

Cinema, or an Art of  
Urban Memory in an  
Age of Forgetting<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In this essay, I would like to explore the articulation of cinema, memory, and the city, or, to put it slightly differently, to consider how the cinematic art simultaneously represents and fosters possibilities for specifically urban forms of collective remembrance. Though only employed here for illustrative purposes, three films compose the backdrop of my argument: Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Éloge de l'amour* (*In Praise of Love*), and Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*.<sup>2</sup> The first is set in Hiroshima a decade or so after the 1945 dropping of an atomic bomb on the city; the second, in present-day Paris (and Bretagne) haunted by the ghosts of the Second World War and of May 1968; the third, in contemporary Toronto while referring back to the 1915 Armenian genocide. Each film stands on its own and deals with distinctive events and sets of circumstances, and more than forty years separate the first from the two others, yet they can be taken together as emblematic of an important cinematic current whose representations of mass catastrophe put into play issues of collective remembrance and amnesia in cities. They warrant our attention because of their dwelling in, rather than providing a neat resolution of, the characteristically urban mnemonic problems that they raise. Beyond the basic appeal to remember — the imperative not to forget that is integral to the duty of memory — the films provoke a series of troubling questions: what and who has been or should be remembered (and conversely, forgotten) in given urban settings?; among the inhabitants of a city scarred by disaster, who remembers and forgets, and why?; where do we remember in cities, and how should we do so? Such queries are inescapable at the dawn of a century still living in the shadows of the one that preceded it, which was punctured by numerous instances of atrocity whose historical traces are rapidly fading away in an age that has spawned a full-blown mnemonic crisis.

Unfolding in cities with distinctive histories and mnemonic characteristics, the three films have the additional merit of underscoring the idea that collective memory is grounded in and enabled by specific places instead of being a free-floating abstraction. The socio-historical texture of a city (its architectural, mythical, and ethno-cultural particularities as well as the set of social relations flowing from there) is essential to the cinematic recollection of the past and,

at the same time, film can metamorphose this same city into a dense site of memory, a mnemonic palimpsest onto which social groups and institutions have inscribed various narratives. Cinema, then, is an art of urban memory — not in the sense of being an audio-visual technique of reproduction of the past of cities, but to the extent that it can exist as a craft working through the urban perils of forgetting and possibilities of remembrance. Film is perpetually poised between these two poles, and in fact constituted by them. To realize this is to be open to cinema's potential.

In the following pages, I would like to discuss three facets of the *problématique* formed by cinema, memory, and the city. I will begin by setting the general cultural framework that informs my argument, namely that we live in a technologically infused epoch shaped by the tension between societal amnesia and memory. This will be followed by an examination of how film is inserted into and contributes to this tension, and then, in a third section, by a claim about the expressly urban character of the various kinds of cinematically nurtured collective memory. The essay will conclude with a consideration of the cinematic audience's vital role in realizing the "work of memory" (Ricoeur 2000) staged in cities.

### **The Entwining of Forgetting and Remembrance**

Before assessing cinema's role as an urban mnemonic art, we need to consider its broader socio-cultural context born out of the dialectic between collective amnesia and memory that shapes and refracts the present's relationship to the past.<sup>3</sup> At one level, Euro-American societies appear to be in the grips of an unprecedented mnemonic crisis that is being fuelled by the systematic undermining of conventional sources of historical mediation and the perception of an ever-expanding chasm between the here and now and the receding horizons of what preceded it. An alarming number of eyewitnesses with first-hand experience of the major events of the last century have disappeared and continue to do so, either because of their premeditated mass murder (e.g., war, genocide, ethnic cleansing) or the gradual passing away of previous generations. The breaking, or at least the loosening, of experiential bonds to the past makes citizens feel increasingly alienated from it. In some cases, documentary evidence of events may have been lost or destroyed because of neglect or deliberate action, or yet again denied and distorted by "assassins of memory" (Vidal-Naquet 1992) who set out to rewrite the historical record for politico-ideological motives (the case of Holocaust denial being the most infamous). Whether they be entire regions, cities, neighbourhoods, streets, buildings, or monuments, former sites of collective memory are rapidly and aggressively being razed or redesigned in the name of war, technocratic planning or profit-driven redevelopment that strips them of their commem-

orative powers. As a result, the mnemonic fabric of many cities around the world is now under siege.<sup>4</sup>

Collective amnesia also results from what can be, in principle, a well-intentioned effort on the part of a population to “put the past behind and move on” in the name of civic reconciliation and forgiveness in the aftermath of a particularly traumatic or violent chapter of its history (civil war, genocide, military dictatorship, etc.). In such instances, the constant revisiting and replaying of particular narratives about the past is unproductive because it can generate inexhaustible acrimony and conflict between groups while neglecting the crucial tasks of societal reconciliation and rebuilding needed for citizens to live together in the here and now. Nevertheless, the will to forget can equally become pathological unless accompanied by a proper reckoning with the past and addressing of historical injustices — including the treatment of victimized groups, the dismantling of the socio-political and ideological foundations of a regime, the punishment of those responsible, and the development of adequate rituals and sites of commemoration.<sup>5</sup>

The current culture of forgetting is spawned in part by the technological obliteration of mnemonic depth and the self-referential presentism of the information age, out of which emerges the “tyranny of real time” (Virilio 1997, 18-19) referring only to itself and refusing anything outside of its dramatically shrinking horizons. The present becomes an autopoietic chronological system, an all-encompassing whole composed of accelerating and multiplying communication flows that leave little room for what came before (or what may follow). Speed is the ultimate virtue, for the instantaneous and the immediate are prized above all else. To an extent that McLuhan could only begin to fathom, the medium is indeed the message: the “now” and “live” are considered indispensable informational requirements, as well as qualities in and of themselves, regardless of the contents of what is being communicated. That which existed a moment ago, let alone in the “remote” past, is condemned from the very moment of its birth to the status of an irrelevant anachronism to be deleted at once and substituted by a novel onrush of raw data.

