

Memory in places, objects, and feelings
Comments to the film *Apples* by Christos Nikou
epff 11

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The film *Apples* by the Greek director Christos Nikou opens with a prologue of a sequence of slow and solemn silent images of an elegant apartment, left empty by its inhabitants, whose life is narrated by objects, mundane and intimate at once: an empty mug, photos, a dress, and among them, the titular apples. The filmic composition gestures to a baroque still life painting, whose objects are poetically melancholic, and convey the aching nostalgia and longing for the human presences they memorialize. The apartment is framed as *a lieu de memoire* that, in the absence of alive subjects who could meaningfully memorialize it, becomes but a *memento mori*. Memento gestures to mind and memory, but no human mind is in sight.

The word *memory* draws its origin from the Latin *memor*, which means mindful. The Italian *ricordare* means to *bring back to the heart*: both derivations set the scene to throw into sharp focus how affect and thought go hand in hand in

performing the work of memory, which the classical world located in the organic body, precisely in the heart. Recalling, bringing back implies that something was there, even in the form of mere traces, flavours, smells: all the sensorial epiphanic (re)emergencies, which Proust's *madeleine* has come to epitomize.

Psychoanalysis considers memory - and its twin opposite, forgetting or repression - to be an active process. Through the psychic work of memory, the subject repeatedly recovers the sense of continuity of the self, despite and across the changes brought about by life and its vicissitudes. The dialectic of continuity and discontinuity is a process articulated in space and time which coalesces into the sense of personal identity: every day, upon waking, we re-mind ourselves of who we are, who we were the day before, the decade before and so on, and on that basis, we project ourselves into a futurity of expectancy, anticipation, and desire, in an existential commingling of temporalities. The emphasis on the process and psychic work evokes the similarly active psychic work of mourning, whereby the subject painfully and slowly detaches him/herself from the lost or deceased love object, to construct a new vision of

themselves and the world, which, for a while, appears impoverished by the absence of the loved other. Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* observed how the whole world seemed poorer and tainted by the absence of his beloved mentor; the world was the same but empty of him and the saint was poignantly conscious of it.

In *Mourning and melancholia* (1917[1915]), where Freud strives to grapple with the difference between the mournful state of dejection and sadness attendant to grief, and its pathological turn into melancholia, he writes:

“[T]he patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost, but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious” (p. 245).

Emancipated spectators after watching *Apples*, from the vantage point of *a posteriori* reflection on the main character Aris and, in identification with him, understand that his amnesia is an emotional response to the shock of his companion's death, and can revisit the narrative cinematic scenes benefitting from Freud's work, holding both positions: the sense of an active defensive process at work when the reality of the loss is stupefying, and the subjective sense of passivity and helplessness in the face of a severe blow. Furthermore, steering away from the temptation of a diagnostic episteme, it can be more profitable to wonder about the nature of the relationship with the object, when the loss is experienced as loss of (aspects of) the self, seemingly, loss of memory, with its impact on identity and existential continuity. Zooming in on the relationship with Anna, a fellow patient of the clinic for amnesiacs, one can wonder whether a passive submission to the woman, whilst keeping a distanced aloofness characterizes Aris' relationship with women. In this case we would be talking about "memories in feelings", as Klein proposed.

Nikou describes the film as “an allegorical comedy-drama” born out of a personal bereavement, which intends to explore the question of whether we are all ultimately “simply the sum of all those things we don’t forget”(quoted by Kermode, *The Guardian*, 9 May 2021); here the psychoanalyst would add that the ego is the precipitate of lost objects, identity consisting in the project of letting go, while retaining them through identification, because this is how we construct our subjectivities.

The cineaste resorts to the allegory of an amnesia epidemic to depict a world suddenly becoming uncanny and absurd, when it is taken over by an incomprehensible shared predicament that deprives people of an essential attribute of their humanness; it uses a similar strategy to that deployed by Saramago in *Blindness*, to embed a subjective itinerary in a culturally signifying atmospheric discourse. The inexplicable epidemic memory loss is a filmic choice to render the sense of the surreal, as though the spectator has suddenly transmigrated into a dream. Is Nikou gesturing to the social participation in the acknowledgment of death and bereavement? Burial ceremonies and places have been milestones in instituting civilizations: their salient features

are acceptance of and adaptation to the grieving person's regression and primary needs -for instance, in some cultures food is provided for one or more days- physical gestures, like hugging, holding, crying together. Moreover, images, portraits, inscriptions are effigial memorials and a defense against forgetting. Aris seems alone, captured in a state of infantile naiveté that makes him absurdly comic, like a Beckett character would be.

We learn that during a bus journey Aris plunged into a slumber which closely resembles an anesthetic if, upon waking, he lost his orientation, his sense of time, and of himself. To the other's gaze, like the audience's, he looks sad, dejected, that is, mournful, yet subjectively he just feels lost, with no memories or connections to others, like a disoriented child. Here one is reminded of Anna Freud's observation that children lose objects and orientation in space when they are lost to the mother's gaze and are not securely held in her mind. Aris too is in need of maternal care and, as he is not recognized or claimed by anyone, he is entrusted to a hospital, where his regression proves to be an adaptive potential for the construction of a new identity, new encounters, and a new life.

