Changing Memory – Shaping Power: The Sound of Music

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If one puts the two phrases 'Changing Memory' and 'Shaping Power,' which serve as the title of this article, in relation to the title of the publication, "Changing Time – Shaping World," the former turn out to be specifications of the latter: 'time' manifests itself, among other things, in the form of 'memory,' since we only perceive time because we remember; and in order to be able to (re)shape the world, we need 'power.'

'Changing time' can be understood in two ways: Firstly, in the sense that time/the times are inevitably and constantly changing, and so is everything that is subject to time, including us; and secondly, meaning that we can, and should, try to use time to change and shape people and things (for the better). Both considerations come down to the actuality that we can take advantage of the fact that time changes us and things so as to consciously shape this process, and try to find a direction in which we can strive to (re)shape the world.

However, this takes orientation, for example through history, and thus 'changing memory' can be read in two ways: Once again, from the perspective that memory changes incessantly as time passes (we forget some things and remember others as the hierarchy between individual memories shifts), which in turn has consequences for our actions, as they depend decisively on what we perceive to be truly important (or less so), and also to the degree that we can consciously shape this process of changing memories, i.e. work on changing our memories by dealing with previously repressed issues – think of the current debate on colonialism, for example: this then also puts our actions into perspective, as we regard certain aspects as important, while others that were perhaps important before – such as the perspective of the colonial states – now appear less so. This is to say that there is not the one memory or the one history – as changing and altered memories al-

ways factor into a changing and altered history – and we are always confronted with previously unknown or hidden perspectives in our view of history, that is: with other histories.[1]

What we need, therefore, is both the availability of diverse stories and the willingness to open up to them, such that our own memories can be enriched and changed in order to gain, if necessary, new trajectories for a future, also in the sense of 'shaping power.' This is not about relativism in terms of "everyone has their own story and is therefore right in their own mind," but about becoming aware of, and perceiving, different perspectives and the resulting different stories that are to be put in relation to one another.

The Story of a Medium's Stories

This naturally raises the question of the 'how': How, then, can the diversity of memories and the resulting stories be communicated in the most broadly effective and appealing way possible?

A good option seems to be a medium that appears all the more suited to providing such different stories as it itself seems to be characterized by a multitude of different ones. For some observers, the music video genre only came into being with the launch of the music channel MTV on 1 August 1981, an event that raised the curtain for the genre's meteoric rise with video clips by such directors as Sophia Coppola, Chris Cunningham, Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze from the beginning of the 1990s onward.[2] The heyday of music video was reflected most emphatically in anthology DVDs released at the start of the new millennium. Series including the "Directors Label"[3] featured collections of music videos that had previously aired on music television channels such as MTV – until the outlet became increasingly obsolete as digital platforms (YouTube in particular, launched in 2005) became the primary distributor of short, video-based content. In February 2010, the American cable channel finally removed the words "Music Television" from its logo.

Yet the fact that MTV first went live at 12:01 a.m. on 1 August 1981 with a music video from 1979 – Russel Mulcahy's video for "Video Killed the Radio Star" by The Buggles – also shows that the genre must have existed before then, a circumstance that leads some to point to 1975 as another date mark-

1 See also the title of Paolo Mieli's 1999 book "Le Storie. La Storia."
2 Cf. for example Marino, 2001, pp. 8–9.
3 Cf. Directors Label, 2003–2010.

ing the start of the history/histories of the music video. That year, the British band Queen appeared on the music chart television show "Top of the Pops" not in person, but in a film made shortly before by Bruce Gowers. The band can be seen singing their song "Bohemian Rhapsody."[4] Of course, a closer look at Mulcahy's video for The Buggles reveals that there seem to be other, more justified candidates for the start of the history of the music video. In the clip, just when the chorus line "Video killed the radio star" is being intoned for the second time (01:25), the camera pans to a television monitor on which two women appear to be singing these very words (Fig. 1). They are positioned in such a way that the singer on the left is seen in profile, while the singer on the right is shown frontally – analogous to the 16mm promo films for the band ABBA. Shot as early as 1974 (that is: one year before Gowers's clip for "Bohemian Rhapsody") by the Swedish director Lasse Hallström, they were made to represent the group on music shows in lieu of live performances (Fig. 2). Taking his cue from films by his compatriot Ingmar Bergmann, Hallström positioned the two ABBA singers in the way described as early as 1975 in videos for songs including "Mamma Mia" and "I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do."[5] The extent to which this was apparently already perceived as a trademark for late-1970s ABBA videos is evident in Mulcahy's homage in "Video Killed the Radio Star."[6]