The supremacy of the spatial dimension of existence over its temporal counterpart is visible in the manner in which the global integration and spread of information flows overtake any effort to locate them into medium- or long-range perspectives that would provide them with contextual meaning. What is produced, instead, is a sense of cognitive disorientation (Jameson 1991, 44) — and I would add, mnemonic disorientation — best captured by the practice of “channel surfing,” whereby the televisual spectator generates a senseless and undifferentiated blur of fleeting images, sound-bites, and headline “ticker” text about events occurring in the four corners of the globe. Time shatters and historical markers dissolve to produce the

illusion of an eternal now. Quite apart from weakening the audience's critical judgement, that is, the ability to put into question and reflect upon the information being broadcast, the cult of the immediate imperils the exercise of mnemonic faculties. According to this argument, contemporary manifestations of collective memory are more akin to a database whose contents are instantly being deleted and replaced than to an archive where the past is carefully classified, stored, and accumulated. Those of us living at the beginning of this new millennium are already "in search of the lost century," as Godard puts it with a wink to Proust.<sup>6</sup> With the death of history, we are witnessing that of the will and capacity to remember.

However seductive such apocalyptic scenarios may be, they remain trapped in a one-dimensionality that blinds them to the reconstruction of collective memory today. As much as societal amnesia is prevalent, there is, conversely, a widespread awareness and dread of it; the ubiquitous "lest we forget," which has risen to the status of a moral imperative, is indicative of this trend toward the development of a duty of memory. We can see this in the growing number of civil society actors from various parts of the world (ethno-racial groups, social movements, non-governmental organizations, etc.) involved in the creation and preservation of collective memory. Indeed, the past few decades have been marked by what could be designated as a vast mnemonic mobilization leading to an explosion of demands placed upon states and international organizations to recognize past acts of mass violence and injustice, to address such acts politically and juridically, as well as to properly commemorate them. There is an earnest public hunger for the work of memory, the plunging back into history to know and understand it via widely circulated documents and accounts of the past, such as books, documentary and fictional films, television series. Included in this mobilization is the proliferation of memorial sites in most societies, where museums and civic monuments honouring the past are sprouting up, as well as a heightened popular awareness of the importance of preserving historically significant elements of cities' built environments. Likewise, we have seen an institutionalization and spread of an array of commemorative rituals, such as remembrance days, trials, truth and reconciliation commissions, and official state discourses acknowledging and apologizing for past wrongdoings. Taken together, these developments reactivate collective memory, plucking events and situations out of the murky depths of time to project them into the present.

Even if we restrict ourselves to the technological dimensions of the question, it is clear that focusing solely on collective amnesia is excessively one-sided; there is no Heideggerian essence of technology that wages war against authenticity and remembrance. The interface of collective memory and technology — how the latter simultaneously bolsters and hinders the former,

and to what degrees — is given form by institutional relations and socio-political struggles. For example, the relative popularization and decentralization of means of audio-visual recording and broadcasting (e.g., personal video camera and the internet) greatly facilitate the conservation and public diffusion of historical materials. We simply cannot overlook or dismiss the communicative and pedagogical significance of new mnemonic technologies. It should be added that the recent explosion of transnational “mediascapes” and “ethnoscapes” (Appadurai 1996) deterritorializes collective memory, emancipating it from its former place-bound condition: audiences can access eyewitness testimonies in different parts of the world, and sites of memory can be figuratively or literally transposed elsewhere. Accordingly, diasporic communities, transnational social movements, and a number of other groups are able to commemorate the past wherever they may find themselves, even at a considerable distance from where it originally occurred (Levy and Sznajder 2002). Far from always already being a source of mnemonic erosion, global communication flows can in many instances nurture collective memory.

### The Cinematic Memory

Having discussed the tension between forgetting and remembrance that characterizes our current epoch, I would now like to turn to the place of cinema within it. To reiterate, my contention is that this mnemonic dialectic not only extends to film, but is constitutive of and made visible through film. Cinema’s defining paradox, which is also the source of its socio-cultural significance, is found in the fact that this most evocative of artistic means of representing reality possesses a certain power of life and death over the latter, and thus, over collective memory itself. The import of this realization struck the inventors of film, and is reflected in a passage found towards the end of Godard’s magisterial *Histoire(s) du cinéma*:

when a century slowly dissolves into the next  
a few individuals transform the old means of survival into new means  
these are what we call art  
the only thing that survives an era is the form of art it has created for itself  
no activity can become an art until its era has ended  
later this art will disappear  
it is thus that the art of the 19th century, cinema, made the 20th century exist  
a century that, on its own, barely existed. (Godard 1998, 290-293)<sup>7</sup>

The pathos-filled character of this statement, with its Hegelian and Benjaminian resonances,<sup>8</sup> illustrates my point. Cinema and the twentieth century are

inextricably bound to one another: though a technical child of the nineteenth, film could not have existed without the subsequent hundred years that form the socio-historical setting nursing it to maturity. More to the point for Godard, the twentieth century may not have existed without cinema, the art form that, more than any other, gave it audio-visual life. At one level, this can be taken to mean that cinematic representation is a *sine qua non* for the formation, preservation, and transmission of collective memory about the past century. But in a stronger sense, Godard brings us to contemplate a possibility that is both much more radical and disconcerting in its implications. What if, instead of merely amplifying or obscuring memory, cinema becomes identical with it? What if, at the highest stage of the “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1992), no memory exists outside of its cinematic representation? If film is humankind’s most powerful mnemonic resource, if it becomes “all the world’s memory”<sup>9</sup> in that what is left outside of its corpus will be forgotten, then what versions of the twentieth century do we actually remember?

Such queries are needlessly hyperbolic at face value, though they do have the merit of drawing attention to the pivotal role of film within contemporary societies’ and social groups’ modes of remembrance and interpretation of the past.<sup>10</sup> Cumulatively, cinema has become a *de facto* historical record surpassing rival mnemonic devices today. In fact, and this is how Godard’s statement can most fruitfully be taken, our understandings of the past, present, and future have invariably become cinematically mediated. This is particularly the case for events and places about which we have little or no first-hand experience, as well as for instances of the uncanny and the extreme that break with everyday life; one could even speak of the essentially cinematic quality of contemporary social existence.<sup>11</sup> For many members of the younger generation, what they know and remember about the defining moments of the twentieth century is difficult to distinguish from the cinematic lens through which they encountered them. More to the point, cinema frames how we imagine the past, and influences what we collectively remember and forget about it. From a reverse angle, and aside from their qualities as signifiers of the past, films now serve as their own mnemonic referents woven into the social fabric. By recalling cinematically experienced situations and ways of thinking and acting that disrupt our habitualized lifeworlds, we can make sense of them. Put succinctly, cinema is now a socio-cultural framing and interpretive device of the first order. Life imitates the seventh art, and is only now catching up — sometimes with catastrophic effects. “It was just like a movie”: the most common comment on the part of stunned eyewitnesses immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. No doubt, this was a phrase that came to mind and loomed equally large for countless television spectators.

