"Pre-dicting the Past, Re-membering the Present, Imagining the Self: The Theatricalization of Memory in *Mnemonic* by Simon McBurney and Complicite"

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"Not Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn the living record of your memory," reads William Shakespeare's sonnet 55.[1] In this poem, the Bard places the remembrance of a private story above the devastating power of war and destruction, while at the same time promising his addressee the privileged immortality of literary permanence. In *Mnemonic*, a play conceived and directed by Simon McBurney and devised by Complicite,[2] words are not only time-capsules in which different fictionalized memories are preserved, but also mnemonic objects in their own right: undeniably, the playtext they conform acts as a reminder of the show that this British company created in 1999 for the Salzburg Festival and that toured internationally again in 2002. Departing from its published dramaturgy both as autonomous text and as a mnemonic aid, this essay will analyze the main perspectives and techniques whereby memory itself is semiotized and explored in this play. In addition, consideration will be given to the show's enactment of individual and collective forms of remembrance as a way to encompass some of the enigmas of our postmodern Selves. Overall, it will be demonstrated that the play's symbolic potential renders *Mnemonic* not only a truly 'memorable' piece, but also an outstanding text in the discourse of contemporary theatre which re-assembles the fragmented time- and mind-frames we inhabit in post modernity.

Kirsten Shepherd-Barr defines Complicite's work through the following paradox: "their plays may seem 'intellectually daring,' but they shun intellectualism."[3] *Mnemonic* is clearly a case in point: the company's use of interdisciplinary source

material in this play is mainly derived from the fields of neuroscience and psychology, but also reveals close ties with the domains of archaeology, history, philosophy, physics, and mathematics. All the same, such a complex background does not hinder the reception of the play. On the contrary, it helps readers and spectators to envisage the larger implications of the stories represented in it.

This is possible thanks to the metatheatrical component of the dramaturgy and its blend of the familiar and the strange, the real and the fictional. On the one hand, the play intertwines the stories of two groups of characters: one of them takes place between 1998 and 1999, and revolves around Alice, a British middle-aged woman who searches for her unknown father across Europe; whereas the other narrative recreates a real archaeological finding, that is, the 1991 discovery of Ötzi or the Iceman, the world's oldest mummified body. Framing these two plot-lines, the dramaturgy includes the spectators' experience in an opening monologue that is delivered by Simon McBurney: playing himself as an actor-director, McBurney gradually leads the audience to a collective exercise whereby certain episodes of the spectators' past may be recollected and, ultimately, their common ancestral origins can be visualized. The combination of such an interactive introduction with two plots based on a traditional quest-pattern facilitates an understanding of the various interpretations of memory that underpin the text, while at the same time engaging the audience in its multidisciplinary microcosm from a personal point of view.

The correlation between the three levels of the dramaturgy is also a structural device that reproduces the complex system of stimulation and connection on which memory, and autobiographical memory in particular, is based. At the beginning of the show, McBurney refers to the mnemonic role of a chair that is on the stage: he is able to explain the connection that his brain has made between this object, his father, his family, and the history of his own theatre company, thanks to the information that the hippocampus gland of his brain has retained of the chair

itself.[4] At a larger level, the whole show is conformed of a series of elements —be they narrative lines, characters, spaces, props, words, or the metaphors that all of them create— whose reciprocal association becomes gradually evident as we gain knowledge of the stories themselves. The readers' and spectators' recognition of this pattern of interconnections is ensured by means of dramaturgical repetitions. For example, some actions are re-enacted twice or re-appear as a flashback,[5] and several key sentences are said either by different characters in distinctive scenes, or in a sequence of intertwined dialogues.[6]

Mnemonic also resorts to the travel metaphor in order to theatricalize the exuberant connectivity of the brain during an act of remembrance. In particular, it signifies the link between the 'here-and-now' to the 'there-and-then' of a certain recollection. The travel metaphor is also used in psychological theories of memory. As Alan Baddeley puts it, "[r]emembering is associated with the subjective 're-experiencing' of the event," and is typically accompanied by a "feeling of 'mental time travel.'"[7] The symbolic connection between travelling and remembering is semiotized in different ways in Complicite's show: for instance, through language, as in expressions such as "train of thoughts";[8] using spatial configurations, as with the Eurostar train on which Alice travels[9] or the taxi that carries different passengers;[10] and by means of movements that create a symbolic action, such as the expedition to the Austrian Alps that leads to the discovery of the Iceman,[11] or the cultural pilgrimage to Europe carried out by American tourists.[12] Travel and its various representations thus become a powerful metaphor to convey the almost immediate mental journey that is generated when we remember, which creates a new perception of time and of ourselves.

