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Time Warp: Cinematic Pilgrimage to Lourdes and Santiago

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Pilgrims experience time in ways that deviate from the norm. The pilgrim’s encounter with time can be disorienting due to environmental changes, physical hardships, and unexpected occurrences. Pilgrims may also feel an intense connection with the historical or personal past. This chapter will examine two films in which pilgrims experience dramatic shifts in the perception of time. Julian Schnabel’s The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is a cinematic interpretation of Jean-Dominique Bauby’s memoires by the same name. Bauby, the editor of Elle magazine, suffers a sudden stroke at the height of his career. Subsequent to the stroke, he experiences a condition known as ‘locked-in syndrome’: his cognitive function is intact, but he is incapable of motion or speech. He learns to communicate via a cumbersome technique of listening to someone read the alphabet and blinking to select letters. When a pilgrimage to Lourdes is proposed, Bauby recalls a previous visit to Lourdes. The pilgrimage takes on new meanings as the present informs the past. Unlike the personal experience explored in Schnabel’s film, Luis Buñuel’s film The Milky Way examines encounters with historical time. Buñuel’s pilgrims are heading to Santiago in the 1960’s, and along the way they experience dramatic shifts in chronological time. Although the pilgrims do not seem to be surprised by this, the spectator marvels as the story defies logic by hopscotching across centuries. The Diving Bell and the Butterfly and The Milky Way both use film to convey the experience of being transported across time, and each film draws on the artists’ memoires for inspiration. My paper will explore how memoires, memory, time and pilgrimage intersect in these two films.

Key Words: Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela, Jean-Dominique Bauby, Julian Schnabel, Luis Buñuel, pilgrimage, time, film, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, The Milky Way.

Cinematic Pilgrimage to Lourdes and Santiago

Memory, time, pilgrimage and film are significantly intertwined. George Greenia (2014:19) identifies memory and resistance to historical time as essential components of the pilgrim experience. Two art films explore the connection between artists’ written memoires and the representation of time, memory and pilgrimage. In The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Jean-Dominique Bauby recalls a pilgrimage to Lourdes; filmmaker Julian Schnabel’s interpretation of Bauby’s memoires demonstrates the capacity of the filmic medium to portray memories of pilgrimage across time. In his memoires entitled My Last Sigh, surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel recalls making a film about the Camino de Santiago, The Milky Way; in Buñuel’s film, the notion of historical time is entirely subverted. This paper will examine the dialogue between memory, time and cinema in these two films, showing how cinema, like pilgrimage, allows for a unique understanding of our experience of time. Indeed, a reflection on filmic time may enhance our ability to express our experience as pilgrims.

Pilgrimages to Lourdes and Santiago are established cultural traditions in France and Spain. The sites draw crowds of visitors and they have offered hope and comfort to generations of pilgrims. The pilgrims’ experiences of these sacred spaces across time and memory offer rich material for filmic exploration. The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Schnabel, based on the memoires of magazine editor Bauby, offers an ironic look at the site of Lourdes in what appears to be a
national discourse has changed. Junko Terado writes that today the pilgrimage serves to challenge contemporary norms that celebrate productivity above all. She cites the standard of unconditional availability at Lourdes as instrumental in the establishment of this public space ‘where no one is excluded and everyone is eligible to participate’ (2012:352). It is precisely this openness to everyone that the protagonist of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* encounters.

In his memoirs, Jean-Dominique Bauby reveals his unique situation; at age 44 and at the peak of his career as editor of *Elle* magazine, he suffers a massive stroke. When he wakes from his coma, he learns that he is entirely paralyzed except for his left eyelid. He describes his condition, known as locked-in syndrome, as follows:

paralyzed from head to foot, the patient is locked inside himself, with his mind intact and the fluttering of his left eyelid as sole means of communication (1997:10).[1]

With the help of a speech therapist, Jean-Do learns to communicate by having her read through the letters of the alphabet and blinking to select the letter he wishes

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are by the Author.
makes full use of both, imagining sumptuous dinners with his beloved when he longs for sensual experiences and remembering places and events from the past when certain prompts move him.

Despite his immobility, Jean-Do’s memoires are remarkably nomadic. He writes,

*The diving bell becomes less oppressive, and the mind can wander like a butterfly. There is so much to do. One can fly across space or time, go to Tierra del Fuego or the court of King Midas. One can visit his beloved, slide in next to her and caress her still-sleeping face. One can build castles in Spain, conquer the Golden Fleece, discover Atlantis, realise his childhood dreams and his longings as an adult* (1997:10-11).

