

# Memory Affect: The Past and Present in Ross McElwee's *Photographic Memory* (2011) and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011)

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## Abstract

*This paper will explore the concept of Memory Affect - bringing together current thinking on affect in cinema and affect in the experiencing of memory by making specific reference to Terrence Malick's feature film The Tree of Life (2011) and Ross McElwee's documentary Photographic Memory (2011).*

*In Photographic Memory, McElwee's sixth wry autobiographical documentary since his groundbreaking film Sherman's March, the director articulates the experiences of memory and it's fragmentary subjective nature in relation to the photographic image, both moving and still, analogue and digital. Although not specifically stated, McElwee's insights illustrate the notion of a Memory Affect. Building on the ideas exposed by McElwee, this paper also considers Malick's equally personal Palme d'Or-winning The Tree of Life, where the director evokes memory within a fictional context, not only representing memory but also positioning the viewer within the act of remembering, creating an affective memory experience.*

*With it's particular ability to represent time and space, cinema is not only a metaphor for memory but also constitutive of memory, and this paper considers another layer of overlap – that of the affective, embodied experience of remembering, of calling the past into present. Drawing on a range of theoretical works, this paper uses these two very different films to explore the notion of Memory Affect and the creation of a memory experience shared between the viewer, the filmmaker and the memory.*

**Keywords :** Affect, Memory, Malick, McElwee,

## Introduction

Memory is a fundamental aspect of being human. It is the accumulation of past experiences that allows us to make sense of the present and possibly the future. Cinema, with its particular ability to represent time and space through sound, visual images and editing makes it an ideal medium to reflect on and understand memory. Two recent works about cinema and memory point to the increasing significance of cinema and the moving images in relation to memory. In *Cinema, Memory, Modernity*, Russell Kilbourn (2010: 2) states

that his starting point is an understanding that “memory today derives its meaning, its existence as such, from visually based technologies like cinema; that cinema is not merely one of the most effective metaphors for memory, but that cinema – alongside photography - is *constitutive* of memory in its deepest and most meaningful sense”. Isabel McNeill in *Memory and the Moving Image, French Film in the Digital Age* (2010) extends this argument to all other forms of moving image, given that the vast proliferation of, and access to, captured images across photography, cinema, film and new media in the public and private mode has exposed an interactive collective relationship with the material and therefore the memories. McNeill suggests that “since memory can no longer be seen as something that resides in the individual, instead of conceiving of memory in terms of storage and recall, we should think of radical virtuality, potentially activated in the form of memories but also in the cause of perception” (McNeill 2010: 17). In building on Kilbourn and McNeill's explorations and drawing on the debate around the affective, embodied experience of cinema and something similar in the experiencing of memory, this paper proposes a concept of Memory Affect. It considers how Memory Affect, captured in cinema can create a shared memory experience between the viewers, and the filmmaker, extending both the virtual and constitutive nexus of cinema and memory.

To explore this idea of Memory Affect, I will consider three specific descriptions of affective memory moments. I will briefly revisit the often paraphrased passage from Proust's *Swann's Way*, where the taste of a Madeline cake takes the narrator back to a childhood memory. I will also explore two films, very different in style and scope from each other, and both made in 2011: *Photographic Memory*, a small scale, personal essay documentary by Ross McElwee; and *The Tree Of Life*, Terrence Malick's operatic, Palme d'Or winning feature film. In *Photographic Memory*, McElwee articulates the experiences of memory and recollection, and this understanding will then be used in the reading of *The Tree of Life*. Both films are rich and multilayered in their exploration of memory. This paper will only consider a fraction of that richness, to illustrate the idea of Memory Affect.

## Memory and Affect

McNeill (2010) has recently pulled together the overlapping and evolving philosophical thinking on memory, starting with Aristotle and moving through Bergson and Proust to Ricœur's dense summation in his *Memory History and Forgetting* (2004). Significantly, all of these philosophers divide memory loosely into a non-conscious and conscious binary. Aristotle used two terms - *mnēmē* and *anamnesis*. *Mnēmē* is defined as habit memory or 'a feeling' (McNeill 2010: 5), whilst *anamnēsis* is a 'recollection consisting of an active search' (Ricœur 2004: 17). Proust makes a similar separation, and uses the terms 'involuntary' and 'voluntary' memory (McNeill 2010: 5).