However, if we look at the function of these promo films, which was to advertise the visualized pieces of music, we also find corresponding precursors as early as the 1960s in the form of the so-called Scopitone, a type of coin-operated jukebox featuring 16mm film shorts (Fig. 3). In other words, just like today, when you can select individual music videos on the Internet and – unlike with MTV – do not have to wait for the desired clip, a Scopitone user could pick a film by pressing a button as early as 1960. Scopitones gradually lost their appeal after the late 1960s, when music shows and similar genres gained ground on color television.[7]

Scopitones share this media-progress-related demise with their predecessors, the Soundies: popular in the 1940s, these visual jukeboxes showed black-and-white 16mm musical films (Fig. 4). Like MTV after 1981, they offered no control over when which film would be shown, as clips were played one after another from a single, large film reel. While Scopitones were superseded

4 Cf. for example Marino, 2001, p. 8.
5 Cf. Keazor & Wübbena, 2011, pp. 66–67.
6 Cf. Keazor, 2022.
7 Cf. Keazor & Wübbena, 2011, pp. 62–63.

by color television, Soundies lost their appeal when more and more private black-and-white-television sets found their way into households. Nevertheless, Soundies anticipated some of the musical visualization ideas found in 1970s music videos, as can be seen, for example, with a comparative look at a scene from Gjon Mili and Norman Granz's 1944 short film for the jazz song "Jammin' the Blues" (Fig. 5) and a moment from Bruce Gowers's 1975 video for Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" (Fig. 6).

But if you thought that Soundies were the first chapter in music video history, you are mistaken, because Thomas Alva Edison's Kinetophone, introduced as early as 1891, was originally developed to reproduce, for example, opera performances at any time.[8] And in 1916, the French film production company Gaumont made a short film to advertise the song "Anna, qu'est-ce que t'attends?" [Anna, what are you waiting for?], interpreted by the Belgian performer and comedian Bruno François Fieremans (also known by the pseudonyms "Blond'hin" or "Blon-D'hin") with a plot acted out in outdoor scenes and working with lip synching.[9] Depending on the point of view, various efforts have been made to trace the ancestors of music video even further back to the 18th century,[10] or in fact to Leonardo da Vinci.[11]

Revision and Progress

In view of this/these very long (pre-)history/ies and the broad social impact that has become clear, it may be all the more surprising that before 2008, music video was hardly seen as a noteworthy means of social or political influence but was apparently 'only' regarded as a medium of entertainment or realization of certain aesthetics. A possible political use was at least conceived in the fictional genre of the feature film: "Bob Roberts" is a 1992 mockumentary directed by Tim Robbins, who also played the title character, a conservative folk singer and self-made millionaire who wants to win the 1990 Senate elections in the state of Pennsylvania as a Republican by all means available – legal or, especially, corrupt. The protagonist uses music videos in his election campaign to re-vision American history in both the literal and figurative sense: in a clip strategically released on election day, which takes the top of the music charts by storm, Roberts stages himself in the uniform of an American sol-

8 Cf. Keazor & Wübbena 2011, p. 61.
9 Cf. Keazor & Wübbena, 2010b, p. 224.
10 Cf. Keazor & Wübbena, 2010a, pp. 23–24.
11 See the compilation in Keazor & Wübbena, 2011, p. 59.

dier who, at the end of the American War of Independence, victoriously duels a devious supporter of his (present) opponent, Democratic Senator Brickley Paiste (Fig. 7).

The supporter, dressed in a mix of historical uniform and batik shirt with Paiste's campaign button on, tries to kill Roberts from behind with a grenade weapon, while Roberts himself only has an 18th-century handgun at his disposal. Paiste, the indirect adversary of Roberts in the scene, is fighting for American independence and is therefore defamed as an enemy of the United States. Images of young men in anachronistic modern business suits, who seem to have fallen as martyrs but come to life again toward the end of the clip, establish a reference to the present election, in which Roberts has shortly before been the victim of a (fictitious) political assassination attempt, but which he pretends to have survived seriously injured. The programmatic title of the song in the music video – "I want to live" – is a decisive factor in the video's resounding impact and the song's chart success, as well as Roberts's eventual election victory over Paiste.