Bauby refers to his memoires as a ‘journal of immobile travel’ (1997:11). Schnabel reveals film to be the ideal medium through which to explore Jean-Do’s immobile voyage. Cinema allows the audience to hear Jean-Do’s thoughts as a voice-off commentary, bringing us into an intimate complicity with him that is denied to the characters in the film. Cinema also allows us to travel with Jean-Do via his memories and his imagination. He makes full use of both, imagining sumptuous dinners with his beloved when he longs for sensual experiences and remembering places and events from the past when certain prompts move him.

It was perhaps inevitable given his condition that Jean Do would be invited to Lourdes. Marie, a physical therapist, takes a reluctant Jean-Do to mass one Sunday, and she allows the priest to offer him communion even though he clearly states ‘no’ via the blinking technique. We hear him say to her, ‘You really got me’, which of course she does not hear. The priest tells Jean-Do that he is planning a trip to Lourdes and asks if he might wish to come along. We hear Jean-Do’s unvoiced reaction: ‘Lourdes? This is a trap. I’ve already been to Lourdes.’ We cut abruptly to a shot of a woman’s long hair being tossed about by the wind; the soundtrack is a U2 song ‘Ultraviolet (Light My Way).’ The hair’s freedom of movement and the upbeat song immediately transport us from the stifling aura of the previous scene in the church. The camera pans right to show the lush mountainous countryside of the Pyrenees, then it cuts to a high angle shot of a car’s steering wheel and an exposed female thigh. A striking young woman is driving; Jean-Do is in the passenger’s
Chamarette’s observations help us understand how time and memory function in this scene; she writes,

*It is the associative relation between the screen memory and the event that permits a repeated subjective encounter with an event in and through time. The temporal event is deferred and metonymised into a differently projected episode, which may also have shifted its perceived temporal location within a subject’s memory* (2009:249).

That night when Jean Do and Joséphine are in bed, she refuses to turn off the blinking lights of the Virgin so that they can make love. Frustrated, Jean-Do says they should separate when they return to Paris. Joséphine agrees, and Jean-Do leaves to take a walk. He finds himself in front of the trinket shop, now closed, and in the window he sees an exact replica of the ‘one of a kind’ Virgin, blinking lights and all. Jean Do’s face is reflected in the shop window as he gazes at the blinking Virgin. The next cut returns us to Jean Do’s present, where he is held upright strapped to a board. Marie is wiping saliva from his face.

The next cut takes us inside a trinket shop; Joséphine has found her Virgin, complete with a crown of blinking lights. The salesman tells her it is one of a kind, blessed by the Cardinal. A sceptical Jean-Do pays the inflated price, then pauses, asking the salesman if they have met before. We recognize him as the priest from the previous scene, indicating how Jean-Do’s present shapes his memory of the past. Jenny Smith’s observations help us understand how time and memory function in this scene; she writes,

*Not at all, and it’s even dangerous. Imagine a guy in good health who sees an apparition. One miracle, and he winds up paralyzed* (1997:70).

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The remembered experience of pilgrimage changes over time, and film is uniquely suited to express these changing memories. Chamarette writes,

*Memory roots us, singularly, subjectively, but also inter-subjectively in a lived past that we may have attended or only apprehended through memorial representation. Film’s proximal status as the closest representation of subjectively lived time that we can perceive in any art form, consequently privileges discourses of memory in theoretical elucidations of film material* (2009:246).

Jean-Do’s reflection in the trinket shop window is difficult to read; first, he smiles briefly as he recognizes the identical copy of the ‘one of a kind’ Virgin. He then continues to gaze at himself and the Virgin. In this moment, experienced anew via memory and film, the blinking Virgin in fact becomes one-of-a-kind, her outstretched arms offering acceptance and comfort. In the window’s reflection, the Jean-Do of the past and present gaze at one another. The spiritual generosity of Marie, who sincerely believes in the value of taking him to mass, opens a space for Jean-Do to re-evaluate Joséphine and the time he spent with her at Lourdes. His filmic pilgrimage to Lourdes is simultaneously a return and a memory, two separate experiences that become one, emphasized by Bauby’s recognition of the trinket salesman as the priest. The blinking lights of the Virgin anticipate what was to become Jean-Do’s sole means of communication via blinking, but the message she conveys to him remains obscure. The shot of Jean-Do standing before the Virgin is at first glance filled with irony. It is, at the same time, a poignant scene; we sense a softening in Jean-Do’s perception as his gaze encounters the Virgin, whose outstretched arms reach toward him and us.