The show's representation of memory through the prisms of psychology and neuroscience is completed by the company's manipulation of props and scenery. Exploiting the polyfunctionality of the theatrical sign, which is part of McBurney's Lecoqian background, Complicite bestow the pieces of scenery of the play with a life

of their own, re-arranging them several times.[13] When moved across the stage, props and pieces of the setting create new spaces and, hence, vary the perspectives through which a situation is presented. Since many of the scenes represent the characters' recollections, the change of spatial configuration bears a direct connection with the unstable nature of memory. These spatial modifications demonstrate, as McBurney says in the play, that memory is unreliable because "we know that when we remember it comes out slightly… different each time."[14]

Furthermore, the movement of props and scenery presents the objects themselves as parts of a broken whole that can be re-composed from different angles. The distinction between settings, situations and their respective recollection is conditioned by the assemblage of their fragments; the same happens with memory, which depends, in Baddeley's words, on a "capacity to recollect associated detail."[15] The movement of scenery on the stage also highlights the spaces that are created between the pieces, thus alluding to the cracks that give memories their discontinuous appearance. In the documentary *Doris Lessing: In Her Words*, Lessing uses a cinematic metaphor to illustrate the mysterious ellipses of memory: she states that remembering is like watching a very long film with constant fade outs.[16] In fact, *Mnemonic* also resorts to black outs in order to reproduce the discontinuous nature of episodic memory.[17]

Other elements expand the play's portrayal of memory beyond the representation of its neuronal and psychic mechanisms, thereby appealing to the readers and spectators as receptacles of a certain culture and as heirs of a particular history. In this respect, Alice's search for her father can be interpreted as archetypically representing the search for identity, which entails an understanding of one's origins. Counterpointing Alice's quest, two characters advocate forgetfulness as a means to succeed on a prosperous blank slate: these are the Maid that Alice meets in Berlin and Simonides, the taxi driver. These figures are part of a historical network of conflict and sorrow to which *Mnemonic* alludes in its recreation of

collective memory, both through repeated recreations of migration and exile, through references to violent episodes of European history, such as the Greco-Turkish war or the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and to the disturbingly colossal wound of the Holocaust.

Despite the obvious fissures in the characters' collective past and the spaces of confrontation that are recreated in the play —either in the form of migration control, as implied in the Maid's fear of the police, or in the dispute between Italy and Austria over the Iceman— the show also suggests the historical and cultural bonds underlying the different groups of characters. The notion of exuberant connectivity whereby *Mnemonic* represents memory on a neurobiological level is tinged in this case with social and historical overtones. Thus, shortly after defining herself as "a Welsh Lithuanian from … north London,"[18] Alice learns that her father was a Polish Jew[19] and that she has a half-brother in Ukraine,[20] thereby realizing that her identity is part of an even larger network of entangled memories. Creating another kind of connection on a larger scale, Alice finishes her personal search in Bolzano, where the Iceman is being studied and displayed before the eyes of other characters.[21] Alice does not find a definitive answer about her progenitor, but is confronted instead with the frozen body of the Iceman. Thus, a rushed nomad or, one could say, a mysterious migrant constitutes the enigmatic answer to her quest.

In their portrayal of collective memory, Complicite fall back on another traditional element that is also a frequent Lecoqian device, that is, the chorus. In *Mnemonic* the chorus is not so much seen but heard, either as an echo,[22] a collage of calls and conversations,[23] a communal mantra,[24] or in the form of traditional songs.[25] Together, its voices enact the multivocal nature of 'social' or 'shared' memory which, as Jerman and Hautaniemi affirm, "includes and intertwines memory processes of both individuals and collectivities, and indicates a dialectic relationship between past and present and future."[26] The text's multivocality is reinforced by the various languages that complement English as the main vehicle of verbal

expression, that is, German,[27] French,[28] Greek,[29] Polish,[30] Rumantsch[31] and Yiddish,[32] which create a sonorous map of contrasted time-spaces. The strong winds that are reproduced several times in the show, whose sound and power are defined as "ear-splitting"[33] and "terrible,"[34] also underline the dialectic blend of temporal frames created by the chorus and its various languages. Every time they blow, the winds force the company to adopt a similar corporeal attitude which enables the transition from one time-frame to another. At the same time, the company's choreographed movement suggests the characters' resilience and common bonds despite their heterogeneity, thereby making the acoustic chorus visible to the audience.