In a more figurative sense, however, Roberts re-visions American cultural history earlier in the film with a clip of his "Wall Street Rap." The song is taken from his album "Times are Changin' Back," which makes the video a direct response to Bob Dylan's 1964 song "The Times They Are a-Changin'" in general and Don Alan Pennebaker's 1965 version of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in particular,[12] which has been adapted and referenced again and again in great abundance for the most diverse purposes and occasions[13]: here as there (Fig. 8–9), the performers are standing against the backdrop of a dreary back alley to the right of the scene. Instead of lip-synching, they are scrolling down cue cards with a stoic expression and not always in sync. The cards feature individual words from the lyrics, which are interpreted musically in a rhythmic chant.[14] But while Dylan has the pop poet Allen Ginsberg and his fellow folk singer Bob Neuwirth standing next to sacks of cement, Roberts's clip shows two American businessmen talking on their cellphones and standing in front of bags of money that they then carry away. Moreover,

12 Incidentally, a promo film that is sometimes also considered the first music video in history (see, for example, the undated "Rolling Stone: The 100 Top Music Videos" chart, where the clip holds number seven).

13 Cf. Keazor & Wübbena, 2011, pp. 443–446.

14 Which is why the "Subterranean Homesick Blues" was later seen as an early precursor of rap ("Is this the very first rap song?" Christopher R. Weingarten asked in 2010).

whereas Dylan's alley remains empty, there are business girls in white shirts, ties and short skirts dancing in the "Wall Street Rap."

The clip also counteracts Dylan's statements in terms of content, most prominently in the album's title "Times are Changin' Back." Dylan narratively sketches a spectrum of US society in the mid-1960s with just a few words, using a series of rapidly alternating vignettes, and urges the audience to be vigilant and authority-critical and use their brains ("Look out, kid [...] You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows"). Roberts, on the other hand, acts exactly like one such authority who, based on his opposing view of US society and from the vantage point of a right-wing conservative neoliberal, gives the advice: "By all means necessary: Make Millions" (Fig. 9).

In 1992, it may have seemed like a fantastic thing to use music videos in election campaigns, but this became a reality when the presidential candidate Barack Obama's famous "Yes We Can" speech was made into a music video after the primary in the state of New Hampshire on 8 January 2008. The clip, which was directed by Bob Dylan's son, Jesse Dylan, and produced by the American rapper, singer, songwriter and record producer will.i.am, features 37 celebrities including actors and musicians such as Scarlett Johansson, Nicole Scherzinger, John Legend and Herbie Hancock. These echo Obama's words, which are played in the background of the clip, both acoustically and visually, either spoken or sung in sync. The speech took an optimistic approach to American history. It addressed major global political problems and the attempt to achieve justice, prosperity and world peace, and referenced analogous past achievements in the refrain "Yes, we can." These words became the campaign slogan, which explains the enthusiasm that the performers increasingly display in the course of the clip. Their zeal is carefully balanced by the seriousness shown elsewhere and especially at the beginning by participants who – in line with the strict black-and-white aesthetics of the clip – appear just as thoughtful, assiduous, and determined.[15]

15 For the creation and structure of the video, see Vernallis, 2011.

Alternative Views

In conclusion, two examples illustrate alternative ways of communicating (American) history.

On 5 May 2018, the video for the song "This is America" by the American rapper Childish Gambino (real name: Donald Glover), directed by Hiro Murai, was published on YouTube. It received 12.9 million views within 24 hours (according to Wikipedia, the video had been viewed more than 800 million times by November 2021). If one were to describe the video in purely formal terms according to its elements, one might be inclined at first glance to classify it as a typical hip hop video, since it bears the hallmarks of hip hop: the bare-chested performer (i.e. Childish Gambino) moves through the video in an elaborate choreography (by Sherrie Silver), indulging in brutal gun violence. Cars from various years of construction are shown, and on one of them sits a beautiful woman (US singer SZA, real name: Solána Imani Rowe) like a hood ornament.