Like the pilgrimage to Lourdes, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has been exploited for nationalistic ends, perhaps most egregiously by Francisco Franco. Julie Jones sees Buñuel’s film *The Milky Way* as a reaction to Franco’s misappropriation of Saint James.
as his alter ego during the Civil War and his later exploitation of the Camino de Santiago (Road to Santiago) as a source of revenue (2009:19).

She argues:

the film undermines any assertion of essential national identity; indeed, it undermines the sense of identity altogether with a transgression of the bounds of time and space and a self-conscious theatricality that mocks Franco’s reinvention of St James and the rapture of fanatics of all stripes (2009, p.19).

What connects The Milky Way with The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is not only the journey to a renowned pilgrimage site but also encounters with the Virgin herself, filmic Marian apparitions that trace their origins to the artists’ memoires and take on new meanings across time and memory. Jean Do’s encounter with the kitschy blinking Virgin is nonetheless powerful; in Buñuel’s film, the Virgin appears to a Protestant reformer turned hunter after he has used a rosary for target practice. The connection between the Holy Mother and the pilgrimage to Santiago is well established, as Victor and Edith Turner explain. They recall the legend that Saint James visited Spain as a missionary; the Virgin Mary, who was still alive at that time, appeared to him by the Ebro River.

James and his disciples, kneeling by the river, looked up, saw a radiant light, and heard seraphic music. Mary . . . appeared to the group and asked that a church be erected on the spot (1978:169).

The Milky Way, shot in France against the backdrop of the student and union protests of May 1968, is a playful account of the haphazard journey of two vagabonds from Paris to Santiago. The pilgrims, Pierre and Jean, travel by any means available to them—hitchhiking, jumping trains, walking. During the course of their journey across France and Spain, they also travel through time; in the film, we encounter fourteenth-century worshippers of a Priscillian cult, a Jansenist and a Jesuit engaged in a duel, Christ and his family, Protestants taunting the Inquisition, and the Marquis de Sade, among others. The Virgin appears on several occasions, as an affectionate mother, a concerned hostess and a miraculous apparition.

Marian apparitions on the Camino de Santiago are often associated with the Virgin of Pilar of Zaragoza, the one who appeared to Saint James according to legend. Despite his atheism, Buñuel claimed an allegiance to the Virgin of Pilar above all other Virgins as he was from the town of Calanda in Zaragoza. In Calanda there is a legend of a young farmer whose leg was amputated in 1640. Miraculously, thanks to his prayers to the Virgin of Pilar, his amputated leg was fully restored. In his memoires, Buñuel comments on this

Magnificent miracle, next to which those of the Virgin of Lourdes seem rather pathetic . . . [He continues] . . . Don’t think I’m exaggerating about the rivalries between the different virgins. In Saragossa, a priest gave a sermon during which he spoke of the Virgin of Lourdes, recognizing her merits, but adding that her merits could not match those of the Virgin of Pilar. A dozen French women were in attendance . . . Shocked by the priest’s statement, they complained to the archbishop (1982:20).

The Milky Way offers an irreverent glimpse of the history of Christianity. We witness Jesus debating whether to shave his beard, cult members participating in an orgy, the disinterment of a bishop and an imagined execution of the Pope. Pierre and Jean encounter each situation with deadpan composure; when they are asked to judge the duel between the Jesuit and the Jansenist, for example, they shrug their shoulders, then guzzle wine and gnaw on bread as they watch the swordfight. With the final appearance of the Virgin in The Milky Way, however, Buñuel evokes a personal memory. Two sixteenth-century Protestants, fleeing on foot after heckling Inquisitors, meet Pierre and Jean on the Camino and ask them to take their donkey to an inn. They then steal clothing from some hunters who are swimming and are instantly transformed into twentieth-century characters. They wander through the woods in modern hunting clothes, carrying rifles that they surprisingly know how to use. While this transformation might be viewed as a surrealist stunt, it also has a connection with the pilgrim experience of resisting time. As Greenia writes:

Pilgrims absent themselves from historical time and opt to live, temporarily, beyond time and its near-horizon perspectives (2014:19).

Thus, whether it is intended in this way or not, via the film’s play with historical time, Buñuel is in fact highlighting an inherent component of the pilgrim experience.

One hunter takes a shot at something that moves, missing. The second hunter reaches into his pocket and
finds a rosary. He tosses it into a tree and fires on it. Moving on, they come upon some sheep enclosed in a pen for the evening. Suddenly we hear the music of a harp alongside the sound of the sheep. The Virgin Mary appears, bathed in light. She holds out the rosary and offers it to the hunter who shot it. Visibly moved, tears roll down his face; he accepts the rosary, and the Virgin disappears.