Cinema's contemporary mnemonic prominence can partly be explained by the fact that the seventh art, the most technological of artistic forms of expression, is able to conjure up the past through an unparalleled combination of the moving image and of sound freed from the limitations of live performance. Aside from representing reality, films can rival it by creating parallel worlds where the chronological divide between periods temporarily collapses; the then and there, or how we remember it cinematically, bursts forward into the here and now. Nevertheless, cinema's representational clout is only one component of its influence upon collective memory. The other aspect of the question pertains to film's widespread reception, given that it remains the most widely diffused and popular of art forms. Film-going must therefore be taken seriously as a collective ritual that implicates audiences in the process of remembrance. For social groups whose communal past is reconstructed and represented in a particular film, attending a screening of it stands as a "commemorative ceremony" (Connerton 1989), a rite of passage through which the transmission of a shared mnemonic framework enables individuals to gain admission and derive a sense of belonging (along ethno-racial, religious, gender, sexual, class, political, or aesthetic lines). Group membership is cinematically negotiated, to the extent that film-going assists individuals in learning not only about their collective pasts, but more fundamentally, about how to remember and understand such pasts. Distribution and screening of a film dealing with a specific social group's history can facilitate public recognition of this group's distinctiveness, and hence allow it to constitute itself more cohesively vis-à-vis other groups possessing different collective memories. And because collective memory is shifting and heterogeneous even within a group, films can provoke discussion and debate among its members about remembrance and portrayal of the past: for instance, whether the narrative form (triumphalist, tragic, ambiguous, etc.) is appropriate, or whether and how a limit-experience (notably mass and extreme violence, cruelty, or suffering perpetrated by or against the said group) should be recreated. No less than literature, painting, music, and theatre, cinema is an ingredient in a group's heritage and identity.

The general public also participates in cinematically induced mnemonic rituals, for film-going can introduce audiences to hitherto unknown or differently reconstructed versions of history. Cinema can modify a society's self-understandings in this way, by incorporating divergent viewpoints or new perspectives into its collective narratives. At the same time, as mentioned above, awareness of a group's past, and of how it remembers the past, is vital to the process of public recognition of its existence and distinctive identity. Hence, in its function as a representational and interpretive device, as well as its creative powers to reconstruct a forgotten historical episode,

film is a strategic intervention into the politics of collective memory. Its making, screening, and viewing contribute to mnemonic struggles within the public sphere, that is to say, the continuous processes of contestation over remembrance (who, what, how, by whom, etc.).

None of this is to argue that the cinematic representation of history is merely a reproduction of it, a perfect restitution or exact replica of an already constituted past that awaits mnemonic retrieval. Quite the opposite: cinematically induced collective memory necessarily involves a social reconstruction — and hence a transformation — of the past. This is so because collective memory is not what “actually” happened in the then and there, but rather an attempt to partially bridge the gap between past and present in light of the former’s legacy and the latter’s preoccupations. In other words, the moment of experience and that of remembrance are neither identical nor completely disassociated. This inevitable process of mnemonic modification of the past is additionally explained by specific properties of cinema itself, even if we maintain the conventional distinction between its documentary and fictional forms for heuristic purposes.<sup>12</sup> In the realist tradition, where documentary film is understood as an animated archive, three processes implicitly altering the portrayal of reality mould the live recording or subsequent reconstruction of events: the initial selection of the subject-matter, the audio-visual and narrative framing of it, and the editing of the raw footage into a completed work. For the fictional film, the metaphor of the dream-factory highlights what is a much more explicit metamorphosis of the past. The creator can use history as source material sparking his or her imagination in the direction of the pursuit of illusion or the transcendence of an existing reality. Hence the strong appeal of the surreal and the fantastic throughout cinema’s history, as filmmakers have consistently been drawn to the possibility of revolting against the realist rules of representation to invent a new audio-visual language that would allot the symbolic and the imaginary their rightful artistic place. Or yet again, cinematic fiction recreates a past that had disappeared because no audio-visual record of it was or could be made at the moment of its unfolding. Whether through realist or fictional means — and as I have already indicated, the line of demarcation is not always clear-cut — cinema can amplify, even transfigure, the past. The images projected onto the screen may appear, in some instances, to be more real than history itself. Beyond the obvious fact that audiences encounter the presence of these images in the here and now, first-hand experience or recollection of a situation in the then and there may not measure up to its cinematic recreation; the former may not be as vivid, dramatic, intense, or sweeping as the latter. Through film, the representational may well trump the experiential.<sup>13</sup>

The three films under consideration here underscore the fact that collective memory is a social reconstruction (and thus, a reinterpretation) of the past. They lay bare the work of memory that lies at their core and without which they could not exist by sustaining a reflexive exposure of the mechanisms through which history must be restaged in order to nourish collective memory today. And instead of being treated as an instance of mnemonic failure that must shamefully fall back upon artificial devices to recreate the past, this restaging is considered a necessary condition for remembrance in an age where history is always already mediated by contemporary interpretive frameworks. Posing the question in terms of an opposition between the authenticity of presence in the then and there and the artifice of its cinematic representation in the here and now is highly misleading, since it suggests that subsuming the latter to the former can produce an ideal collective memory (namely, one that never forgets anything). If one follows this line of thinking, film should invoke the illusion of being present at the original unfolding of an event, or try to perfectly reconstitute the original moment in order for the event to appear exactly as it did in the past. Yet by masking the representational labour involved in cinema, such approaches effectively deny the chronological, spatial, and experiential gaps that distinguish remembrance from history — the stuff of the cinematic work of memory that occurs at the border between authenticity and artifice, as well as that between forgetting and remembrance.

