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A Camera, a Radio and a High-Tech Mechanism to Erase Memories, or How to Deceive Reality in Robin William's Movies

ABSTRACT

We build reality whilst transforming it through the means of memory. This is commonplace knowledge. What happens though when we intervene in the structures of memory in brutal ways? When we try to change the past by projecting onto it those things we would have liked to happen; when the world in which we live becomes a mode of overcoming, through the power of imagination, the closures constitutive of a universe of suicide and despair? The above is a relevant theme in the movies featuring Robin William. Most of these are placed against a fantasy-filled background, the characters that he embodies trying to convince us, somehow, that the price of watching those movies is that our world would be changed forever. For this study, we chose three movies that we find to be most immediately relevant for the given theme: *Jakob the Liar* (1999), directed by Peter Kassovitz, *One Hour Photo* (2002), directed by Mark Romanek, and *The Final Cut* (2004), directed by Omar Naim. In all these representations, reality is dictated by an impossible ideal, but being unhappy proves to be something inherent in humans.

KEYWORDS

Film; Robin Williams; Altered Reality; Artificiality; *One Hour Photo*; *Jakob the Liar*; *The Final Cut*; Reflection; Ideal.

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It is more than apparent that besides having Robin Williams as the lead actor, the following movies *Jakob the Liar* (1999, directed by Peter Kassovitz), *One Hour Photo* (2002, directed by Mark Romanek) and *The Final Cut* (2004, directed by Omar Naim) share also the attempt of measuring the degree in which mental images can function as valid description of a plain surrounding world. In one form or another, all three of them expose a form of perceptual decision which is supposed to save an alienated existence. While the first movie, *Jakob the Liar* uses a non-existent radio to re-create an overwhelming reality, the other two use a photo camera and a sort of futuristic memory shredding mechanism, hence visual means of projecting it.

Kassovitz's movie opens with the image of a man facing a wall, but not in Magritte's way. He gazes up at a tree whose branches can be seen behind it, but which is inaccessible due to some closure reasons which we find out in the following moments of the movie when solitude overlies the narrator's voice while describing the past. The memories are fenced and all hope seems to be lost but Jakob will invent it and save the damned community.

There is a providential newspaper carried by the wind that triggers the action



of the movie and the melancholic man starts chasing it in order to find out some news about the world whose embrace is denied to him. The space he inhabits is zoomed in while he tries to grasp the floating printed paper and reveals itself to us as a grey, amorphous mass of demolished buildings. Moreover, it seems devoid of any flickering individuality and reduced to a zero rhythm of life.

The chase makes him forget about time and he is caught outside after the prescribed lights-out-interval and thus taken to a German head-officer. It however proves to be a fortunate event because, while waiting for the commandant, he gets to hear some news on the radio. The news is vital for the inhabitants of the ghetto who are living in a deep state of despair. Furthermore, he gets another secret to add to the one concerning the radio when, on his way home, he meets a little girl, Lina, who asks for his help. Not being allowed to hide anyone, Jakob is at first afraid to do that, but finally this kind-hearted character takes the risk.

Returned to the ghetto, the pancake shopkeeper confides to a friend about sharing his information on the radio. Rumors begin. Everyone is convinced that Jakob holds a radio and not that he accidentally listened to one. Whereas he is partially guilty of that because he chooses to use and thus reveal the information in order to save an imprisoned fellow from suicide, once started, the rumor snowballs into something that cannot be stopped. Everyone starts vying for his company hoping that he will reveal more. Although he tries to deny everything he soon finds himself forced to make up stories for the others. Their craving for hope is desperate and he projects a reality that is supposed to comfort them. Stories abandon logic and the emotional roller coaster cannot hear anything else than the obsessive question about what is to be invented for the following day. The tone is ironic and there are

quite a few good comic lines that will leave the audience in splits. Underneath the ironic tone and comic lines runs a deeper, serious current. A whole universe starts to exist in the mind of the men behind the ghetto walls. There are jazz concerts and shotguns, Russian music, concerned Americans from Chicago and encoded messages transmitted through the final result of a soccer game.

Furthermore, speaking about what is gained and lost, there are a couple of touching scenes: a professor living in the same ghetto destroys his real radio that he, so far, kept hidden. The professor keeps repeating the lines he has learned for his King Lear's performance: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for sport." Fear defeats him, but not the others. It is a matter of destiny but not acceptance without a fight.