On the 'non – conscious' side, Bergson's example of a 'habit' memory is being able to write with a pencil without an additional thought process. Habit memory is often a corporeal event – inscribed on the body like reaching for the light switch in the dark without thinking through its location. This is not dissimilar to Proust's 'involuntary' memory, the feeling that came instantly upon the narrator on tasting the madeleine cake dipped in tea (McNeill 2010: 5). If the non-conscious element of memory is experienced spontaneously and without effort, how then is the 'active search', 'effort to recall' or 'voluntary memory' of the 'conscious' side of the binary experienced? Bergson (2007: 112) notes that "one 'imagines' the recollection", that is we creating an image from the past in the mind's eye, a process of bringing that image from 'darkness to light' (Bergson cited in McNeill 2010: 23). Ricœur (2004: 25) suggests that the active recollection always references "the place in time of the initial experience". In all of these definitions, what is made clear is that memory occurs in the present. Whilst drawing from actual rather than imagined events of the past, memory is then created - it is experienced 'now' as either an instant non-conscious event or a more conscious act of creating or imagining a virtual space that is not the past, but is rather the memory. That the recollection 'tends to live as an image', is clearly a point of intersection with cinema, but is there also a bigger overlap in terms of the non-conscious or affective experiencing of memory?

Affect, like Memory, has become a significant area of study within the field of cultural and social theory. This reflects a move away from the notion of the film spectator as passive and distant, 'towards definitions of film viewing as embodied and sensory' (Mroz 2012: 25). Shouse (2005: 4) states that "an affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity [...] it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential [...] affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness". In his summary of Bergson and Deleuze's ideas, Rodowick (1997: 87) explains the relationship between perception, affect and time - perception "is an interval opened on one side as sensation and closed on the

other as action", and "what falls in between is affection, or what has not been transformed into an image or action". I suggest that in the process of experiencing memory there are affective moments when the past is layered on the present, experienced as sensation but not yet articulated as memory or the image recollected. The intensity of these affective memory moments can vary, some profound, some fleeting, but all having resonance. Shouse (2005: 8) suggests that "the importance of affect rests upon the fact that in many cases the message consciously received may be of less import to the receiver of the message than his or her non-conscious affective resonance with the source of the message".

## Swann's Way

Proust's experience of tasting Madeline cake is often paraphrased in discussions of memory, however, when read in relation to Deleuze's ideas on perception and affect outlined above, it is an interesting articulation of Memory Affect, at first bewildering in its intensity, "an interval opened on one side as sensation"...

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. (...) Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savors, could, no, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?

and then "closed on the other side as action"...

Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind. (...) And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. (Proust 1913)

In his articulation of memory processes, Proust first experiences the sensation brought on by the taste of the cake, a non-conscious habit, or in Proust's terms 'involuntary' memory, experienced bodily via sensations or intensity from the past, yet to be shaped into a particular meaning. It is only after an active search, the process of drawing the past into the present, the 'voluntary' memory that he forms the

images of his elderly aunt on a Sunday morning dipping a Madeleine cake in tea. Interestingly Proust's affective experience, created by the taste, but calling on an association from elsewhere as yet unarticulated, carried a far greater intensity than that of the images he eventually draws from the past, of those Sunday morning many years ago.

## Photographic Memory

*Photographic Memory* is Ross McElwee's sixth documentary since *Sherman's March* (1986), which made him a festival circuit favorite and popularised the personal diary-style documentary. In the 25 intervening years, McElwee has maintained a quiet but unique voice, with the *Cineaste* journal describing him as a "central figure among America's 'second generation' of cinéma vérité filmmakers" (Lucia 1993: 23). In *Photographic Memory*, McElwee uses his increasingly troubled relationship with his teenage son Adrian as a pretext for delving into his own young adult memories and a key summer in France when he worked as a photographers assistant. McElwee travels back to Brittany, physically and via his many old photographs, to the town of St Quay Portrieux to track down Maurice, the local wedding photographer he worked for, and Maud, the young woman with whom he had his first significant romantic affair. McElwee's journey becomes a filmic enactment of Aristotle's *anamnesis*, the active search for a recollection.

