagement with the simulacrum. As a system of faithless resemblances, the simulacrum has been described by critic Maria Beville as a circumstance which creates an uncanny reaction in the observer (Beville 2013). She claims that in postmodern literature ‘the city is uncanny, it is a simulacrum made up of simulacra, at once familiar but also strange and unknowable’ (Beville 2013: 604).

Multiple temporal images of the remembered self lead to an alienation from one’s past; both the uncanny and the postmodern simulacrum evoke the double as a motif. Both imply a split from oneself and a dispersal of identity, both problematise the relationship between subject and object through a diminishment of difference, and both suggest a dominance of the object. This is no less potent for the fact that the subject creates the object, nor because that object is groundless. Memory is so vital to

the subject that its unstable nature does nothing to diminish its importance. Furthermore, to recall Eco, the memory image does not appear unreal to the subject.

This distance from, or splitting of self could conceivably engender a sense of disbelief in the reality of one's past life and experiences. If the reality of the past is seen as a construction, a present idea of the way things were rather than an objectively verifiable certainty, then the self and the life of the self have to be acknowledged as artificial creations rather than natural occurrences rising from something external to the subject's own psychological reconstructions. Pasts are no longer firm referents by which we may understand ourselves; they are what we tell ourselves about ourselves. This relates back to the uncanny nature of the self simulacrum, but is more disturbing, because the subject actually creates the object, or other, that leads to the uncanny effect. Indeed, in this instance, the object or other is the subject itself. Gry Faurholt identifies a sense of irresolution in tales of split personalities and doppelgängers, which he claims create similar uncanny effects (Faurholt 2009). Such stories almost always end in tragedy (Faurholt 2009; Dolar 1991), with the death or disappearance of either the self or the threatening double. This tendency in literature suggests that the self cannot sustain the threat of such fundamental ontological fragmentation, cannot bear the corruptive presence of the other within itself. What memory as simulacrum proposes is that memory itself creates a perpetual series of doubled selves, that the subject cannot fully trust yet is forced to believe in to construct a notion of self.

Without direct access to past presents, the memory simulacrum forms the sole arbiter of the truth of those pasts. The present is the only real, but since time is experienced linearly it immediately becomes a memory image, and is thus absorbed into the simulacrum. The past builds up inside the subject, 'like sediment' (Kjaerstad 2006: 419). Since the present is always instantaneous, it can never keep up with the simulacrum gathering behind and around it. What is lost to memory is excluded from the narrative of self, despite its equally reliable reality status.

Recognising the loss of difference between real and false compounds the unfounded nature of the memory narrative, of the self – the simulacrum is right there, contactable. It comes before the object it claims to represent; it is dominant, while past presents are not. Past presents were once 'real' but it is memory that shows them to us, it is memory we and touch and see, memory that we take comfort in. Ironically, memory is our only means of viewing past presents, but it simultaneously dismantles any means of apprehending them – it obscures the very things it appears to present to us. In *Phantom Communities* (1998), Scott Durham provides an interpretation of the oppressive relationship between the individual and the simulacrum described by Baudrillard:

...the serial images and virtual realities generated by the media and information technologies of all sorts have become the sole arbiters of the 'truth' or 'reality' of everyday experience, to the point that the spectator or consumer appears only as the vestigial support for the 'simulation model' that he or she seems destined to repeat (Durham 1998: 21).

Within the simulacrum, images are the only touchstone for 'truth' or 'reality', to the extent that the subject is no more than the support network for this system. The

‘concrete time and space’ of the subject becomes irrelevant, discardable. In the case of memory, the subject and the object are ultimately both parts of the same entity – the remembering subject. The subject is both the story of their past and their subjective experience of the present. They exist both now and then.

Memory is unlike other texts, not only in that it is constantly restructuring itself, but because the act of interpretation further changes it, to the extent of becoming the text itself. The most effective way to apprehend these aspects of memory is by using the simulacrum as an interpretative framework. It offers explanation for the function of copies that undermine their sources, as well as the occurrence of flawed artefacts that obscure the reality they are modelled upon. We may recall Augustine’s description of memory as a palace, through which one may wander. It may be more accurate to think of memory as a hall of masks and mirrors, with fragments of the real flickering upon diaphanous surfaces, reflecting the various identities subjects may construct for themselves. There is certainly something there; the past manifests somehow. The issue lies in telling where that past ends and where the simulacrum begins. By the time that question arises, however, the simulacrum has already prevailed.

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