

Remembrance

[Brian Dunnigan](#)

I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

Samuel Becket

In mental life nothing that has once taken shape can be lost, that everything is somehow preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances.

Sigmund Freud

A man stands, stiff and still, on a station platform. He's dressed in a 1940's hat and overcoat. He seems oblivious to the cold and the falling snow. We can hear the melancholy whistle of a distant train. His eyes close as he remembers his encounter with a beautiful woman and the choice she gave him...

Set in a once-upon-a-time, wartime Canada of the 1940's, *Remembrance* is a stylish and atmospheric film that centres on a man who remembers everything but seems to have forgotten the most important thing; in other words it is a *love* story. It is also an erotic tale, with memory traces of earlier narratives of initiation, such as Cupid and Psyche, Adam and Eve. The film works best on this level, as fable and melodrama but is less convincing on the psychology and existential reality of its central character. The ending is therefore darker and more ambiguous than the redemptive ambitions of the narrative would like to suggest.

The film's protagonist is Alfred, a man in his early thirties. He is polite, emotionally withdrawn almost autistic, overwhelmed by his inability to forget anything and cut-off from the reality of the war. He lives nowhere and travels everywhere, a figure of pure asexual knowledge who will discover (a previously unknown?) erotic desire that will propel him out of his isolation. He earns a living as a stage performer not unlike Mr Memory in Hitchcock's *Thirty-Nine Steps*. And like Borges's *Fuentes the Memorious*,^[1] (and like all of us) he suffers from too many memories. It is appropriate therefore that when we first meet him on the station platform, he is in the dark, isolated, almost frozen. Then as that image shifts into the recent past we see him now on stage, alone under the bright lights. His stance that of a young boy about to perform for his parents, a child man who presents his party piece to a half-empty auditorium, his eyes closed to the world. In the *fable*, Aurora^[2] has been sent by the intelligence services to waken him from his dark night of the soul, to free the traumatised child and to encourage his engagement with the world of adult responsibility. She is a messenger of light (though she brings darkness too in the figure of the spymaster who sits unsmilingly nearby) and that is how we first see her, bathed in a roseate glow as she smiles in open admiration from the audience. She is the only one whose name he hesitates in remembering, for a moment, she makes Mr. Memory forget himself.

It is this conflict between *memory* and *forgetting* that gives the narrative its thematic unity and structural dynamic. The main action of the film is itself an act of selective remembrance. Alfred on the station platform, recalling recent events, has become a good storyteller, selecting and ordering, remembering and forgetting. He is no longer the same man who cannot forget *anything*. He is now able to think and act, perhaps even plan for a future, no longer overwhelmed by his memories. Aurora for her part has to forget her real motivation for going backstage, in order to be an effective seducer. But when she finds herself attracted to Alfred, she has to remember her original purpose. Love can do that; make you forget your everyday self and remind you that self and life can be mysterious, astonishing. Later, a nightclub scene will underline this, time itself will stop and all sounds fall away, as they stare at each other in love-struck forgetfulness.

But Alfred cannot easily forget the *fear* that prevents him loving anyone (including you suspect himself). He is afraid

that not being a soldier or engaged in the war effort might make him seem less of a man. He is afraid of what he knows but cannot forget; (unspoken) knowledge that could be dangerous to himself or others. And most particularly he is fearful of the unfiltered, chaotic reality that dominates his existence. There is only one sequence of shots that give us a subjective sense of how disturbing this might be. In the nightclub scene we move from a cool, controlled (backstage) world into a brash and exuberant one of people enjoying themselves. The low angles, jerky camera moves and exaggerated sounds, all create a disturbing effect. The laughing faces, clashing glasses, saturated colour, suggest a world of sexuality and *jouissance*, a brief descent into Alfred's vertiginous world. (The film however quickly moves back to its narrative surface as if afraid of confronting this internal reality.) The only way Alfred can cope is presumably by moving on, by building the protective persona of Mr. Memory who entertains by remembering banal lists and trivial facts and by not entering into what must be terrifying relationship with Others. Aurora reminds him of his fear and the frightening truth of his life. Yet miraculously love transforms everything, as in a fairy-tale he overcomes his fear and dances with her. As he joins the dance of life, the intensity of his present torment vanishes, the singer is no longer threatening but still she expresses a final fear which sums up all the others "...this is not like me...I'm afraid to be made a fool."

It makes us think of how it must be to have his strange affliction. We wonder how Alfred can live with that ever-expanding, never-ending stream of memories. What must his life have been like? He must have been seen as a freak, teased, tormented, put on show; always and everywhere different from others who only wanted to be amused by, or make use of him. That is why his sense of *betrayal* when he learns the truth of Aurora's mission, must have reminded him of all the other times when trust broke down. You suspect that he has forgotten none of them, nor his barely sublimated rage at not being able to live a full life.

Aurora however seems to have forgotten who this man is almost as quickly as she forgot what she had for lunch. She naïvely believes that having stirred his desire and now sealed it with a kiss, that Mr Memory will be able to forget they ever had this conversation. (This is presumably a line learned in Spy School, a pre-war spy school before such lines became clichés.) Alfred must know that you cannot trust a spy especially one who is so sincerely committed to a higher authority, but he has tasted of the forbidden fruit ^[3] and is now a tormented man. All his senses including taste are heightened and focused through what he sees, and his most powerful memory is the vision and therefore *taste* of Beauty itself as he dances with Aurora. This is the decisive erotic remembrance that opens his eyes. He can no longer remain unconscious to the call of the world or his own impulses. Yet the ending remains ambiguous.

Alfred is standing once again in the snow, on that cold, lonely platform, ordering his recent memories, shutting out the terrible shriek of the train whistle. The romantic imperative of the narrative implies that Alfred, shaken by lust will now follow his conscience and play his part in love and war. A new and moral commitment to taking care of others will flow from his realisation that he can change, that he has a choice. All this we might believe as he turns and follows Aurora, disappearing into the train smoke and a new life. And perhaps we might accept this hopeful outcome if we had been presented with a less complex character. But you cannot help fearing that it all might end badly. Alfred is a man of extreme sensitivity weighed down by a past, inhabiting an intense almost paranoid present, where relationship and authority could easily trigger a violent response. And in this sense at least, the film is true to its romantic roots. Alfred of course is only too aware of these dangers and perhaps he chooses otherwise, for in the last shot where Aurora had turned left, he turns right. Is this a deliberate ambiguity or did someone forget to remember how the film should end?

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¹ "...the present was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness, as were his most distant and trivial memories..."
Jorge Luis Borges *Labyrinths* (London. Penguin Books, 1970).

² Meaning literally Dawn (L).

³ "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." *Genesis*, Chap 3, verse 5.