McElwee's particular trademark 'point of view' camera technique (he is always behind the camera, the people he meets interact with the camera, as much as with McElwee), creates something of an inter-subjective virtual memory space by taking the viewer almost bodily into the recollection and along the twisting winding roads of Brittany that he and Maurice used to travel between wedding jobs and that McElwee now travels in search of his past. We experience, with him, the fragmentary twisting and unwinding of the memories, often clouded by the uncanny sense that a place 38 years on is the same yet not.

Although always intensely personal, McElwee's films often also capture the social or political zeitgeist of the day, in this case, the seismological cultural and generational gap created by the digital revolution. McElwee places himself in the analogue age and his son Adrian in what Steven Shaviro (2010: 1) might term the 'post-cinematic' age, entirely immersed in and contributing to the digitally created new media world. This film is McElwee's first use of a digital video camera with a memory card, which he views with ironic suspicion. "I mean what if the camera's memory fails, its bad enough that I can barely trust the memory of the cameraman". McElwee's old photographs of that year in France seem to represent a truth or evidence of the real, whilst digital is somehow not to be trusted. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear

that the truth, or more specifically the factual evidence of the analogue photographs is far less certain - not only has the photograph shaped McElwee's memory, but it seems that the memory has shaped McElwee's perception of the photographs, both are ultimately subjective.

As we travel these winding roads, McElwee's narration recalls that Maurice talked of philosophy, music, art, politics and life, and was something of a mentor to the then young McElwee. The older McElwee eventually stumbles into the café where he had his fateful first meeting with Maurice. The café is disturbingly the same, but different. The context of his first meeting with Maurice was by chance captured in a photograph that McElwee took in this café. It shows light falling across empty tables with the view to the sea. Maurice was in the café at that moment, and on seeing the young man with the camera asked McElwee if he would come and work with him. Although the meeting with Maurice happened outside the frame, as it was, of the photograph, the photograph is 'a certificate of presence' in Bartheian terms (after Shaviro 2007: 76), and the presence of the young McElwee is evidenced not by his image in front of the camera, but because he is behind the camera, he and the camera were there on that day in St Clay. For the viewer, through this image we almost see McElwee's recollection. Then McElwee uses this photograph to illustrate his affective memory experience. In a very slow dissolve the old black and white photograph transforms into a contemporary image of the café with light falling on empty tables looking out to the sea. The image is similar but different, colour creeps in, the tables become booths, the view remains the same; it is still and timeless. McElwee's voiceover says "The place has somehow warped over time and for a moment I feel myself trapped in the warp – half expecting Maurice to tap me on the shoulder". The bewildering and uncanny experience is not unlike that articulated by Proust: McElwee experiences something of the memory affect as the past is layered on the present, an uncanny, disturbing sensation, felt but not clearly articulated (Image.1). A jogger then runs past the window breaking the spell and bringing us back to the present. McElwee uses the simple filmic device of a long slow dissolve to illustrate his sensation, and momentarily the audience is drawn into this memory time warp.



Image 1 - Café in St Quay, past and present (screenshots  
*Photographic Memory* © First Run Features)

Later in the film, McElwee's idealistic memory of Maurice is reshaped when he learns that Maurice was lazy, womanising and untrustworthy, and had a second life taking nude photos of women friends. He ultimately died early and alone, as lovers, friends and family deserted him. The film then returns to the photo of the empty café, but now it seems transformed. A chemical smudge, unimportant on first viewing takes on a ghostly presence as if Maurice, who we now know to be dead, haunts the image. McElwee calls our attention to two silhouetted figures reflected in the mirror in the corner of the image. The first time he showed us this photograph, the figures had been insignificant, but now, he asks "could one of them be Maurice?" Coming back to the photograph a second time, after the information has been revealed, is clever narrative crafting by McElwee and the viewer experiences the photo differently, like a recollection return to again and again – ever changed by the present circumstances. Memory, like McElwee's perception of the photograph, is not fixed, but rather changes over time and in relation to the context.

