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Prosthetic Memory and the New Civil Rights Cinema of the 21st Century

Abstract

Memory studies are one of the most dynamically developing areas of the humanities. Although most scholars are focused on various forms of collective memories, some differ from this general trend. Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory is one such different approach. This new form of 'public memory' makes it possible for individuals to be affected by events that they did not themselves experience. It works through various forms of media, such as films or experiential museums. Although Landsberg's theory is at times not exactly precise and leaves room for doubt, 'prosthetic memory' can be applied to the interpretation of various contemporary movie trends, such as the new civil rights cinema of the 21st century, and can also help to redefine some of most basic cinematic devices.

Keywords: prosthesis, prosthetic memory, memory, retro, nostalgia, cinema, new civil rights cinema

Memory and its relation to media has recently become not only one of the most discussed topics in the realm of pop culture, but also one of the most influential. Thanks to postmodernism, 'nostalgia film', retro styles and other rose-tinted modes of depicting history, cinema in the second half of the twentieth century has turned not toward the future, but the past. However, unlike traditional costume dramas (which of course are still being made), new ways of depicting the past concentrate on issues such as retrospective shaping of historical narratives and the very function of memory. These subjects, which have also become the main topics of the dynamically-developing field of memory studies, divide scholars. Some see these throwbacks to the past either as a danger, or in the best-case scenario, as a sign of the end of creativity. Simon Reynolds complains about the lack of the "next

big thing”¹ in music caused by retromania, and Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard² believe that looking at the past is a victory of image over reality. Zygmunt Bauman, in his last book *Retrotopia*, describes the fear of both the present and the future as a reason for searching for utopias in the past, which is perceived as safer and more harmonious than anything that lays ahead of us³. Authors such as the ones mentioned above most often see the past as an object of manipulation, as well as a tool for further manipulation. For them, looking back to the past remains a sign of real things forever lost, and can’t be of any value.

It can be assumed that such pessimistic views were based on the part of pop culture that idealizes the past and depicts it as a pastoral realm of conservative values, in order to “attempt a trans-historical reconstruction of the lost home”⁴, and maintain the status quo of “the simpler times” – both politically and artistically. It is no accident that Jameson based his definition of ‘nostalgia film’ on movies such as *American Graffiti* (1973, George Lucas) and *Star Wars* (1977, George Lucas), historical and pop cultural throwbacks to the 1950s of the chaste, idealized Eisenhower era. Reynolds, too, said as much in regards to the music of that time. In fact, the Fifties and ‘the Good Sixties’ (before John F. Kennedy was assassinated) were convenient tools of the Reaganite political rhetoric of the 1980s. They were also noticeable in movies “evoking the past through the deployment of a limited iconography that erases contradictions in the past in favour of a coherency of style”⁵, and used to support slogans such as ‘America’s back’ or ‘Let’s make America great again’. As such, it’s understandable that filmmakers, looking at the cosy images of bucolic suburbs introduced in *American Graffiti* and its innumerable imitations, and at other images of the fake past hiding any hints of social and political conflicts and not posing any challenge to the status quo, saw them as yet another tool for manipulating audiences into ideological submission.

Even though the conservative image of the past can still be found in American movies today, perception of the retro style as something amounting to nostalgic idealization became rare, not only among scholars, but also in films themselves. The subversive and progressive potential of revising and redefining the past is discussed by such authors as Marc Ferro, who proposed reflecting on counter-discourses⁶ that present a counter-history, and Kaja Silverman, who “finds political potential in retro fashion”, stating that it “avoids the pitfalls of a naïve

¹Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, (New York: Faber and Faber) (2011), electronic edition.

²Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press) (1991); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext(e)) (1983).

³Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia*, (Cambridge: Polity Press) (2017).

⁴Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books) (2001), electronic edition.

⁵ Philip Drake, “Mortgaged to Music!: New Retro Movies in 1990s Hollywood Cinema”, in: Paul Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press) (2003), p. 191.