Lost and alienated, Aris follows an intimation from his internal world and bites an apple, to see whether he likes - or, perhaps has preserved- its taste, thus intuiting that his search begins with the exploration of the sensual pleasure which originally is registered by infants in their body and leaves somatic mnemonic traces. The apple appears to be a polysemic sign: it is a healthy fruit, the greengrocer Aris visits tells him that it is a memory enhancer, it constitutes the only manifest link with the past and is a signifier of the forbidden knowledge of sexuality in its broader reference to Genesis, where Eve is the initiator of the rebellious gesture, to which Adam passively assents.

Myths are signifying textual forms that can be framed and interpreted in a plurality of discourses; hence I propose that the apple be inscribed in Aris' search for the foundation of his identity, recovering his earliest and most idiosyncratic likes, and dislikes, the origin and the erotics of his being.

Beginning a new life, forging a new identity, reconnects the subject to the infantile self, nourished by a maternal figure, whose breast is taken in as a source of nourishment, life, accompanied by sensuous pleasure. Freud, and later

thinkers like Winnicott, Laplanche, and Roussillon, to mention but a few, maintain that experiences are registered and form mnemic traces, a kind of coded template that can be reactivated when the subject encounters others, enters in new relationships, has new experiences. Those original templates are encoded under the aegis of pleasure and unpleasure, like an alphabet whose composition varies in a personal and idiomatic way, following the trajectories of sensations of pleasure, to be pursued, and unpleasure, to be, instead, avoided. This is by no means straightforward, because the internal world is occupied by all sorts of contradictions, destructive pursuits illusorily viewed as calming and/or pleasurable. What if deep down Aris wishes to forget, so as to erase grief, loss, sadness, anger, guilt? What if, for some, for some time at least, emptying oneself of oneself is an unconsciously desirable condition? We do not know and cannot know; Aris is but a filmic character. What we do know, however, is that his submission to the ‘medical regime’ is strikingly passive and de-responsibilizing: he does what he is told, progressively expands his repertoire of activities and experiences which he fixes in Polaroid self-images to be gathered in a

photographic album, like parents do to record and preserve the significant moments of their children's development and life. A photo album is another memorial object through which Aris constructs his 'new' identity, functioning as a parent to his child-self who is learning about life, having new experiences. And, like an infant, his rhythmic temporality is beaten by actions; from concrete activities to abstract concept: this is how time is apprehended through development.

There are only two moments in the film when Aris acts on his own initiative: the first is when he borrows a bicycle from a group of children, to see whether he has retained the procedural memory of how to ride it, which he indeed has, riding being a skill not subjected to the workings of repression or other defensive strategies resulting from conflicts and wishes. The other spontaneous gesture is biting the apple to reclaim his capacity for pleasure, hence to reappropriate his desire. The apple therefore is situated at the juncture where need and wish part ways and follow diverse trajectories. In some ways Nikou cinematically highlights for us the problematic of memory and amnesia - naturally in the absence or organic brain lesions- that is, its

essential and conflictual connection with desire. Solely wishes -unlike instinctual urges like hunger and thirst- would leave their marks as memory traces, and signifiers of those experiences that have been registered and encoded under the aegis of pleasure. Psychoanalysis proposes that when the infant wants to feel the sensations that s/he hallucinates and can recreate by thumb sucking, s/he taps into mnestic traces to source his/her autoerotic stimulation of the mucous membranes. Returning to the apple, it is a healthy fruit and, like the nourishing milk, satiates hunger and thus pertains to the register of need, which Freud, Laplanche and Green disarticulate from the vicissitudes of memory and mnestic traces, governed by the vagaries of desire. Therefore, the taste of apples becomes an embodied memory that Aris seeks, thus recovering his sense of agency, desire and wish to remember. Desire, taste, nostalgic sensoriality, all belong to the construction of a new subjective organization, which, however, is also

“... a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and [...] it contains the history of these object-choices” (Freud, 1923, p. 29).

Identity, as a conglomerate of identifications with lost objects, is a symbolic burial ground, a place of memory, where, at the same time, hope and trust in new experiences and relationships is possible, when entering creatively the paradoxical state of mind whereby the object is felt as both absent, in reality, and symbolically present, and inscribed in one's own biographical narrative.

What can one make of the ending? A pivotal filmic strand is Aris' relationship with Anna, fellow patient, whose character is fiery, rebelliously independent, active, even in her sexual advances to him. It is not clear whether he desires her or simply acquiesce to the sexual encounter, in whose aftermath he seems to conclude that he does not. Yet it is in the relational engagement with her that he gathers together fragments, aspects of his self: what he likes or dislikes, together with the recollection of his address and other details of his present life. One could conclude that the object of the memorial work is the present, rather than the past, a present temporality that becomes the marker of differences: as well as the fellow patient's name, Anna is also the name of one of the doctors, and Anna is the name

inscribed on the tombstone Aris stops by in the graveyard. Is this Nikou's filmic strategy to carry the viewer along the path of the signifier, a woman's name, which becomes the marker of the difference between the two living Annas, who are not viable substitutes for the dead Anna, who was the real object of desire? In the recovered present, Anna is but a name on a tombstone, a symbolic presence, but unequivocally present in Aris' affective life. The ending gestures to the accomplishment of the work of mourning, closely linked with loss, memory, and identity. In a circular motion, we finally return to the apartment where, in identification with Aris, we bear witness that there has been a woman, who is not there in the present, but whose presence becomes emotionally poignant. She is a presence, creatively constructed through the mourning work, which is a veritable inventive refashioning of a life, of life itself.

References

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