By operating on two levels at once, the structure of the three films makes this borderline explicit: they stand as first-order meditations about how a catastrophic past weighs upon the present, yet also as second-order dramas concerning the creation of artistic representations of memories of this same past. Stated differently, all three films are performances about the creation of other performances, restagings of stagings of the past. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, this takes the form of Resnais' aborted documentary about the dropping of the atomic bomb on the city (incorporated into the film's early sequences) and the making of a fictional movie about peace in which the Frenchwoman holds a role; *Éloge de l'amour*'s subject-matter is the conception of an opera about Simone Weil, while also referring to the plans by a large American studio to produce a film about a French woman involved in the wartime Resistance who was captured and sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp; and *Ararat* deals with the Armenian genocide,<sup>14</sup> but is foremost a movie about the making of a movie about the Armenian genocide. Moreover, the directors of these films deliberately portray the first-order representations as flawed performances: the films about peace set in Hiroshima and the Armenian genocide appear somewhat contrived and overly didactic in their depictions of horror and the messages they convey, while Godard suggests

that the American adaptation of the French Resistance fighter's memoirs will be exploitative in its crass sentimentalization of trauma. I would argue that for Duras and Resnais, Godard, and Egoyan, the emphasis upon these representational limits is a warning against a simplistic realism that would promulgate the idea that the work of art should aim to reconstitute the past completely and transparently. According to this logic, collective memory would only ever become alive and vivid once experiential, temporal, and spatial gaps between an event and its subsequent recollection were abolished. By contrast, the three films are premised upon the impossibility of adequately reproducing a limit-experience that exceeds, in all its violence, horror, and suffering, cinematic representation (Hiroshima during and after the explosion of the atomic bomb, the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide). They direct us to the mnemonic value of the allegorical, which strives not to depict the past in a totalizing fashion, but to allude to an intensity and extremity that can only be imagined. Remembrance is thus cultivated by what resists representation and remains off the screen, as much as by that which appears on it. In fact, the capacity to produce a realist cinematic image may provide an illusory sense of perfect restitution of the past and, consequently, of completion of the work of memory — a task that remains perpetually incomplete.

The three films' pursuit of a Brechtian alienation effect underscores their reflexive performativity, for they never allow audiences to forget that they are witnessing partial reconstructions and mediated restagings (as well as restagings of restagings) of the past, rather than first-hand history. Exposing the cinematic work of memory is the reason for the abrupt shifts and cuts, as well as entries and exits, between first- and second-order plots. The creation of a rift between the past and mnemonic mechanisms used to recreate it cinematically serves to combat the audience's identification with what it sees on the screen, dispelling the illusion of its being transported back in history. The three films' occasional overlapping of the two narrative levels, and the disjunctures and ambiguity that the audience experiences as a result, similarly produce reflexivity through this effect of estrangement. Are we watching an actual peace march in Hiroshima, or the making of a movie that features a fictional peace march in Hiroshima? How do the scenes of rehearsal of the script for an opera about Simone Weil fit into the plot about the wartime memories that form the background for this opera? To what extent is the Turkish-Canadian actor who plays Jevdet Bay (the Turkish Ottoman governor of Van partly responsible for the genocide) simply playing a role, and to what extent does he believe in his character's motives? Questions like these cannot but make the films appear as socio-cultural constructs that give shape to the past while wrestling with the ethical and political conditions under which collective memory can survive today. Cinematic memory is

therefore an intervention into the present that reflects the fraught bond linking what is here and what was there.

If cinema can augment or supplement collective memory, it can equally act as a source of societal amnesia. In the first instance, commodification undermines film's standing as a historical record, for the insertion of individual movies into commercial distribution and exhibition circuits converts them into throwaway objects of consumption competing with others for ever-shortened shelf-lives. To be clear, the problem is not commercialization *per se*, but rather the effects of a fickle marketplace that imposes a profit-driven logic of disposability onto films rapidly consumed and "spat out" — hardly the conditions to establish cinema as a repository of the past. Furthermore, the narrowing down of films to nothing more than forms of escapist distraction indirectly strengthens our age's self-referential presentism, the belief that little outside the bounds of the immediate is worth remembering. Lest this be misunderstood, I want to specify that my critique is not directed at cinema as a form of popular entertainment, but instead at the notion that this should be its sole function. The continuous expansion of the cinematic amusement industry does not leave much room for its other purposes, notably that of cultivating remembrance. At the very least, it must be acknowledged that the relationship between the marketplace and collective memory is tense and cannot be easily reconciled.

Even ostensibly historical films may undermine collective memory by seeking to tame the past's radical otherness. All too frequently, such films sentimentalize suffering or trivialize horror in order to remain "accessible" to as broad an audience as possible, resulting in light and thin simulations of history that give the misleading impression of knowing and feeling exactly what it was like to be in the then and there of catastrophe. Shoddier still is the cinematic instrumentalization of the past, which is mined in order to provide vicarious jolts of excitement to a public jaded by the ordinariness of their own day-to-day lives. Film is thereby transformed into a mnemonic circus seeking to trigger intense yet fleeting emotions without lasting involvement or consequences. The collective memories of victims and survivors of disaster are used to satiate a popular appetite for thrills, and then discarded as soon as the audience steps out of the movie theatre. This kind of mnemonic spectacularization is not far removed from societal amnesia; it is, in fact, a form of forgetting through cheapened cinematic remembrance.

Hence, as a representational technology and a mnemonic art, film simultaneously sheds light and shadow upon history. I have claimed that cinematic memory is fundamentally creative, transforming the past in the very act of searching to recapture and translate it into idioms that can be comprehended today. This process of (re)creation marks an oppositional

gesture that resists yet is produced by a contemporary culture of amnesia, whose threat stems less from erasing history than from its failing or refusing to ponder what sort of relationship between past and present should be established. Under these circumstances, cinema's turn to memory is a novel avant-garde stance: *contra* modernism, the task no longer consists of utterly breaking with and repudiating that which preceded the present moment, but to project fragments of the past into the here and now so as to etch them into collective memory. By insisting that we plunge back into the twentieth century to reflect upon our connection to it, films can become a medium through which we accomplish the work of memory.

