

The imaginary and memories of the present time
By Marianna Garin

Storytelling is an essential element in the survival of a culture, and a way to make sense of the world we live in. Stories that as an imaginary journey, memories, everyday moments, or various symbols or metaphors that encourages our feelings towards new meanings. The video works of Sara Rajaei encompasses various layers in narration; with a poetic visual language her stories investigate temporal relationships of story telling. These narratives that deconstructs time into present future and past, bears significance not only as a fundamental order in the medium in which she works, but also in the way they are organized, where *time* according to a bergsonian¹ idea is indivisible, and they must all coexist. Her work is like opening a secret box, and finding lost pictures and forgotten emotions, all composed by music, and for the beholder to complete.

Although the written word has progressively become an important starting point in her creative process, the filmic narration is not only able to 'tell' us the story, but also to 'show' it through the semiotic diversity of images and sound. Her narrative works are mostly comprised by a story and the narrator, or sometimes text as in old silent movies that brings forward the story and explains the 'mental' images.

While Rajaei's early works mainly concern themselves with her cultural background with clear codes, her later work is more of an investigation of the temporal construction of the narrative itself. The short film "Veronica & Chantur" is an analogy of female punishment, or even the death sentence: A woman in a black dress is sitting like a condemned prisoner while a man is tying her up by a wisp of her long hair on metal strings. Then her chair is suddenly kicked away from under her, and the film ends.

Rajaei's work reminds me of segments of dreams that sometimes are difficult to put into words, and that need to be visualized in order to be communicated. The female protagonist, in the work *Charismatic fates & Vanishing dates*, is sitting in a room, and various notions of time through the film become as a long déjà vu. Her photographs become part of the scenarios from which the film revolves: a photograph - a frozen past moment - or forgotten memories that are intertwined with everyday life, or in this case seemingly real time in the film.

It is exactly at this intersection between the fictional and the real, the public and the private, in her stories that a new meaning emerges. She bring together element from her cultural background, sometimes from her private one, and interweaves them into new meanings where images and story forms a new contexts. In Rajaei's work the hybridisation of these narratives in a culture is pivotal, in our modern day where the memories, the déjà vu, the amnesia, are important sources to connect our minds. Memories and nostalgia works as crucial elements in the handling of the present, and the déjà vu experiences are perceptions of various existences, the real/actual and the virtual existences, and the repetition of an illusion. Her works draw attention to the complex, and to how extensively ramified the connections between all of these thoughts systems are.

The French philosopher Henry Bergson² believed that we didn't forget our past experiences in life, but that they are preserved in our minds as part of our memories. These memories supposedly exist in three different places, some stored in the brain and some as pure recollections stored in the consciousness. There is also a third possibility of

memory, that could be similar to what the French novelist Marcel Proust called 'involuntary memory'. In a voluntary memory the images from the past can be applied to an immediate situation in the present, whereas involuntary memory is more distant and unbound from pragmatic necessities of everyday life, rather it can be triggered by specific sensations that have more to do with the unconsciousness. In for example the film *Charismatic fates & Vanishing dates*, she manages to create that entire ambience that surround a sensation, feeling a certain mood through these various levels of memories.

A day of Amnesia, (from 2004), is a recreation of an occurrence, taken from her own memory of her childhood, but that no one of her family members recall. The characters from the story are on display against a white backdrop, as we hear the narration. They are totally immobile, just concentrated listening, as if they want to 'grab' a last chance to reconnect themselves into a context they have been removed from, or a story they have lost. As the camera repeatedly revolves around them, we become part of their close intimate study. The story is about a newly bought carpet, and the family members' involvement and comments on this carpet. The man brings it into the domestic sphere dominated by women. The narrator has a clear dominant tone of voice, as if she would be reading didactically on purpose, but intermittently the characters' voices are slightly superimposed over the narrator's voice, repeating her words. They are in a borderless white room, as in a dream, and as sitting on an imaginary carpet unseen even by them. Only the title implies the amnesia, as a disturbance in memory that also could imply an impossibility of dealing with the future not having relation to past experiences and therefore being lost, as in that very same borderless white room. A woman incidentally reveals the news that the war is over, but the news is unimportant, as if detached from its meaning. Only in our imagination can we see what this carpet look like, or even understand where this take place, in a country where the war has evidently become mere normality. The film aesthetic in this work is dependent on the duration in time of the story in relation to the image.