The imaginary radio becomes real and proves to be more than enough to re-vitalize human mind. His "existence" radiates optimism and creates a sort of artificial soap bubble. The Spanish name of the movie *Ilusiones de un mentiroso* or the Brazilian one, *Um Sinal de Esperança* seem to us more appropriate. The world Jakob builds is a world of tangled illusions where the lies are converted to temporary truths. They are also soothing and projective, bringing closer an expected ending. More importantly they speak about how relative everything is: "Here's a book about Africa. You read this, you'll forget you're hungry." plus "Technically, they're retreating. But strategically, they're advancing." or even the funny hint on his personality: "Jakob Heym: My name is Jakob Heym./ Miss Esther: The Jakob Heym? I imagined you much taller. / Jakob Heym: So did I."

The second significant scene that caught our eye is the one at the end where there are a multitude of suitcases abandoned



in the street. They are perfect symbols not only for hopes but also for unexpected paths. The viewers are let to believe that Russians indeed saved the prisoners but the information comes from the narrative voice of an incurable optimist and a “liar”, Jakob, who is already dead. The layers of uncertainty are doubled, but we should not be surprised. We live in a world of illusions and relativity. There is a measurable smaller distance between tick and tock rather than the one between tock and tick, the sea seems to burst with colours at sunrise and we are raised to believe that there is a man in the moon or that we can loose weight through a miraculous diet says Jacques Ninio in *The science of Illusions* (Jacques Ninio, 2001, p. 5). The author also differentiates between physical illusory perception and mental one. The movies that we intend to discuss deal strictly with mental reconfigurations. Yet the demarcation proceeds with the biased states of organism such as hunger, emotion or expectation which, in turn, are responsible for the perceptual decision. Then, it goes on with choices brought on by ambiguity of display and thus by misinterpretation. (J.O. Robinson, 1998, p. 16).

If *Jakob the Liar* is oriented towards past and history the second movie we have chosen to analyze is a story of modern times. *One Hour Photo*, (2002) directed by Mark Romanek tells the story of blank spaces and lack of emotions:

Like painting and graphics, photography creates an illusionary image of a flat plane. However, what is specific about photography’s pictorial language is that there is a special relationship with reality [...] the specific relationship is known as the photographic paradox, that is, in the same (photographic) image a large similarity with reality and at the same time an illusionary

alienation of that reality is present. If factors as time and movement are absent, the alienation is increased. (Henk Slager, 1997, p. 126)

In fact, the movie opens with a line about the adequacy, mirroring of photos to real life: “Family photos depict smiling faces [...] People take photos of their happy moments in their life. One looking through our photos would conclude that we have led a joyous, leisurely existence free of tragedy. No one ever takes a photo of something they want to forget.” Hence photos are seen as a self-deceiving mechanism. People would rather save their family albums before anything else when it comes to a house on fire. In that way a sort of projected eternity is at hand, ready to be grasped and held tightly. A family album transforms itself into a cluster of imaginary bubbles filled with happiness. *I was happy long time ago, so long ago that I can’t remember why and how come, but the fact that I am smiling to the photographer is evidence enough* is what a photo seems to say. If for Jakob it was hope that made the world go round, for regular people the same is to be attained through an abstract concept of happiness

The main character of the movie, Seymour Parrish (*See more?*), is obsessed with the Yorkin family. They seem to be, to the outer world, unbelievably happy. Working as an employee of one-hour photo lab, Sy is a very lonely man. Loneliness is one of the reasons why he gets emotionally attached to this suburban family and often fantasizes of being the uncle of the family. He gets to know their life by heart each time the family drops off photos that are to be printed. But when the manager discovers that he makes an extra set of prints for himself everything changes.

Now there are some details in the movie that are impossible to be ignored. We talked about spaces and how they are



perceived. The wife of the above mentioned family, Nina, transforms her living space into a much too perfect magazine cover display. She does that because investing in architectural design and accessories proves to be a temporary solution for her neglected emotional needs. Sy's home is also result of his maniacal need for cleanness. Everything is spotless and white in a minimal yet allusive requirement for attention. In both houses time is suspended but in a different manner. On one hand, there is the laughter of the child and the photos to supply the desired marital happiness and on the other hand there is a broken windshield of a car one of the characters drives symbolically used to show how the world actually functions. People perceive the world through translucent media, not seeing the cracked detail but the global illusion of clear, even if far-lying space in front of them.