### **The City as Cinema's Mnemonic Palimpsest**

So far, I have insisted upon the temporal facet of cinematic memory, the ways in which film participates in and is produced through the tension between collective remembrance and amnesia. What should not be overlooked, however, is the equally significant spatial dimension of the question at hand. Place matters, since collective memory is cinematically materialized in, as well as sustained and delimited by, specific locations. Conversely, film has the capacity to fundamentally alter our mnemonic perceptions of particular places, converting them into sites of memory and forgetting. The three works that concern us here (*Hiroshima mon amour*, *Éloge de l'amour*, and *Ararat*) are interesting in that they transform their respective cities — Hiroshima, Paris, and Toronto — into mnemonic palimpsests, spatio-temporal manuscripts that bear the traces of continual processes of inscription and erasure of different historical narratives. The city is thus, on the one hand, a densely and multiply layered stage upon which the cinematic art of memory can unfurl and, on the other, a frame whose architectural, historical, cultural, and socio-political attributes shape the mnemonic possibilities and limitations of cinema. That cinema advocates on behalf of the distinctly urban character of remembrance certainly deserves notice, if only because this position goes against the grain of the influential edifice of Western Romanticism. Indeed, according to the latter, nature is the uniquely authentic bosom of memory, whereas the city is feared and loathed as an artificial machine that produces forgetting (of culture, of history, and ultimately, of one's inner self). By contrast, the three films in question illustrate the rich mnemonic texture of urban life, where the built environment resonates with the ghosts of the past: the Hiroshima Peace Dome (the only major structure left standing in central Hiroshima after the explosion of the atomic bomb); the plaques and monuments dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust and Resistance fighters scattered around Paris, as well as an abandoned Renault factory (a strategic location during the upheavals of May 1968); the film studio, customs inspection

area, and movie theatre in Toronto (refuges for memories from elsewhere, a point to which I will return below).<sup>15</sup>

In order to discuss the specifically urban character of cinematic memory, I would like to propose and then investigate four mnemonic motifs that the three films under consideration mobilize: mourning, dislocation, contestation, and cosmopolitanism. Beginning with the first of these, I would argue that some forms of cinema amount to acts of mourning, requiems to the loss of the mnemonic opulence of certain cities. As depicted on screen, the destruction or decay of urban sites of memory becomes an allegory for the process of collective forgetting that overtakes us with the passage of time,<sup>16</sup> and that drags down with it generations (those who lived through the catastrophes of the First and Second World Wars), political ideals (those embodied in the May 1968 movements), and the cultural traditions of victimized populations (citizens of Hiroshima, Armenians, Jews). In *Ararat*, for instance, we hear a voice-over from one of the Armenian-Canadian characters as grainy digital images of the receding traces of the ancient Armenian city of Ani in present-day Turkey: “When I see these places, I realize how much we’ve lost. Not just the land and the lives, but the loss of any way to remember it. There is nothing here to prove that anything ever happened” (Egoyan 2002, 63). The ruins of a city are also the ruins of memory.

This fading of urban-based collective memory can be provoked by a sudden act of mass annihilation (the explosion of an atomic bomb, the carrying out of a massacre), but also by a seemingly more benign and normal process: the amalgamation of modernist urban planning and architecture with global capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century, which has succeeded in creating a series of mnemonic non-sites in cities around the world (Lefebvre 1970). *Hiroshima mon amour* takes place against the backdrop of a city that was hastily and generically reconstructed, where physical traces of the pre-bomb lifeworld and culture have been virtually wiped out; the past has been converted into a museum and souvenir shops for carefree tourists. During the nighttime sequences of *Éloge de l’amour*, the characters wander in a Paris that was preserved by Hitler but recently colonized by billboards and neon signs stripping the metropolis of its distinctiveness. And if Toronto’s built environment does not play a significant role in *Ararat*, one cannot help but wonder whether its enthusiastic embrace of modernism (and the resulting destruction of significant portions of its architectural heritage in the last few decades) contributes to emboldening Ali, the Turkish-Canadian character in the film, to declare to his Armenian-Canadian interlocutor: “It’s a new country. So let’s drop the fucking history, and get on with it” (Egoyan 2002, 55). Toronto as modernism incarnate: a mnemonic graveyard, where troubled pasts from distant shores come to claim their eternal rest.<sup>17</sup>

To the trope of mnemonic mourning must be added that of a dislocated collective urban memory, a contemporary predicament which each of the three films nicely captures. In effect, the question of how to live with the incomplete, partial character of remembrance of and in cities today is their actual subject, rather than given historical events or their recovery as such.

Besides, if we were able to fully reconstitute the past, if collective memory was an identical copy of history, then none of the three films would possess a *raison d'être*. But since memory and history are related to each other through complex processes of mediation, cinema reflects the experiential, chronological, and spatial gaps that are at the root of mnemonic fragmentation in cities. Regarding the first of these gaps, the three films portray their main characters as being alienated from the original situations of mass trauma hovering over them; they were absent during the Hiroshima atomic bomb explosion, the Holocaust, and the Armenian genocide, catastrophes whose extremity and intensity radically break from the ordinariness of their everyday lifeworlds. How can they, existing in the aftermath of disaster in Hiroshima, Paris, and Toronto do anything other than approximately come to grips with the suffering of those who experienced catastrophe first-hand? Secondly, the three films stress the implacable passage of time, which makes it increasingly difficult for later generations to understand the limit-experiences of those who came before them due to the widening gulf between past and present and the gradual disappearance of survivors of particular atrocities. Finally, of most relevance here is how the films draw attention to the spatial dislocation of urban collective memory. The previously mentioned decay and destruction of mnemonic sites underlie this condition, often inducing an uprooting and involuntary displacement of remembrance from the place where it originated to other venues. Because of the frequent disappearance of mnemonic markers at the initial locations of mass violence and trauma, protagonists in the films must enact rituals of remembrance elsewhere while being deprived of such locations' historical resonances. In addition, they seek to counteract their absence from the then and there of catastrophe through a variety of forms of social action: visits to the original mnemonic sites or public exhibits devoted to them, discussions with survivors of the atrocity or members of the oldest generation (which is responsible for transmitting collective memory), as well as the documenting and viewing of audio-visual records of what remains of these locations and events.