The violent winds of time and history are like the sword of Mars and "war's quick fire" in Shakespeare's sonnet: they transmute everything, but they also discriminate that which remains from that which is forgotten.[35] In Complicite's play various elements outlive individual and collective oblivion to become veritable monuments of the past. The Iceman's body itself is defined as a "national" and "ancient" monument in the play's dialogues,[36] but there are other objects which acquire comparable connotations. From the Russian wind-up watch that belonged to Alice's father[37] and the box containing his alleged personal belongings,[38] up to the remnants of the Iceman[39] or the piece of palaganite that Alice wears around her neck —which is thought to be "400 million years old" and brings back memories of her boyfriend Virgil[40]— the show is full of small mnemonic objects that attain a massive historical significance on public and private levels. Not only do these miniaturized forms of memorial recreate a collective past, but they also contribute to the re-construction of a shared present. As Cornelius Holtorf maintains, monuments "also invite new memories."[41]

Considering the play's contemporary character and theatre itself as a "memory machine," as Marvin Carlson phrases it,[42] *Mnemonic* can also be envisaged as signifying memory from a postmodern viewpoint and, thus, as

throwing light not only on our Selves as individual and social entities, but also on the cultural and historical spaces that we inhabit. In a way, *Mnemonic* may be regarded as a theatrical "postmodern chronotope," just as Paul Smethurst defines this concept as "as an optic … for seeing and reading the contemporary."[43]

To start with, the different time-frames and knotted narratives of the dramaturgy are in line with post-Newtonian theories of time in their re-presentation of the past as a massive, chaotic and highly subjective phenomenon. Hence, *Mnemonic* not only relies on flashbacks and repetition to break temporal linearity, but also on scenes that conflate dreams with imaginary situations and which, therefore, include the characters' "psychological time," in Stephen Hawking's terms.[44] In a flashback scene, Virgil says to Alice that "[p]erhaps one of the most astonishing discoveries of modern times is the immensity of the past."[45] Interestingly enough, the sentence does not only apply to the Iceman plot-line, but also to the hybrid nature of Virgil's own recollections as both real and imaginary; to Alice's untraceable family origins; and, ultimately, to the never-ending fractal pattern of the spectators' ancestral lines, which becomes manifest in the interactive exercise between McBurney and the audience. In this respect, the play's postmodern recreation of time as almost inapprehensible in its lack of linear direction, immense fragmentation and uncontrolled subjectivity re-defines memory as almost a miraculous ordering principle that apparently connects disparate and immeasurable individual and communal time-frames.

Yet, the subjective component of memory obviously makes this ordering principle unreliable, as has been mentioned. The show's frequent use of video-projections and voiceover does nothing but reinforce the play's unstable world of appearances. Even if these technical devices act as guiding signs at certain times,[46] they frequently disorient reader and spectator by sinking them into a relative universe of simulacra.[47] The technological signs of the play hence separate memory from the past to which it refers, and even from the present-time in which it is evoked.

As Smethurst maintains, when we watch video and other digitally-coded images, we are actually within "a programmed stream of time detached from any other reference points but the play of images and sound itself."[48] From this perspective, memory becomes a form of fiction occurring in an independent timescape.

The progressive "loss of the real" that characterizes the postmodern and that is fostered by recorded material may certainly lead to "the figuration of collapsed perspective."[49] In fact, *Mnemonic* announces the rupture of any solid standpoint when the chair that McBurney had presented in his opening monologue collapses under Virgil's weight.[50] Significantly, just before the chair falls apart Virgil was alluding to chaos theory by talking about the unpredictable pattern that governs our lives. Whenever the chair re-appears in the play, readers and spectators are aware of its fragmentary configuration and, consequently, are reminded of the re-constructed, ever-changing pattern of the entire show. In a way, this complements the company's theatrical presentation of memory from a postmodern viewpoint: if our conceptualizations of the past and the present can easily change their perspective or fall apart, it is only the act of observing itself that can be re-membered; it is, then, the observation itself that becomes mnemonic material.

This poses, on the other hand, another complication: the subjective element of the observation. This inevitably calls to mind Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which underlies the study of the Iceman. Referring to the Iceman conference-scene, in which contradictory theories on his death are presented by a community of researchers, Liliane Campos maintains that the show "places the theatrical gaze and the scientific gaze against each other, undermining the objectivity of the laboratory by pointing out its theatricality."[51] In the same vein, the use of a plastic curtain that divides the presentational space into different fictional spaces also underlines the theatrical character of the situations represented, while at the same time signifying the sense of conditioned or distorted perception that affects the observer's gaze and its object.[52] The neutrality of what is observed is also

questioned in the play by means of a constant mixture of the observer and observed — thus, McBurney, the director, becomes an actor-spectator, Virgil;[53] Virgil's body often substitutes that of the Iceman throughout the play; the tourists gradually replace the Iceman in the final scene;[54] and the spectators have become observers of their own memories and hence, in a way, are rendered participants in the play's entangled stories from the beginning. All in all, these signs highlight the limitations of memory even if it is confined to a mere act of observation, and invoke the complementary action of another mental activity that can also acquire individual and collective implications, namely, imagining.