Photos only speak about a reassuring thought that they were there, existed without a doubt and they were important enough for the others so as to be taken a photo of them. For that reason, Sy goes unwanted and unexpected into family's home and enjoys watching their TV, sitting on their sofa and wearing their clothes. It is the small things that matter and the vision of the kid, of Jake, seems to be closer than anything else to a secure space of which Sy has always dreamed of. Jake himself takes photos of toys, furniture and all sorts of unimpressive things we feel familiar with. They are in total contrast with what Sy, in the final scene confesses about his traumatized childhood: it was full of indecent pictures that an abusive father was asking for.

There are a few witty hints on understanding the movie: Yoshi Araki, Sy's helper from the lab is in fact that name of a famous Japanese photographer and so is Danny Lyon the cop who is a notorious American photographer. The actor who plays the police officer was a police officer in real

life and Sy, trying to escape from the prosecutors enters by mistake in a conference room where the discussed topic is optics. It is all about framing in both senses the reality.

Whereas Sy lives in a continuous emotionally devoid present, the main character from *The Final Cut* (2004), directed by Omar Naim, Alan Hackman, played by the same Robin Williams, lives in an utopian future where memories fully belong to people to such an extent that those, if willing, can permanently erase them.

The one that is able to materialize all this is a person called "the cutter" and his role is to re-build the emotional life of his clients. Only the moral, beautiful and safe memories are kept. No matter what a person did in his/her life the way people will remind himself/herself after death is the way in which the loving and paying family wants to. Guilt, altogether with remorse is erased and we find ourselves trapped in a perfectly dostoyevskyan world where everything is allowed. "The cutter" acts as a sort of censor but also as a guardian of secrets having total access to some of the most private thoughts which can be at times, overwhelming. During the movie "the cutter" is defined through analogies: he performs a rite like a priest does, but dealing with corpses he can also be compared to a medical examiner or a taxidermist. Sitting at a desk he sees simultaneously a great number of recordings that offer the same dispersed information like a jigsaw. He stores the information he gets in special folders tagged by age, diet, career, preferences almost in the same way the modern neuromarketing acts.

Not everybody agrees to what he does. There are people protesting out in the streets crying that it is not fair to make saints out of murderers and that it is a crime to deprive people of certain painful things that happened to them. Not everything is perfect but



the sorrows, the struggle are part of our existence as well and define us as individualities. Once understood, the mistakes we have done transform themselves into lessons and points of reference for future paths we choose to follow. Even if erased from the memory, the deeds remain and people find themselves entrapped in an illusory world, living an artificial life, governed by a constant lie that insists on them being “happy”. Still, to be completely honest this movie is just a *mise en abyme* of a permanent tendency of humans to expiate a guilt complex. The Jewish tradition, for example, has the following funeral ceremony: money is put on the eyes of the dead person and salt and bread are given to a person who, by eating them will take on his own the sins of the deceased. The cutter does more or less the same thing, but it is rendered throughout visual Photoshop intervention upon memories.

The technology that makes the control of minds possible is based on a chip called Zoe, a chip that sometimes shows its own flaws. It is only then that Allan Hackman sees the poetry of human mind. It records fragments of dreams and hopes, surreal veils of floating fish and swings in the breeze. One of his friends tells him: “You’ve seen so much life and somehow you’ve missed the point of it” and what she says proves to be the tragic essence of his life.

He is constantly haunted by one childhood memory, a terrible accident that he considers himself guilty of. Hence his life is tormented and the only solution he can think of is to go back to the roots of his nightmare and explore his one edited life. The result proves to be unexpected. The blood that he remembered was only spilt paint, his friend lives and the memories were deceiving, incomplete glimpses of emotionally charged past times.

The movie ends with the image of a new cutter, editing Allan’s life.

Robin Williams is not a comedy actor even if recent roles classified him as so. He carefully chooses his roles and most of them deal with illusions, memories and surreal worlds. It is nevertheless true that some of his choices are playful and speak about children and their pure and adventurous way of living their life, but the great majority shows his interest for the human mind and what it can project. The directors are different in the movies we have chosen to present here and each one, in his way, is a genius. We were mostly interested in exploring three versions of faking the reality. One dictated by the need to impose hope where fear and despair ruled, another one that aimed to cover an emotional blank space and the third one which speaks about healing as well as about imposed perfection. The means used to do that are common: machineries of all kinds (a radio, a photo-camera, a cutting studio and a microchip), instruments that intervene in our perception of the world and which shape it according to our own needs or to the needs of society.

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