The three films' peculiar narrative and audio-visual structuring exhibit and are framed by urban mnemonic dislocation. I would argue that they should not be understood as conventionally complete or interpretively closed works, for they are composed of splinters jutting out in numerous directions, whose meanings remain ambiguous and impossible to resolve

with certainty. Did the French woman return to Paris to resume her life there, or did she stay in Hiroshima with her Japanese lover? Was the opera based on Simone Weil's life ever finished? What happened to the film-within-a-film about the Armenian genocide after its premiere? Duras and Resnais, Godard, and Egoyan eschew chronologically linear plots in favour of temporal juxtapositions, flashbacks, and sudden leaps back and forth in time that, cumulatively, make epochs mesh and collide with each other.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, they represent Hiroshima, Paris, and Toronto as a disorienting series of separate, pluralistic, and ultimately disjunctive mnemonic fragments (central and suburban quarters, industrial and entertainment areas, etc.), instead of - - as the cinema has frequently treated the urban — mnemonically harmonious or organically integrated wholes.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the cities only contain or reveal remnants of the past whose missing portions are found somewhere else: Nevers in *Hiroshima mon amour*, Bretagne in *Éloge de l'amour*, Van, Ani, and Aghtamar in *Ararat*. And because of the effects of the experiential, chronological, and spatial gaps I have already mentioned, the protagonists of each of these films are flawed witnesses unable to remember disaster exactly as it happened. Without first-hand experience, they must, like the rest of us, labour to pick up the fragments of memory and piece them together in order to confront catastrophe.

The two motifs of cinematically induced urban collective memory that I have analyzed up to this point, mourning and dislocation, inhabit a tragic sensibility. However, film supplies a more affirmative strand of thinking about the tension between remembrance and forgetting, built around the principles of mnemonic contestation and cosmopolitanism. Let us consider each in turn. Our three movies depict the city as a contested site of memory where various actors struggle over what and who is remembered (or forgotten), how and why to do so, and by whom. Given that no consensus exists over these matters, collective memories taking shape in the urban social world cannot be unified or singular. On the contrary, they are formed of a multiplicity of differently institutionalized ways of thinking and acting, locations and rituals that are themselves continuously open to questioning from citizens. Accordingly, these urban actors erect commemorative buildings and monuments (museums, plaques, public art and squares, etc.), organize and participate in public protests and memorial ceremonies, and produce discourses appealing to remembrance — all of them etched into the heterogeneous mnemonic fabric of cities. Over time, social groups reinterpret the prominence and meaning of these mnemonic manifestations differently, thereby challenging and transforming the city's historical self-identity. For example, Duras and Resnais imply that the atomic bomb museum in Hiroshima is becoming a banal tourist destination; Godard suggests that the spirit of the causes and

participants in Paris's Second World War Resistance and May '68 movements, a spirit embodied in certain places, is all but forgotten today; and Egoyan points to the fact that locations now fully assimilated into the Turkish nation retain other histories for the Armenian diaspora.<sup>20</sup>

The selectivity of state-supported collective memory illustrates its contested character in cities, where few rituals or sites recall "undesirable" chapters in a people's or nation's history. The focus on Japanese victims in Hiroshima denies the suffering of the substantial number of Koreans there or the atrocities performed by the Japanese military in Asia during the Second World War. In a similar vein, emphasis upon the French Resistance and Holocaust victims deflects attention from mass collaboration with the Nazis during the Vichy regime. The Turkish state, for its part, refuses to recognize the Armenian genocide. In this context, the urban is an entry-point into the politics of memory at the national and transnational level, where action to challenge institutionalized forms of collective memory into question is directed toward states and civil societies. Social groups use the city as a staging-ground to put forth public claims for recognition, redress and commemoration of traumatic events, as well as for initiatives to prevent the reoccurrence of such events. One can think here of the peace marches in *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Éloge de l'amour*'s references to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and the demands for Turkish acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide that form *Ararat*'s political context. Collective actors whose experiences have been forgotten struggle to create urban counter-memories, the putting into the here and now of subaltern and marginalized pasts. Remembrance of this kind is a gesture of subversion: to revive other histories is to remember otherwise, to begin to rewrite the urban narrative. "*Sous les pavés, la plage*" ("under the paving stones, the beach"), one of May '68's most celebrated slogans, can perhaps be understood in this sense too: we must take the idea of the city as mnemonic palimpsest seriously, and dig under its surface to reveal other stories and lives. Its script is incessantly being written and rewritten, as layers of time and memories of its diverse inhabitants pile up and jostle against one another.<sup>21</sup>

The last trope that I want to explore in the three films under consideration is that of mnemonic cosmopolitanism, a form of urban remembrance that is open to and reaches toward pasts from various parts of the world. The intersection of cinema and the city is particularly rich in this respect, since it enables the deterritorialization of collective memory. Film is the ideal artistic medium for this process due to its unrivaled capacity to transpose itself across space; it makes the representation of a situation that occurred somewhere mobile and transferable, so that it can potentially be restaged and viewed anywhere else. To an extent that could not be contemplated before

its advent, the cinematic era facilitates the audio-visual evocation and diffusion of an event or situation beyond its local setting, a phenomenon that has reached a new peak with the emergence of a globalized “mediascape” (Appadurai 1996, 35-36) composed of transnationally circulating flows of images and information. And even before it was designated as global, the city has been a node in this vast web of people, goods and services, images and ideas in movement across territorial borders. It brings together these flows and recombines them in ways that can collapse the distinction between a here and elsewhere, subjective realities that come to co-exist in the same place.

The three films help us imagine some of the forces that foster urban mnemonic deterritorialization, such as immigrant and diasporic groups carrying memories from distant lands with them, communication media increasing our exposure to events in faraway places (which seem, for this reason, much less removed from our daily existences), and a burgeoning global civil society composed of transnationally minded actors (non-governmental organizations, social movements, etc.). In Duras and Resnais’ film, Parisians could remember and be all-too-aware of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, while the French woman’s trauma in Nevers could be relived in the Japanese city. *Éloge de l’amour*, for its part, places ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (as well as Western indifference toward it) as a disturbing subtext within Paris itself. But cosmopolitan memory reaches its fullest cinematic expression in *Ararat*, to reveal the film’s significance. Egoyan demonstrates how the other three kinds of collective memory mentioned here can be transformed or transposed in a global city: the death of remembrance in one place does not mean its obliteration, for it can be resurrected somewhere else; dislocated memory is not condemned to an involuntary itinerant status, since it can find urban shelters; and perhaps most innovatively, counter-memory can sometimes solely survive in distant metropolises. Elaborating upon this last point, I would contend that transnational politics based in global cities are, in many cases, the only means through which to critique official collective memory in distant places. For diasporic communities, such cities are anchoring-points for networks and flows stretching across continents, as well as adopted homes where they inscribe their histories by way of commemorative sites and ceremonies (places of worship, community centres, monuments, remembrance days, festivals, etc.). When developed like this, cosmopolitan collective memories can be “exported” back to the original place of catastrophe, perhaps even assisting in the revival of local communities or the contestation of exclusionary state-approved historical narratives. *Ararat* is a doubly coded product of these dynamics: its political and historical setting is the Turkish state’s

denial (and thus willful forgetting) of the Armenian genocide, at the same time as the film is itself an intervention on the part of the Armenian diaspora in its struggle for recognition of the genocide by the international community (and eventually, it is believed, by Turkey).