When Alice signals the end of her quest by declaring that she cannot remember, Virgil responds: "It's OK. It's all right. Then imagine."[55] The open end of Alice's story and the unresolved mystery of the Iceman's death, which remains unsolved despite recent theories about his homicide, reflect the impossibility to retrieve the past in its totality. In a way, this proves the Maid's thesis that "in the past, you always arrive too late."[56] At the same time, it reinforces the ties between memory and imagination. McBurney suggests this bond at the beginning of the play when he claims that "re-membering is essentially not only an act of retrieval but a creative thing, it happens in the moment, it's an act … of the imagination."[57] The key questions to go on from here would be what should be imagined and how so as not to betray memory's deep-rooted relation to reality, no matter how inapprehensible reality has become in the postmodern world.

Mnemonic does not offer an answer to such questions; otherwise it would actually block the mechanisms of imagination itself. However, its theatrical devices act as an artistic compass for readers and spectators by providing them with scientific knots that form networks of theories; with cultural patterns that form maps of identities; with individual stories that re-present aspects of European history; and, more important, with dramaturgical strategies that re-construct human empathy on the stage and which foster emotional bonds with the audience. As has been shown,

all these guiding elements convey various meanings about what memory is and how it can be interpreted from differentiated points of view; about how we can pre-dict the past when the past has to be re-considered or re-defined; about how we can re-assemble the present and, hence, re-member it; and about how, by doing so, we can re-discover a more complete sense of Self in its individual and social dimensions. Peter Brook says that after a powerful performance, "it is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say."[58] The silhouette of *Mnemonic* remains vivid for many spectators after seven years; and by living on in "the living record of [our] memories," to quote Shakespeare again,[59] it lets its 'rightly blended strategies' re-construct memory again and again as a project for the future.

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[1] William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p.60.

[2] Simon McBurney and Complicite, *Mnemonic* (London: Methuen, 1999).

[3] Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.211.

[4] McBurney and Complicite, p.5.

[5] McBurney and Complicite, p. 38-39, p.74.

[6] McBurney and Complicite, p. 75.

[7] Alan Baddeley, *Working Memory, Thought, and Action* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p.340.

[8] McBurney and Complicite, p.10.

[9] McBurney and Complicite, pp.17, 38, 8, 51.

[10] McBurney and Complicite, pp.44, 50, 55.

[11] McBurney and Complicite, pp.17.

[12] McBurney and Complicite, pp.48-49.

[13] McBurney and Complicite, pp.14, 36.

[14] McBurney and Complicite, p.3.

[15] Alan Baddeley, p.340.

[16] Nobelmedia, *Doris Lessing: In Her Words* (TWI, 2007).

[17] McBurney and Complicite, pp.6, 16.

[18] McBurney and Complicite, p.45.

[19] McBurney and Complicite, p.52.

[20] McBurney and Complicite, p.59.

[21] McBurney and Complicite, p.66.

[22] McBurney and Complicite, pp.15-16.

[23] McBurney and Complicite, p.34.

[24] McBurney and Complicite, p.76.

[25] McBurney and Complicite, pp.24, 54.

[26] Helena Jerman and Petri Hautaniemi, 'Introduction', *Anthropological Perspectives on Social Memory.* 39, 78 (2007), pp. 1-7, p.2.

[27] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 18, 38, 67.

[28] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 21, 42.

[29] McBurney and Complicite, p.23.

[30] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 48-50.

[31] McBurney and Complicite, p. 50.

[32] McBurney and Complicite, p. 54.

[33] McBurney and Complicite, p.20.

[34] McBurney and Complicite, p.24.

[35] William Shakespeare, p.60.

[36] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 30, 34.

[37] McBurney and Complicite, p. 37.

[38] McBurney and Complicite, p. 51.

[39] McBurney and Complicite, p. 37.

[40] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 28, 52.

[41] Howard Williams, ed., *Archaeologies of Remembrance: Death and Memory in Past Societies* (New York: Kluwer Academic, 2003), p.281.

[42] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p.2.

[43] Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), p.4.

[44] Paul Smethurst, p. 314.

[45] McBurney and Complicite, p.28.

[46] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 17, 20, 28, 41, 46-47.

[47] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 8, 11, 15, 30, 32, 34, 54, 74, 76.

[48] Paul Smethurst, p.99.

[49] Paul Smethurst, p.99.

[50] McBurney and Complicite, p.13.

[51] Liliane Campos, 'Searching for Resonance: Scientific Patterns in Complicite's *Mnemonic* and *A Disappearing Number*', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 32, 4 (2007), pp. 326-34, p. 328.

[52] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 14, 21.

[53] McBurney and Complicite, p.8.

[54] McBurney and Complicite, pp. 75-76.

[55] McBurney and Complicite, p. 73.

[56] McBurney and Complicite, p.46.

[57] McBurney and Complicite, p.4.

[58] Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, p.149.

[59] William Shakespeare, p.60.