## The Tree Of Life

*The Tree of Life* is Malick's fifth feature film as director and won him the Palme d'Or in 2011. It is a complex film. There is little conventional plot, and no linear narrative structure as it slips between time frames and even other worlds. At the heart of the film is a story centering on the O'Brien family as their three boys grow up in a small Texas town. The story moves backwards and forwards in time from the birth of their first son Jack, played as a teenager by Hunter McCracken in the 1950's, the death of the middle son R.L. (Laramie Eppler) in the 1960's, through to a time close to the present, in a glass and steel city where grown Jack (Sean Penn) is now a middle-aged architect. The O'Brien family's experiences are placed in context against an operatic sequence covering 13.77 billion years from the origins of the universe and beginnings of life on earth through to the dinosaurs. Rather than indicating the insignificance of the O'Brien family within the scale of the universe, Malick's focus on the detail within the family's story, be it the sense of a breeze on a hand or a childhood prank, places the smallest experience of life on the same level as the grandest. Malick uses the power of cinema, "its uncanny ability to collapse both time and space" (Moscato 2012: 35) to not only collapse the origins of the universe into a 20 minute sequence, but also the O'Brien's 50-year story into the remaining one and a half hours of the film. However, I would suggest that even this time scale is a manipulation through the power of cinema, and that in fact the diegetic time period within the film is perhaps only 10 minutes. Starting where present day/grown Jack has an intense Proustian affective memory experience or as Rob White less favorably puts it 'a midlife breakdown' (2011: 4), and then leads to a series of recollections, before ending back with present day Jack having had an emotional epiphany. To suggest that most of the film is something like a flashback from grown Jack's point of view would oversimplify the structure. However, the underlying framework of grown Jack's crisis moment reinforces the idea that the film is a memory experience rather than a period piece attempting an authentic recreation of ordinary family life in small town Texas circa 1958. Significantly there is a power in the very strong connection this film makes with viewers and their memories of childhood. Ken Jones (2011) writes that "one recalls instances that feel like they've been seized from one's own memory". Malick has used the full scope of cinematic devices to create an affective memory experience that seems to both create and draw on the viewer's own memories.

On first viewing of *The Tree Of Life* there appears to be no dominant point of view or time frame. There is no established present (we do not start with grown Jack's crisis moment then "flashback"), in fact it seems that Malick is deliberately blurring the temporal



relationships of sequences, allowing for a fluidity that sometimes merges timeframes and even overtly allows for a slippage that reflects the unstable nature of memory. The first shift in time from the 1950s to the 1960s is disturbingly fluid. In the opening few minutes of the film there is a montage of family life at the 1950s bungalow. The camera is constantly moving. Like McElwee, Malick uses a highly subjective camera, always as if from a point of view. Unlike McElwee, the point of view is constantly changing and moves with the boys, Mother (Jessica Chastain) and Father (Brad Pitt), in and around the modest bungalow, allowing for seamless edits even though the situations are constantly changing. The sequences flow on to a moving shot along a stone-paving path, revealing Mother at the door accepting a telegram, as she moves away from the door it becomes apparent that she is in a much bigger, grander, empty, 1960's house. Time has shifted. In hindsight (or perhaps on second viewing of the film) it is clear that this is seven or eight years on. The telegram is notification of the middle brother's death, but Malick does not make this information overt - as Mother breaks down in grief it is clear that something terrible has happened. For the viewer the sequence is disorienting in its flow from happy childhood to sudden and unexplained tragedy some years into the future. This sequence happens only four minutes into the film, and Malick thus undermines any sense of narrative coherence from the beginning. In its place we must settle into a more fluid experiential, non-chronological order.

Later, and without narrative explanation, the images move from the 1960's to the present, it become indirectly apparent that the man we are watching is the eldest son Jack now grown up. Malick's disregard for a linear chronological scheme in the film perhaps reflects Bergson's thoughts on memory in relation to perception. Memory, according to Bergson, requires the affective interval, opened on one side as perception and closed on the other as action "as a dislocation in time. In the direct images of time, the interval no longer functions as continuity in space, but as a series of dislocations in time. These dislocations are nonlinear and non-chronological" (Rodowick 1997: 88). As McElwee experienced an intangible intensity when the past is overlaid on the present via his photograph of the café, in this crisis moment, the character of Jack experiences a similar, if more overwhelming Memory Affect, as a rush of memory sensation comes crashing in on his present. As the film builds towards this moment, the temporal strands are so entangled there is a sense of all happening at once.