On closer inspection, all these elements are brushed against the grain, as it were, since they tell an alternative, critical history of the USA through rapidly succeeding and merging scenes from a country dominated in an almost surreal way by firearms and fetishism revolving around these arms, as well as police violence and mobile phone voyeurism. Murai's video sketches a panopticon of contemporary America and critically highlights racial stereotypes when Childish Gambino briefly strikes a pose at the beginning of the video before executing a hooded man from behind with a shot to the head (Fig. 10), referencing old racial stereotypes such as that of "John Crow" (Fig. 11).[16] This character was popularized from the 1830s onward by the US actor Thomas D. Rice, who performed in blackface and embodied various prejudices against African Americans. By appropriating the characteristics of this figure in a caricature-like manner, Childish Gambino indirectly asks whether the clichés epitomized by it are still effective in contemporary America.

Barack Obama and the rock musician Bruce Springsteen undertook a completely different, decidedly more positive yet no less critical endeavor: they had become friends in the course of the 2008 presidential election campaign, during which Springsteen had performed. From February 2021 onward, they debated not in the format of a music video, but on an equally widely received eight-episode podcast series entitled "Renegades: Born in the USA," which was intended as a kind of 'cultural response' to Donald Trump's presidency.

16 Cf. Kasambala, 2018.

In October 2021, the conversations appeared as transcripts in the form of a book under the same title. Their encounters are enriched with private photos, song texts and contemporary documents. This is fitting insofar as Obama and Springsteen not only exchange private memories, but always do so in awareness of and against the backdrop of American history, to which they add their different, sometimes contradictory memories and stories. The fact that it is all about correcting and complementing the 'great American narrative' is made clear by opening and closing chapters: "What does it mean to be an American?" is a question asked at the beginning. The answer – "The stories and habits of mind that bind us together as people" – is immediately called into question in the following passage by Obama:

> For most Americans growing up in the fifties, the answers were pretty simple. […] That's the story we told ourselves, anyway. But it wasn't the whole story. It left a bunch of stuff out, whether it was the continuing discrimination against brown and Black people or all the ways that women were expected to stay in their place, or some of the ugly realities of our foreign policy during the Cold War. Bruce and I came of age as young people were challenging a lot of America's most cherished myths about itself. The result was a growing bitter divide in the country. A political and culture war that in a lot of ways we're still fighting today.[17]

The conversations that follow revolve around how different personal perspectives can complement each other rather than clash. These are closed by the question of how to find one's way back to a supra-personal level and tell a "new, unifying story about the country that is true to our highest ideals while at the same time giving an honest accounting of where we fall short[.]"[18] As an example of such shortfalls, Obama and Springsteen state that in American history "[t]he arch of history bends towards justice. But not in a straight line."[19] Obama and Springsteen by no means underestimate the challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of the pursued "new, unifying story about the country." In fact they explicitly address the ambivalent role of social media, such as the podcast used by themselves for "Renegades": "It's not an easy thing to do in these cynical times, especially when we've got a thousand different me-

17 Obama & Springsteen, 2021, p. 47.
18 Ibid., p. 251.
19 Ibid., pp. 146–147.

dia outlets and internet platforms that have figured out you can make lots of money fanning people's anger and resentment."[20]

But optimism has the final word: "Somehow, though, in some kind of way, we both believe that such a story is still there to be told and that folks across the country are hungry for it. We are convinced that, for all our disagreements, most of us long for a more just and compassionate America."[21]

The book ends on a personal note when Obama tries to sum up the outcome of the conversations, conceding that he "learned something," and Springsteen concludes, "So did I"[22]: the shared view of the personal stories considered in the context of the "big" story/stories and their repercussion on the perception of the "big" story/stories has changed the view of the memories. Perhaps the desire and power for change can arise from what was learned in the process.

20 Ibid., p. 251.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 282.

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Figures

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Fig. 3: Advert for a Scopitone machine from 1963.

Fig. 4: Advert photo for the Panoram Visual Jukebox, ca. 1940.

Fig. 5: Gjon Mili/Norman Granz, Illinois Jacquet/Sweets Edison/Barney Kessel/Marlowe Morris "Jammin' the Blues," 1944.

Fig. 6: Bruce Gowers, Queen, "Bohemian Rhapsody," 1975.

Fig. 7: Tim Robbins as "Bob Roberts," 1992.

Fig. 8: Don Alan Pennebaker, Bob Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," 1965/67.

Fig. 9: Tim Robbins, "Bob Roberts," 1992.

Fig. 10: Hiro Murai (choreography: Sherrie Silver), Childish Gambino (Donald Glover), "This is America," 2018.

Fig. 11: Edward William Clay, Cover for an edition of "Jump Jim Crow" – sheet music, ca. 1832 with Thomas D. Rice as "Jim Crow."