⁶Patrick McGee, *Bad History and the Logics of Blockbuster Cinema*, (New York: Pallgrave MacMillan) (2012), p. 16.

referentiality, by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes”⁷. According to Silverman, as well as Elizabeth Guffey⁸ and others, history can be depicted in pop culture not only nostalgically, but also nonchalantly, ironically and/or critically, and can therefore become a tool not for sustaining, but challenging the status quo. It could, at the very least, diversify peoples’ notions of events that occurred in the recent past.

How can moviemakers achieve such goals? Of course, strategies differ depending on the genre, but certain strategies seem to have gained popularity with filmmakers as well as audiences. Among them, we can find the critical depiction of history, reversing traditional historic narratives (e.g. in American revisionist westerns), or the autothematic use of classical formulas and the filling-in of the gaps left in those narratives. For example, by introducing black American or homosexual characters to genres reserved in the mid-century for white and heterosexual characters only (as Todd Haynes does in his melodrama *Far from Heaven*, his 2002 take on the Eisenhower era). These strategies mostly reference shared images of the past – its mythologisation and demythologization in collective forms of memory that can be influenced by politics, media, current historical narratives, etc. Since it is almost impossible to examine exactly how movies influence our memory as individuals, media and film scholars rarely focus on individual memory, instead shifting their attention to strategies for shaping and governing collective memory built on symbols and icons, reproduced by and through other movies.

However, concepts that are predominantly focused on the perception of the past by individuals (due to media coverage), also seem to prove just how difficult it is to explore such relations more than intuitively. This is why Alison Landsberg’s theory of prosthetic memory is both unusual and difficult. It is challenging, because it focuses exclusively on the individual spectator and their reaction to cinema, something that is not popular among media and memory scholars. It is difficult because to some extent it proves that those avoiding the topic of individual media relation seem to be right.

Prosthetic memory is “...a new form of public cultural memory [...] that emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum”⁹, and makes it possible for individuals to be affected, by way of empathy, by events that they did not themselves experience. The notion of media affecting people on their innermost private level is, of course, not new. However, it has most often been regarded negatively. For example, representatives of the Frankfurt school and ideological criticism perceive media as tools for manipulating audiences seen as passive and mindless. On the other hand, some positive takes can be found within the

⁷Kaja Silverman, “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse”, in: Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) (1986), p. 150.

⁸Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro. The Culture of Revival*, (London: Reaktion Books) (2006), p. 11.

⁹Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press) (2004), p. 2

reflection on queer cinema. According to Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, film might be considered queer not only if its characters are homosexual, but also when, in the very “psychological processes of looking at and identifying with characters”¹⁰, someone finds empathy for an experience that’s very much outside their own (not necessarily only in terms of sexuality). Therefore, Hollywood cinema, in which viewers are traditionally encouraged to identify with the central characters through plot, narration and visual devices, can be used to “experience the world through other people’s eyes”¹¹ – not only those of the white, heterosexual men that still dominate screens, but also of women, members of ethnic and racial minorities (BAME characters¹²), and gay men and women.

Of course, it is almost impossible to accurately examine or prove that kind of influence, but even random accounts of such reactions can legitimise the aforementioned definition of queer cinema. Alison Landsberg never mentions Benshoff and Griffin’s concept, but proposes something quite similar: “[one of] the greatest powers (and pleasures) of narrative cinema [is] to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender”¹³, as “...prosthetic memories do not erase differences or construct common origins”¹⁴. However, Landsberg adds something to this equation that complicates things even more – memory. The most important question she asks is, “...to what extent do modern technologies of mass culture, such as film, with their ability to transport individuals through time and space, function as technologies of memory?”¹⁵