As Proust's memory experience is triggered by taste, Malick uses the memory of touch throughout the film and as one of the triggers for grown Jack crisis moment. One of the first images in the film is a young girl (possibly Mother as a child) crouching in a field, her hand extended outwards, just feeling the breeze. It is

an unusual image and is held for some time. Just beyond the girl's hand a long stalk of grass is being buffeted by the wind and we are sensitised to this subtle but tactile experience. Images of Mother holding her hand out in the breeze or feeling the wind on her face are repeated through out the film, keeping the same tactile intensity in focus. The camera often captures her hands, almost disembodied, caressing a sons face, or lifting them from the ground (image. 2). In one of the first images that we see of grown Jack, he turns his hand under a stream of water from a tap, an action very similar to Mother's hand feeling the breeze. When he does this he seems lost in a thought, perhaps some unarticulated sense of his mother is being experienced. The glass and steel city he moves through as a grown man is hard-edged, and it is the moments of tactility that move us back into the memories, such as his hand running over the long grasses being planted in the city planter boxes.



Image 2 - The memory of touch. (screenshot *The Tree of Life* © Twentieth Century Fox)

From these triggers the film builds an intensity of moving between fragments of grown Jack in the city carrying out his job, but clearly distracted by his thoughts, which stray between images of childhood joy and family life and images of grown Jack as a lost soul wandering the surreal landscape. As discussed above, the constantly moving camera allows for seamless edits between these very disparate locations and images: R.L. and young Jack playing in a stream, moves to grown Jack discussing complex blueprints, to city workers rushing by under glass and steel atriums, to Jack in a skyscraper boardroom, to Mother and R.L. playing on the front lawn, to Jack walking through the surreal desert landscape, to Jack walking the city streets. There is no specific here and now. As grown Jack experiences an extended Memory Affect, Malick builds an intensive affective experience for the audience. Having sensitised us to touch he also uses the soundscape to reinforce the melding together of images, locations and temporal strands, creating an intensity of fluid dislocation in this crisis moment. The 'present' Jack in the city is not grounded with realist sound, rather the sounds of the city around him are contrived, at times muted such as the other voices in the boardroom or heightened such as harsh footsteps on the concrete walkways or the mechanical sound of lifts. Underlying this whole sequence, unrelated to any

of the images initially, another sound starts, it is a low rumble that builds in intensity and eventually resolves as waves rolling in on a surreal landscape.

The constant and seamless sensory movement between temporal zones, images and sound comes to a halt as Jack, seemingly overwhelmed, stops walking. It is hard to tell if the moment of crisis is over or just beginning, but certainly metaphorically, the interval of affect and intensity, also experienced by the viewer, has closed.

Where Jack seems to have been tormented by a series of almost involuntary memory sensations, the film starts to move into a more stable 'voluntary' memory. Through a series of now hard, disjointed jump-cuts, the sequence ends with the scene where grown Jack appears in his own memory, in the 1960s, as witness to his mother in her grief, but unable to offer comfort. His voice over asks "How did she bear it?" The film then plays out over 120 minutes largely in the 1950s as Jack recalls moments from the past in order to make sense of his present. After a surprisingly moving existential and spiritual climax in the surreal landscape in which Jack's questions on life seem to be resolved, the film returns to Jack in the city, at almost the same spot as we left him in his moment of crisis, but with perhaps the hint of a smile on his face as the film moves to the closing images.

## Conclusion

Memory, like cinema is inherently affective. Memories can be understood and expressed not just in terms of images reconstituted, events recounted, or even time frames shifted, but as intensities or resonances. In *Photographic Memory* McElwee calls attention to various moments that I have labeled as Memory Affect, when the past is layered on the present, either through the active search to recall, or via an involuntary or non-conscious trigger creating a disturbing sensation he finds difficult to articulate and we, through the medium of cinema, can to a degree also experience. In *The Tree Of Life* I have discussed a specific Memory Affect sequence that occurs to the character of Jack. However, this film is, as a whole, an affective memory experience that taps into and also then shapes our own memories of childhood. Malick creates a shared memory experience with the audience not simply through familiar period details or childhood images but also through non-conscious resonances of Memory Affect.

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## Filmography

*Photographic Memory* (2011) Directed by Ross McElwee  
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*Sherman's March* Ross (1989) Directed by Ross McElwee  
USA

*The Tree of Life* (2011) Directed by Terrence Malick USA:  
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