Egoyan's film, then, is the expression of a globalized collective memory progressively emancipating itself from the locations where it was originally conceived, even when these have been erased or left to decay. Social groups recreate this kind of mnemonic reality through diasporic artifacts whose physical presence addresses the silence that lies at their core (Gorky's painting, "The Artist and His Mother," and the grainy video of Armenian ruins in Turkey), simulacra of mnemonic sites (such as the studio where the first-order *Ararat* was shot, with its embellished reconstruction of the town of Van),<sup>22</sup> or virtual spaces where the past can be temporarily conjured up anew (e.g., the customs inspection area and the movie theatre where the first-order *Ararat* premiered). Given that time-space compression causes the proximate and the distant to overlap and blur, Toronto and other similarly global cities can serve as extensions of faraway locations where geographically remote politics, histories, and images are transposed. Cosmopolitan memory finds its proper dwelling place in such metropolises. The metaphor of the city as a mnemonic palimpsest becomes even more apt when taken in this context: beside being composed of different chronological narratives from its own past, the urban texture is enriched by the collective memories of those coming from elsewhere. Parchments of remembrance and forgetting clash and crosscut to form mnemonic tapestries incorporating multiple histories. To remember in a cosmopolitan manner is therefore to commit to memory the experiences of others in different places, in order to share the global city with people coming from the four corners of the world.

### **Conclusion: The Audience and the Cinematic Work of Memory**

Before coming to the end of this essay, we need to contemplate the pivotal role of the audience in the phenomena described so far. Indeed, despite the fact that films may contain appeals to engage in the cinematic work of memory, the latter is not a monological process. Instead, cinematically induced and urban-based collective remembrance can only be accomplished dialogically, for it is essentially an intersubjective social process whose effectiveness depends upon audiences' recognition of and response to certain films' demands to fulfil a duty of memory. The interpretive dimension of this process consists of filmgoers producing and reconstructing meaning in light of the narrative and chronological fragmentation found in the three films discussed here. In fact, by being plunged in and out of these films' first- and second-order historical dimensions (representations of the past and

representations of representations of the past, respectively), audiences are involved in mnemonic restaging while wrestling with the inherent limitations of their efforts. The films' formal "incompleteness" and ambiguity, as well as their agnosticism regarding the prospects of collective memory, mirror our current predicament: under what conditions, by whom, and for how long will Hiroshima, Ravensbrück, May '68, or the Armenian genocide be commemorated? Neither absolute remembrance nor forgetting are predetermined *dénouements*, since as the films imply, the extent and kind of collective memory to exist in the future will in large part be determined by audiences' participation in forms of socio-political action dedicated to commemoration, and by institutional responses to such demands. Turning the cinematic lens onto filmgoers themselves *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Éloge de l'amour*, and *Ararat* direct a similar question towards us: what are we doing, and what will we do, to contribute to the work of memory?

I would further claim that the three films place a singular demand upon us, namely that we acquire what Duras (1960, 32), in a beautifully evocative turn of phrase, called "an unconsolable memory"; not one that flawlessly restitutes a past moment in time, but one refusing to resign itself to the inevitability of forgetting. It mourns the passing of time and the disappearance of preceding generations, yet vows not to let the suffering of fellow human beings, as it is cinematically recorded or reenacted, sink into historical oblivion. One of cinema's enduring merits is to make this kind of collective memory both experientially possible and ethically necessary, given that it possesses an astonishing capacity to elicit a sense of solidarity between a film's audience and its characters. That strange and quintessentially urban ritual of sitting in a darkened room with strangers to watch aurally enhanced moving images flicker on a white screen contains a remarkable gift, that of immersing us into another epoch and to gain access to others' lives.<sup>23</sup> Cinema can be a revelatory experience that jars us out of the complacency and self-involvement of the day-to-day, that sears itself into our hearts and minds — to the point that we temporarily forget everything else, as Truffaut said of Resnais' *Night and Fog* — and that awakens our moral imagination. The cinematic portrayal of others' realities compels us to listen to and learn from them, to try to place ourselves in their shoes.<sup>24</sup> How could they suffer so, in Hiroshima, in Ravensbrück, in Van? And are we allowing ourselves to forget them through sheer indifference towards the past?

To acquire an unconsolable memory through cinematic means implies an intense suspicion of the society of the spectacle that, aside from fomenting societal amnesia, reduces audiences to mnemonic voyeurs titillated by the pain of others portrayed on screen or merely passive bystanders consuming it for entertainment's sake. Against spectatorship at history's unfolding,

cheap sentimentalism, and the blunting of empathy stands the work of memory implicating filmgoers in the creation and reproduction of collective memory. And against complete mnemonic spectacularization stands an admission of the limits of film, the fact that it can and should never become the sole source of a society's commemorative rituals and beliefs.<sup>25</sup> But this kind of active and combative remembrance requires something toward which I have been gesturing throughout these pages: mnemonic cosmopolitanism, a radical openness to and embrace of the historical experiences of others nearby and faraway. In turn, I would argue that cosmopolitan memory becomes much more feasible through metropolitan life, for those inhabiting global cities are better able to encounter multiple public representations and manifestations of pasts embodied and revived by the strangers who surround them. Because it engages in a "politics of just memory" (Ricoeur 2000, 1) that interrogates the mnemonic texture of the cinematic city, mnemonic cosmopolitanism is critical in spirit and substance. It cannot be content solely with what is commemorated through film, but must imagine and reflect upon all the movies that could have been made yet never were and never will be. It must, in other words, reach beyond what already exists in the cinema to labour to remember the cinematically forgotten, groups and peoples whose experiences have never appeared in front of a camera or on screen. A mnemonically cosmopolitan public struggles to acknowledge those whose histories have been languishing in the dustbins of history in order to incorporate the hitherto unrecognized suffering of distant others into humankind's collective memory.