Prosthetic memory is enabled by media and allows viewers to experience something they have not themselves lived through, and that doesn’t even have to be ‘part of’ the group they identify with (for example, their gender, race, ethnicity or race). On the one hand, these kinds of memories don’t belong to any particular group. This makes prosthetic memory different from any kind of collective or cultural memory. On the other hand, these memories have the power to influence individuals, and shape or even change their point of view or life experience. They are mediated – acquired through media by watching movies or going to experiential museums, etc. At the same time, it is the bodily experience that provides the “conduit for prosthetic memory”¹⁶. In fact, while explaining the idea of prosthetic memories, Landsberg uses examples from science fiction cinema, including *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott), *Total Recall* (1990, Paul Verhoeven) and *Strange Days* (1990, Kathryn Bigelow). In these films, memory and identity can be literally transmitted through

¹⁰Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 11.

¹¹Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 11.

¹²BAME – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic.

¹³Harry M. Benshoff, Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield) (2006), p. 11.

¹⁴Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 9.

¹⁵Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 21.

¹⁶Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 28.

digital devices, implanted inside the body of a person who never lived them. Does that make them false, or their ‘owners’ less human? The filmmakers argue the opposite. In *Blade Runner* and its sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017, Denis Villeneuve), androids equipped with artificially-generated memories are more human than the humans themselves.

This idea is of course very tempting cinematically, and therefore pop culture constantly provides movies and TV shows based on it. Among the most recent examples are the long-running serial *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-2014; Netflix, 2014–), and *Altered Carbon* (Netflix, 2018), both of which toy with the idea of identity and self being transferred into or through a device no bigger than a pen drive. In relation to actual viewers – the real audience watching movies – it is of course much more complicated and intuitive, partly because of difficulties with how to understand the word ‘memory’ in this context. In fact, Landsberg doesn’t even define it. On one hand, she uses the term as commonly understood, which suggests that prosthetic memories, while acquired through media, are almost literally attached or implanted within the mind/body of the individual viewer. On the other hand, memory sometimes means the same thing to her as knowledge or personal experience, expanded by gathering new information about the past.

The theory is most convincing when its author describes not how media enables people to acquire memories of events they haven’t lived through, but how media helps create new memories – of experiencing certain emotions, or gaining knowledge. For example, taking part in reconstructions of historical battles (controversial as they are), will not make anyone remember the actual events, but will create mediated memories of taking part in a reconstruction. Likewise, visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is thoroughly described by Landsberg, will not bring anyone even remotely close to what actual Holocaust survivors went through, but will create in them memories of seeing an exhibition and submitting themselves to the historical narrative it provided. Therefore, such visits will widen one’s knowledge, and through the guide narration and exhibits, allow them to see the world through someone else’s eyes. As an example, the author describes “a boardwalk-like walkway. The ground under your feet is uneven. You are walking on cobblestones – cobblestones, you learn, which came from the Warsaw ghetto”¹⁷. The transferential space of the Memorial Museum that surrounds visitors with real artefacts puts them in the victims’ shoes (to some extent, literally). A similar space can be found in The Warsaw Uprising Museum, where visitors can ‘experience’ some of the discomfort of the insurgents hiding in the sewers and so on. In that way, prosthetic memories could “derive from engaged and experientially oriented encounters with technologies of memory”¹⁸.

Of course, cinema can also serve this purpose, and the idea of memory as prosthesis becomes less abstract and more easily grasped when applied to actual

¹⁷Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 132.

¹⁸Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 143.

films and formulas. Not necessarily through the science-fiction genre, but those with the ambition to recreate the forgotten experiences of discriminated groups can give a boost to empathy and raise awareness – both public and individual – of counter-narratives and counter-memories. Landsberg herself uses the cinematic example of *Rosewood* (1997, John Singleton), the true story of a lynch mob that attacked African Americans in 1923 in Rosewood, Florida. Recent American cinema provides even more, non-singular examples, many of which can be found in the trend known as the ‘new civil rights cinema’ of the 2000s. *The Help* (2011, Tate Taylor), *The Butler* (2013, Lee Daniels), *Selma* (2014, Ava DuVernay), and others are all examples of films that deliberately aim to provide audiences with prosthetic memories in a less literal sense than described by Landsberg.