Her visual, or cinematic approach, has its own order, to structure space and the complexity of time doesn't always have a contingent upon the narrative action in the films, as for example in *Charismatic fates & Vanishing dates* (2006). The story comes from the past, that somehow manifests a notion of déjà vue and tells us about persons that have disappeared or no longer exist, like the grandfather's death and a cousin that never returns. Through the photographs mentioned earlier, the visual interrelationship breaks into story. There is a voice over, and other voices from the past interrupts that narrated story, without beginning or end, and without any sense of chronology. The camera moves around the room, we see a couple looking at photographs. Through the film there is a girl that runs around through images, memories, and time, she is the bearer of the story, becoming almost immortal. The story moves forward and characters reappears in that room.

The mise-en-scène is filled with symbols and takes place in the dark living room of a house filled with nostalgic old furniture. Chandeliers and framed pictures, white lilies, and a wig all become props in the story. As in the collection of the photographs, people reappear in the same living room, and disappear as memories. The music creates the escaping quality of the déjà vu; you hear the melody at the very beginning, and again around the end.

The temporal gaps happen rather in the narration than in the images, that often are composed of fragments of stories, as if the artist remarks that in her methods of writing

she is recollecting a memory, or even that the method is part of the creation of the memory or their fragments out together as one would remember memory.

Rajaei employs both short and long-take aesthetic and the rhythm of the music to express shifts between the "exterior" world and the characters "inner" world which is very tangible in the work *While on my way* the story is created out of once overhearing a short conversation in the train. The images in the film represent an encounter, we see a room in which a man and a woman meet for the last time. The camera leads the gaze in the room, and the story is merged by the image, the music and the text that relates the story. The music creates the tension and strengthens the emotions, since there only is the written word. Several observations intertwine as the author sits in the public transportation, things that are happening in her surrounding become fragments in the film. The gap of the private intimate - a person decide to commit suicide and the everyday small things like somebody chewing a gum which is happening in the public, is often the way she merges everyday reality with imaginary reality.

In *Forever for a While* (2009) we follow time in three generations that correlates to the three temporal divisions *present- future -past*. The protagonist is a woman in different ages: as a child, as a young woman and as an aged woman, three generations that meet in the same house. It plays with the protagonist's different states of consciousness and temporality. Again a camera that flows through the room or we see the protagonist, the camera sweeps around her, the same kind of loaded rooms, with dark warm light.

The little girl that has a crystal ball, the symbol to see into the future that falls, an old lady suddenly appears as a ghost, the crystal ball is collected by the young woman that walks in the room, she reappears in a dining room, but she seems absent from the people that are dining around her, as if immersed in thoughts. In the same room, the little girl sits in the armchair where the old lady just sat, she goes to the shelves and picks up a framed photograph that pictures the same dinner occasion we witnessed early. It has already become a memory of a *present* action that happens in the film. The young woman looks at that picture, she wanders to the mirror and see her self as the elderly woman. The crystal ball carries the film through these different images and stages. The music reinforces the story of each of the women (that has their own music part), and somehow interconnects them to become one.

Shahrazad (2009) is a quiet and intimate portrait of a female writer that somehow lives in her inner creative world, through nostalgic moments, her memories that form part of her poetry and that is the only thing that connects her to the everyday life and to future. Rajaei's methods of making collages of recollected moments or lost memories that she pictures in her mind, and then slowly binds together into new stories comes to its peak with *Shahrazad*. During three years the artist was meeting her and slowly developed a friendship. In the role of beholder we share and become part of her daily life in her private sphere, with her emotions, her stories from the past of the ones she once loved, losses, and memories. The artist works with a professional camera team that also know the protagonist well. She sings, she describes things in her life. Paints her lips, gets melancholic. She reads, makes her hair, and sits in long moments of silence. The camera films her from different angles and states of mind. Her world is in that house, that room and the camera makes a scanning of it, documenting details, letting the camera flow in a long take - a duration of time and image. When referring to "*One Thousand and one Nights*" she laughs in the very beginning since the title *Shahrazad*, as for the Persian queen, carries her name, and tell us about how the storytelling became not only a savour but as

something therapeutic in life that brings back to an essential meaning in the works of Sara Rajaei.

¹ Referring to the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) I also make reference to the title of the article; “*Memory of the Present and False Recognition*”, in *Revue Philosophique* (December, 1908) re-used in *Il Ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico*. 1999 by Paolo Virno.

² Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. 1911. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George and Unwin Ltd., 1978: 87.