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Double Exposures: 'Visual returns' in the Deadwood and Breaking Bad sequel films

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Double Exposures: 'Visual returns' in the Deadwood and Breaking Bad sequel films

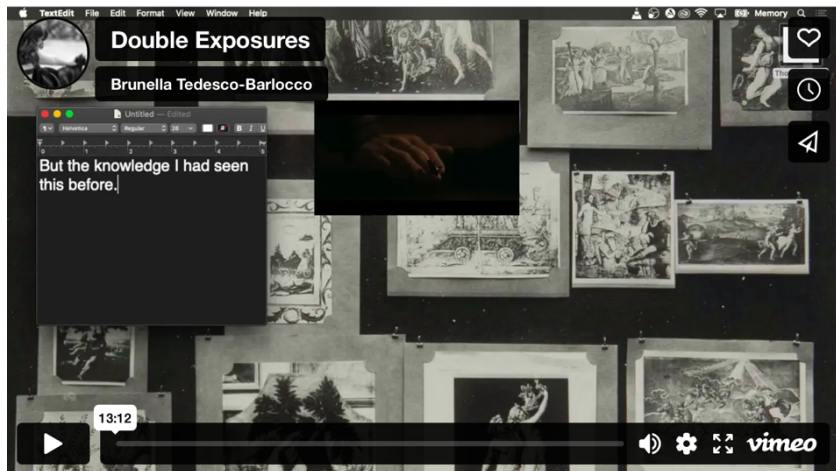
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Television series are filled with images that populate our memory, whether striking in their uniqueness, symbolism or emotional intensity, or familiar in their constant repetition. Although, as Amy Holdsworth criticises, television has often been derided by its presumed 'ephemerality' and 'forgettability', it is nevertheless 'part of both a material network of

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memory and a system of everyday memory-making within and in relation to the home and the family'.^[1] Within that network, the visual aspect of the televisual cannot be buried under the import of narrative.

Television shows that return – whether through a series 'revival'^[2] or a film sequel epilogue – add another layer to their relation to memory. The two sequel films analysed in this videographic essay, *El Camino: A Breaking Bad Movie* (2019) and *Deadwood: The Movie* (2019), came several years after the finalisation and cancellation of the *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Deadwood* (2004-2006) series respectively, and are therefore seen through our recollections of the shows and our melancholic, nostalgic, or mournful relation to their demise. Pervaded by memory, these films not only represent it through flashbacks; as I propose in this videographic essay, these film sequels also display instances of 'visual returns':^[3] images that are similar to others found in the original runs of the shows, recreating either an action or a gesture, or mimicking a composition. While a flashback might make those past moments irrupt through montage, gathering present and past explicitly, the visual return works in an indexical manner, evoking the past through that very similarity, but not reproducing it directly.^[4]

Within new iterations of pre-existing fictional universes then, the visual return emerges as an image inscribed with memory and time, which seeks to activate our visual-emotional archival memory of the past shows, or films. The role of emotion is also foregrounded throughout, as visual returns encourage an attentive and attached mode of spectatorship. These images circulate through a web of engagements, attachments, and parasocial relationships to the characters and to the story-world, and thus stir more than merely our factual recollection of narrative and visuals: the emotions generated and nurtured throughout our viewing experiences are also key parts of this nexus, as are those that arise from re-encountering the story universe.

The indexical connection that is generated by the visual return, its inherently mental and emotional nature, is the focus of this videographic essay, in which I utilise the desktop documentary interface aesthetics to stage and allegorise the mnemonic process, also suggesting the spectral insistence of the past in the present through the editing techniques of overlays, flickers, and split screens. In this way, I aim to materialise a process of retrieval and contrast that only ever exists as a virtual possibility, a process anchored to the present image, but also untethered, able to disperse into multiple vanishing points. As Miklós Kiss has stated, desktop documentaries are able to present not only the results of the thinking process, but also how the process itself is developed: in revealing its methodology, it '[collapses] the boundaries between making and presenting'.^[5] Through 'Double Exposures', the meaning-making process tries to also collapse the boundaries between thinking, remembering, feeling, misremembering, forgetting, *and* making and presenting.

In the tension between parallelism and contrast, repetition and difference, new meanings emerge, meanings that help us make sense of the new endings proposed by these films. Visual returns, furthermore, not only allow us to read the present through the past, but also do the inverse process: as the past moment returns in the present, it retrospectively becomes an echo that resonates beyond its concrete duration. However, our attachment to a beloved show is no guarantee for recollection. If one recognises the spectator's creative role in the construction of temporal and emotional meaning, it is also key to anticipate that the similarity behind the visual return might not be recognised: the audience members might not recall the previous moment at all, or their memories might be incomplete, hazy, misplaced within the narrative of the series. Although the desktop documentary style of this videographic essay depicts memory as a retrieval performance, archival and montage-like, it also seeks to address its creative nature and the possibility of an imperfect remembrance. Memory, according to Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, is a 'formative rather than merely (...) reproductive process'.^[6] Due to this, 'Double Exposures' tries to lean into the '(illusive) transparency' of the desktop documentary,^[7] interpreting it not as a 'reproductive process', in the words of Keightley and Pickering, but as a porous one. The dynamics of anticipation and delay between voice and image, the incorporation of floating images that stick to the screen as if they were lingering thoughts, the mise-en-abyme of the different windows and the glitching of the files toy with the affordances of the softwares, not only looking to deform the image but also, in a way, the interface itself.

Time must be considered as a key element to this dynamic: the images allow for a reflection on the passing of time, and that very passing also affects our remembrance of them and our relationship to them, making way to our nostalgic longing, but also generating a deteriorating distance. In the face of multiplicities, these processes must also be considered an essential part of the viewing experience. Our re-encounter with the story-universe is moved by remembering and feeling, but also by forgetting, by only being able to conjure up vague recollection. It is through this manifold nature of memory that our intimate relationships to the shows and to television also take shape.

Author

Brunella Tedesco-Barlocco holds a bachelor's degree in Journalism from Universidad ORT (Uruguay) and an MA in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies from Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona, Spain), where she is currently developing her PhD dissertation focused on reboots, resequels, and revivals. She is a member of the CINEMA Research Group of Pompeu Fabra University and an editorial assistant for the academic journal *Comparative Cinema*. She has published articles in *Adaptation*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Communication & Society*, and *El Profesional de la Información*.

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Notes

- [1] See Holdsworth 2011, p. 3.
- [2] See Loock 2018.
- [3] This concept was inspired by Holdsworth's 'moments of return' (see Holdsworth 2011) and Jordi Balló's cinematographic 'visual motifs' (see Balló 2000). Holdsworth's 'moments of return' focuses on spectral apparitions by deceased characters, or on the explicit act of characters remembering the past, usually depicted as a flashback with an explicit visual match between the image of the present and the image of the past. Balló's concept, on the other hand, suggests a shared imagery throughout visual culture, in which certain images that exist across film genres and epochs trigger the spectators' iconographic memory and allow them to understand a latent meaning through their narrative economy.
- [4] There is one exception to this, in *Deadwood: The Movie*. When Al holds newcomer sex-worker Caroline, this image is explicitly matched by the one it evokes, shown in a flashback.
- [5] See Kiss 2021.
- [6] See Keightley & Pickering 2012, p. 51.
- [7] See Kiss 2021.