New civil rights cinema can be defined as a group of African-American-centric films that “emerge as a counterpoint to earlier Hollywood offerings that focused largely on whites”, and make “an effort to reframe the civil rights movement”¹⁹ of the 1960s, vilified by conservative administrations as ‘the bad Sixties’. Moviemakers locate their African-American heroes in the midst of social upheavals, as in *Selma*, or in hostile and discriminatory communities, as in *The Help*. Instead of alleviating or undermining social ruptures, as nostalgia films would in order to create a vision of “...history without guilt [...] that suffuses us with pride rather than with shame”²⁰, new civil rights cinema emphasises social injustices, racial prejudice and the urgent need for progressive movements. At the same time, it operates within the area of memory and the historical narratives shaping it.

It is fair to assume that the new civil rights cinema is targeted at a general audience, against racial divisions. Yet, in regard to both black and white viewers, it has slightly different aims and uses different strategies, as described by Landsberg. She firmly emphasises that prosthetic memory unites people by showing differences, and creates alliances “...by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, the ‘other’”²¹. At the same time she admits that prosthetic memories can also lead to homogenous identity, as in the case of the immigrants from Eastern Europe that she examines. Newcomers, in order to become Americans, had to shake off their former identities and acquire a new, American one.

However, unification by way of prosthetic memory can also work the other way around – by reminding people of a group identity (and by extension, individual identity), and its historical role. For example, African-American actors in Hollywood traditionally played supporting or episodic roles, and were therefore excluded from the narrative. Moreover, even in movies centred on racism and civil rights violations, such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988, Alan Parker) and *A Time to Kill* (1996, Joel Schumacher), it was white characters who held the active, prominent positions within the narrative. The black characters were portrayed as too scared or

¹⁹Oliver Gruner, *Screening the Sixties. Hollywood Cinema and the Politics of Memory*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan) (2016), p. 226, 127.

²⁰Svetlana Boym (2001).

²¹Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 9.

weak to act, waiting to be saved. New civil rights cinema, especially *Hidden Figures* (2017, Theodore Melfi), *Selma* and *The Butler*, brings African Americans back to the centre of events, highlighting their agency and role in the civil rights movement (*The Butler*) and other prominent activities (such as the vital role played by black female scientists in the Mercury space programme, in *Hidden Figures*²²). Here, it is white characters who appear as background figures. Therefore, memory is being radically shifted, and prosthetic memories ‘implanted’ in those who, for example, were too young to remember the Selma to Montgomery marches (*Selma*), enabling reinforcement of a group identity.

At the same time, such movies are supposed to attract white audiences as well. Just as in the case of Toni Morrison’s novels, “...while the black characters [...] acquire memories that might be considered their cultural inheritance, she intends white readers to take on those memories, too”²³ by enabling empathy and ethical thinking. That means “thinking beyond the immediacy of one’s own wants and desires”²⁴. How can that be achieved in a feature film? The afore-mentioned movies, *The Help*, *The Butler* and *Hidden Figures*, are interesting examples. On the one hand, they use careful, self-reflexive stylization and – sometimes – documentary footage connected thematically to the civil rights movement. On the other, in terms of narrative they are made in a rather conventional way. *The Butler* is especially characteristic of the biopic formula. However, this last feature in particular allows redefinition of ostensibly basic narrative devices in terms of prosthetic memory.