In his memoirs, Buñuel describes a dream he once had:

I suddenly saw the Virgin, softly illuminated, her hands extended toward me. It was a strong, unquestionable presence. She was talking to me, the evil sinner, with all the tenderness in the world, enveloped in the music of Schubert, which I could distinctly hear. I wanted to recreate this image in The Milky Way, but it doesn’t have the strength of conviction that it had in my dream. I was kneeling, my eyes filled with tears, and suddenly I felt immersed in faith, a vibrant and invincible faith . . . . I will add that this dream had a certain erotic quality to it, which of course remained within the chaste limits of platonic love. Perhaps if the dream had lasted the chaste element would have disappeared, ceding its place to real desire. I can’t say. I simply felt overwhelmed, touched, beyond my senses (1982:114-115).

My recent personal experiences on the Camino de Santiago serve to confirm Greenia’s assertion and these films’ affirmation that pilgrims live, at least temporarily, in a space beyond temporality. Walking with a small group of colleagues and students, we enjoyed both solitude and community, allowing me to glimpse the experience of others while also diving deeply into my own. A colleague had recently lost her father; when we came upon an isolated patch of daffodils, those flowers transported her instantly to past moments spent with her dad, who had loved daffodils. Solitude afforded me my own time for reflection and revisiting the past. I thought of friends I had lost over the last year, some of them my age or younger, and had conversations with them as I walked that I wish had actually taken place while they were still alive. In an article I wrote on the pilgrimage, I noted that

I had time to imagine my father, who had recently been too ill to consider engaging in the exercise he loves, walking alongside me as he used to do during long strolls on the South Carolina coast (Smith, 2017).

These experiences with my father as a younger man and with my friends now deceased were truly outside of time; they were events that could only take place within the a-temporal context of pilgrimage.

Our decision to walk the Camino Primitivo rather than the more familiar Camino Francés also contributed to our experience of the fluidity of time. Walking in early March, we encountered few pilgrims outside of our group until the two Caminos merged in Melide. The ancient Roman town of Lugo was particularly evocative of times past. The intact Roman wall, designed for defence, is roughly 1700 years old and to this day stands tall, protecting the heart of the old city, which includes the cathedral of Lugo. The eclectic style of the cathedral likewise offers the pilgrim a journey across centuries; from the rear facade and along the perimeter, the cathedral reveals its early Romanesque and Gothic origins, dating from 1129 CE. The front facade, in the Neoclassical style, dates from 1769 and presents the most recent manifestation of the structural evolution of the building. I set out to explore before dawn on a rainy Sunday morning and had the city to myself. Walking atop the Roman wall alone in the rain, I could imagine the nervous vigilance of a lone sentry guarding against attack. Just behind the cathedral, I discovered a Roman bathing pool excavated not too long ago, mosaics still intact. Making my way alongside the edge of the cathedral, I was able to witness the gargoyles in action as the pouring rain channelled through their wide-open mouths to spill forth in dramatic arcs against the pre-dawn sky. By the time I sat down for breakfast, my early morning journey had spanned 1700 years in a matter of hours.

Buñuel and Bauby make pilgrimage a subject of their memoirs, and Buñuel and Schnabel use memory to shape the exploration of pilgrimage in cinematic art. Memories change over time, and in film time is often experienced in an asynchronous way, allowing memories to return and shape the lived experience. In The Diving Bell and the Butterfly and The Milky Way, an encounter with the Virgin touches the protagonists in unexpected ways. Neither the rosary-shooting hunter nor the sexually frustrated Bauby anticipates the effect that the Virgin will have on him. As Bauby contemplates the Virgin in the shop window with her blinking lights, a hauntingly sad soundtrack punctuates the experience of his relived pilgrimage. The song, ‘Don’t Kiss Me Goodbye’ by Ultra Orange and Emmanuelle, references the impact of time and memory:
Similarly, there is a connection between memory, the Virgin and music in Buñuel’s mémoires: the Virgin appears to him in a dream ‘enveloped in the music of Schubert’, and he attempts to recreate this memory in The Milky Way. In both films, humour, irreverence and an unconventional experience of time allow humanity to unfold to its potential, surprising the spectator and perhaps even the writers and filmmakers themselves.

References


2. Ultra Orange & Emmanuelle is a musical group that was born of the collaboration between the band Ultra Orange and actress/vocalist Emmanuelle Seigner. In The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Emmanuelle Seigner also plays the role of Céline Desmoulins, Jean-Dominique Bauby’s former lover and the mother of his children.