Film, and film-going, should exist as arts of urban memory in this way, transfiguring the cities in which we dwell by bearing witness to the unrepresented, the misrepresented, and the unrepresentable — or they should not exist at all. Returning to Godard's quotation, one could say that if cinema is to continue to make the twentieth century exist, it will need to ensure that an unconsolable memory, a cosmopolitan memory, survives with it in our new millennium. Then, and only then, can the city begin to gesture towards its utopian role as an eternal repository of all the world's memory, a bottomless mnemonic palimpsest whose original script is never to be found.

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## Notes

- 1 The phrase “art of memory” is taken from Yates’s (1966) fascinating study.
- 2 *Hiroshima mon amour* (France/Japan, dir. Alain Resnais, 1959), see the screenplay by Marguerite Duras (1960); *In Praise of Love* (France, dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 2001), see Godard (2001); *Ararat* (Canada, dir. Atom Egoyan, 2002), see Egoyan (2002).
- 3 Halbwachs (1994 [1925]; 1997 [1950]) is the author of two pioneering studies in the field of collective memory. For more contemporary analyses, see, *inter alia*, Connerton (1989); Coq and Bacot (1999); Derrida (1996); Eyerman (2001); Feldman and Laub (1992); Hartman (1996); Huyssen (2000); Le Goff (1992); Nora (1984-92); Ricoeur (2000); Wiewiorka (1998); Yoneyama (1999); as well as the journal *History & Memory*.
- 4 For an example of how this is proceeding in Beijing today, see Watts (2003). Famous historical precedents include Baron Haussmann’s mid-19th century modernization of central Paris, and Robert Moses’ similar efforts in New York City a century later (Berman 1988; Harvey 1989).
- 5 In fact, I would contend that civil reconciliation is less a matter of forgetting the past than of reinterpreting it through the rendering of justice.
- 6 *L’origine du 21e siècle* (France, dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 2000).
- 7 The translation is my own.
- 8 “When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of the life grown old. By philosophy’s grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk” (Hegel 1952, 13). “One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form” (Benjamin 1992, 230).
- 9 The phrase is from the title of a documentary by Alain Resnais on the French National Library, *Toute la mémoire du monde* (France, dir. Alain Resnais, 1956).
- 10 As Egoyan (2002, viii) explains of *Ararat*: “Since no widely-released dramatic movie had ever presented the [Armenian] genocide, it was important that any film project would need to show what happened. We live in a popular culture that demands images before we allow ourselves to believe, and it would be unimaginable to deal with this history without presenting what the event looked like.”
- 11 Today, our visions of sublime horror and ecstasy derive less from religious or literary sources than from films. It could be argued, in a mildly flippant way, that *Independence Day* has taken the place of Dante’s *Inferno*.
- 12 This distinction has in many instances collapsed, with the advent of the fictional documentary, the “mockumentary,” virtual reality, reality television, and historical fiction.
- 13 In his well known discussion of the impact of mechanical reproduction more generally, Benjamin (1992, 244) makes a similar point: “Mass movements are usually discerned more

clearly by a camera than by the naked eye. A bird's-eye view best captures gatherings of hundreds of thousands. . . . This means that mass movements, including war, constitute a form of human behaviour which particularly favours mechanical equipment.”

- 14 In the synopsis of her script for *Hiroshima mon amour*, Duras (1960, 10) writes: “Impossible to speak of Hiroshima. The most that one can do is to speak of the impossibility of speaking of Hiroshima.” Similarly, Egoyan (2002, ix) explains that “[a]ll of the central characters in my *Ararat* are somehow connected to the making of Edward’s *Ararat*, and most of the conflicts that occur in the contemporary story are related to the unresolved nature of not only the genocide, but also the difficulties and compromises faced by the representation of this atrocity. How does an artist speak the unspeakable?”
- 15 Alexander Sokurov’s film *Russian Ark* (2002) provides a remarkable example of the mnemonic resonances of a single building. In the film, the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg is transformed into a repository of Russian national history and identity.
- 16 In *Hiroshima mon amour*, the female character declares: “Like you, I too have tried to struggle with all my strength against forgetting. Like you, I have forgotten” (Duras 1960, 32).
- 17 As we will see later, Toronto’s character as a city with a relatively thin local mnemonic density is also what allows it to serve as a refuge for displaced memory.
- 18 For an elaborate discussion of how cinema has emancipated itself from chronological linearity, and can introduce the impression of the simultaneity of past, present, and future, see Deleuze (1985, 129-164).
- 19 For instance, one could think of the way classic Hollywood musicals portray New York as an enchantingly holistic backdrop for the unfolding of their stories.
- 20 Cities are not equally open to mnemonic reinscription, which varies according to the degree and strength of the institutionalization of “official” (that is, state-sanctioned) history, as well as the impact of previously mentioned phenomena: the destruction or decay of sites of memory, modernism in planning and architecture, and global capitalism.
- 21 The pluralization of collective memory in cities, to the point where we need to speak of collective memories, does introduce the problem of social cohesion and solidarity among citizens. What kinds of bonds of mutual obligation can exist between people who may share a common space, yet few if any common memories or experiences? *Ararat* explores this issue through the lens of the tense relationship between a Turkish-Canadian and diasporic Armenian characters.
- 22 One of the exchanges in *Ararat* underlines the fictional aspect of the mnemonic recreation of places: Edward: “What it is?”/ Ani: “You wouldn’t be able to see Mount Ararat from Van.”/ Edward: “Well...yes. I felt it would be important.”/ Ani: “But it’s not true.”/ Edward: “It’s true in spirit” (Egoyan 2002, 28).
- 23 “But whatever you took home from the movies was only a part of the larger experience of losing yourself in faces, in lives that were not yours—which is the more inclusive form of desire embodied in the movie experience. The strongest experience was simply to surrender to, to be transported by, what was on the screen. You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie” (Sontag 2001, 118).
- 24 However, Sontag’s use of the past tense in this passage is not incidental, since she argues that

the conditions for this immersive cinematic experience to be possible have now all but disappeared.

- 25 This is not to deny the limits, even the inadequacies, of cinematic representation, that is, the fact that it can never fully reproduce the scale and intensity of suffering of those with first-hand experience of extremity. Nevertheless, film remains, in sensory terms, the most “immersive” medium through which to convey such limit-experiences to others.
- 26 Rather, cinematic representation should be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for collective remembrance, which occurs through institutionalization and public enactment of traces of the past.

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