Filmmakers have in their repertoire a number of tricks that can help them to either manipulate viewers, or enable them to perceive events from their leading characters’ perspectives, and sympathize with them. Such devices lie at the very heart of classical cinema, aimed at immersion and emotional involvement. Yet, the new civil rights cinema requires from its audience something more than just the regular engagement typical of any other screening, as it “uses cinematic identification to create the conditions under which audience members can acquire prosthetic memories”²⁵. That is why *The Help* and *The Butler* both employ first-person narration. This is especially emphasised in *The Help*, the story of black maids serving a wealthy, middle-class white woman in the suburbs of Jacksonville, Mississippi in 1963. In the first two minutes of the film it is established beyond any doubt that the black woman’s perspective will be the privileged one. In the very first scene we see a sheet of paper which will be filled with the main character, Aibileen’s (Viola Davis), words. A few seconds later Aibileen/Davis looks straight into the camera and starts talking about her experiences as a black maid. This breaking of the fourth wall is a clear violation of classic cinema’s rules, but here it’s not supposed to create distance between the character and the audience. On the

²² In *Hidden Figures* social progress and the fight against racial discrimination are equated with space conquests and progress in science.

²³ Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 100.

²⁴ Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 149.

²⁵ Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 109.

contrary, she speaks directly to us, reaching outside the frame of the screen, so that we can put ourselves in her rather unfamiliar situation and ask ourselves the questions she has to answer. For example, how would we feel raising a stranger's children, while our own are looked after by someone else?

Of course, it is no coincidence that *The Help* brings up such an emotional, personal issue, since it is one of the easiest ways known in cinema to manipulate someone into empathy. Still, it's not quite enough, because a few seconds after Aibileen breaks the fourth wall, we begin to hear her in voice-over. It is she who will tell us the entire story – from her own perspective. Therefore, black audiences get a chance to identify with a representative of their own race and heritage (Aibileen's grandmother was a house slave), while white viewers for the most part of the movie leave the privileged and familiar area of their own perspective. Interestingly, just as in *Rosewood*, which has been analysed by Landsberg, *The Help* makes even more effort, by putting a direct representative of white audiences inside the story (while strongly establishing a black woman's point of view and emphasising the importance of her finally-heard voice). Within the story, it is a white girl from the suburban middle class, Skeeter (Emma Stone), who listens to Aibileen and the other maids describing their awful fate. She writes their stories down and has to reach beyond her own exclusively white experience, in order to guide audiences to do the same – to inhabit memories of discrimination and a new model of slavery that defined racial relations in the Eisenhower- and Kennedy-era South²⁶.

The Butler also privileges a black servant, Cecil (Forest Whitaker), working for decades in the White House, who like Aibileen narrates events in first-person. He witnesses successive presidents and their decisions on racial injustice, such as the desegregation of Little Rock High School in 1957. Crucially, while it's powerful white men actually making the choices and signing the documents, Cecil's perspective shows that in fact all of the changes began with black communities demanding their rights – such as the Freedom Riders, and those who marched on Washington with Martin Luther King. Again, while providing African-American audiences with their inheritance and collective memory, *The Butler* encourages white audiences to acquire prosthetic memories of that struggle, by using both a personal perspective and a sentimental plot centred around Cecil's conflict with his son.

While *Hidden Figures* and *Selma* never introduce a first-person narrator, they also encourage the audience to see through the black characters' eyes. Their directors use point-of-view shots, or limit the viewers' range of knowledge by making them privy only to the knowledge the characters would have (three characters, in the case of *Hidden Figures*), and hence, their perspective. This encourages “mental

²⁶ However, *The Help* lacks narrative consequence – in many scenes filmmakers focus on Skeeter's (and some other white characters') point of view. Also, eventually it is she who writes down black servants' memories and experiences and publishes them as her book. Therefore narrative intentions from the opening scene are not fully carried through.

identification”²⁷, the very condition that prosthetic memory needs to even occur. In *Hidden Figures* especially, we enter and leave the scene when characters do, and experience what they experience, even if there is no voice-over to explain exactly how they feel. Even the rather omniscient narration in *Selma* puts the black characters front and centre, especially Martin Luther King (David Oyelowo).

In this way, while not acquiring actual memories of the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, the audience can experience some of the characters’ emotions, understand their situation and gain some knowledge about the past, and the kind of real memories someone in their position might have had. As Landsberg says, putting oneself in someone else’s situation “might be instrumental in enabling a white person to experience empathy for African Americans”²⁸. She uses another prominent example: the 1970s TV adaptation of Alex Haley’s novel *Roots*, which tells the story of Kunte Kinte (John Amos), a slave kidnapped from Africa in the 18th century. *Roots* was a ground-breaking show, as it was one of the first depictions of the realities of (the often mythologised) slavery in American pop culture. “What was new about *Roots* was its attempt to use the mass media to create images of slavery and, even more important, to portray a sympathetic black character with whom a white audience might identify. By granting Kunte Kinte point-of-view shots, the miniseries enabled white viewers to see through a black man’s eyes”²⁹.

However, the way in which Landsberg describes the influence of *Roots* on white audiences – and the idea of prosthetic memory – might be seen as problematic, especially from the contemporary point of view. She states that “Kunte Kinte became more than a role model. He became, in effect, a body that could be worn”³⁰. In light of these words, it has to be remembered that the inhabiting of black identities is very often seen as an offensive act of cultural appropriation, especially when the “body could be worn” literally, for example as a Halloween costume. It is fair to assume, then, that due to *Roots*’ immense popularity dressing up as Kunte Kinte was not unusual. Given the intimate nature of memories and trauma, even within communities, prosthetic memory could be seen as a device for progress and empathy, as well as for the appropriation of elements of a minority culture by members of dominant groups.

This kind of situation is put at the centre of the conflict in *Dear White People*³¹, in which events are catalysed by a university fraternity encouraging Halloween party guests to dress up as famous black people (media celebrities)³². This, of course,

²⁷David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press) (1985), p. 67.

²⁸Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 109.

²⁹Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 102

³⁰Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 103.

³¹ Both movie (2014, Justin Simien) and TV series (Netflix, 2017–).

³² The same situation occurs in *On My Block* (Netflix, 2018), in which kids from a rich neighbourhood dress up as *cholos* (Mexican gangsters).

causes outrage among the black students and poses the wider question of the thin line between acquiring prosthetic memories through media, and the unwelcome appropriation of unique and often traumatic experiences (or memories) that belong to a different group. The question remains: who is to say that those memories (for example, of slavery and racial discrimination) “do not ‘naturally’ belong to anyone”³³?

Of course it would be unfair to say that cultural appropriation is actually what Landsberg has in mind. She states more than once that the idea of prosthetic memories is a utopian one, aimed at the noble task of creating empathy and putting oneself in someone else’s shoes, in order to shape one’s subjectivity and political views. The actual intention of engaging audiences in current events and influencing the future by “enabling people to feel just such an engaged and experiential relationship to the past”³⁴ through prosthetic memories, can be found in many contemporary feature films and documentaries, on the big screen and television, all of which emphasise the immediate connection between past events and the realities of today. For example, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016, Raoul Peck) affiliates the civil rights struggle of the 1960s with today’s Black Lives Matter movement, while also undermining ‘white’ prosthetic memories (for example, classical westerns depicting ‘how the West was won’), as reproducing racial stereotypes. In *13th* (2016), Ava DuVernay shows how criminalization of black males and the image of the “Black Buck” (an aggressive black male), is derived from slavery and Jim Crow rights. Further, *O. J. – Made in America* (2016, Ezra Edelman) explains how the memory of racial injustices can deform the course of law.

These movies can force audiences to look beyond racial divisions (like those created by O. J. Simpson’s infamous case), and deal with painful memories in order to “prosthetically” acquire an unfamiliar point of view. That, hopefully, “...can make people feel themselves a part of larger histories, of narratives that go beyond the confines of the nuclear family and that transcend the heretofore insurmountable barriers of race and ethnicity”³⁵.

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³³Alison Landsberg (2004), p. 19.

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