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THE IMPORTANCE OF ART IN HUMAN LIFE, A PROUSTIAN INTERPRETATION
OF HONIGMANN'S FOREVER

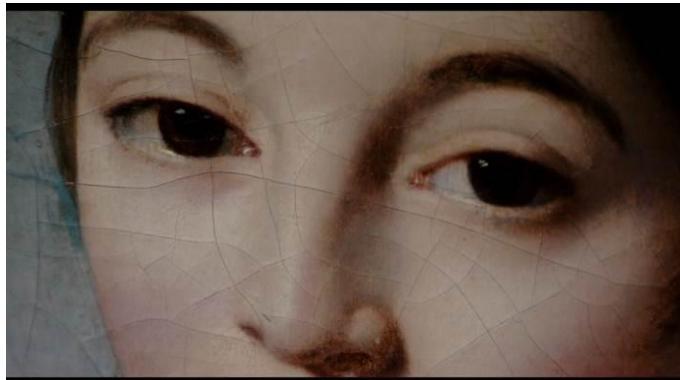
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Abstract: This article aims to present an exploration of the theme of art's power within human life in Heddy Honigmman's documentary film *Forever* (2006), which exemplifies her obsession with this topic. The film's contemplation of art is a self-reflexive one, as it uses the medium of film to explore representation through the visual arts, music and sound, in search of the essence of art itself. By focusing on Paris's famous Père-Lachaise cemetery and its visitors, the notion of art intermingling with life, love and death is shown at its most intense and moving. It will be argued that Marcel Proust's monumental cycle *Au Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) serves both as a model and as a kind of method for Honigmman's approach to this central theme in *Forever*. She does so, not only by reflecting upon but also by putting into practice Proust's notion of *involuntary memory*, which implies that sensory experiences can bring back 'forgotten' memories and make us experience eternity; and also by use of the *petite phrase* which reveals that only through repetition can the experience of a piece of art be fully comprehended or fully 'felt'. A modern day filmic version of Proustian aesthetics aiming to achieve a *truth* that falls somewhere between art and reality is thus formulated. However, where Proust's literate and philosophical writings on the importance of art in human life and its connection to the workings of our memory and emotional life are conceptual, Honigmman's filmic reflections are concrete. The power of film, the sensual medium, lay precisely in its emotional impact, relying on images and sounds that exploit, above all, our innate as well as learned aural, visual and linguistic competences. The more abstract or conceptual meaning of *Forever* is thus always subordinate to the experience in which this meaning is embodied. Some specific insights from cognitive film theorists Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith and Damasio's theory on human consciousness will allow me to suggest an explanation of these ideas.

Introduction and Theoretical Background

It is only through art that we can escape from ourselves and know how another person sees a universe which is not the same as our own and whose landscapes would otherwise have remained as unknown as any there may be on the moon

-Marcel Proust in 'In Search of Lost Time'



The power and vitality of art and music in human life is an important theme in nearly all of the award winning documentaries of independent filmmaker Heddy Honigmann (born in Lima, 1951), and is central to several of her films. Musicians exiled from their homelands

make their living performing in the Paris metro in *The Underground Orchestra*. Cuban exiles in New York celebrate their Latin roots by performing and enjoying dance and music in *Dame la Mano*. Elderly people in Rio de Janeiro speak about their love-life in relation to the erotic writings of the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade in *O Amor Natural* (1996). However, it is in the documentary on Paris's famous Père-Lachaise cemetery, *Forever* (2006), that this theme is explored most extensively.ⁱ "I am making a film about the importance of art in life" is Honigmann's answer to a visitor in the cemetery who asks her in a scene early in the film why she is filming. In order to analyze the contemplation, representation and use of art in Honigmann's artistic oeuvre, this essay will focus on *Forever*. Marcel Proust's monumental cycle: *Au Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), published between 1913 and 1927, I argue, serves as both a model and a kind of method for Honigmann and should, be considered as her most self-reflexive film. Like Proust, Honigmann reflects, in *Forever*, on the nature, importance and function of art in human life as well as its connection to the workings of our memory and emotional lives; additionally, as in Proust, music and painting are the main vehicles for the examination of the relationship between perception, memory and art.ⁱⁱ In this way she explores this conception of art whilst simultaneously putting this into practice by creating her own work of art, following Proust's example. As will be analyzed, Honigmann

builds upon her knowledge of Proust's ideas on the nature and meaning of art and his notion of *involuntary memory*, which implies that sensory experiences, like a smell or a taste, can bring back 'forgotten' memories with all the feelings and impressions that were originally associated with it. In Proust's view, art can produce a similar sensorial and aesthetic experience, because in order to really appreciate and enjoy a piece of music or a painting one has to listen to it or to see it repeatedly. Through repetition the present experience of the piece of art becomes intertwined with the memory of past experiences of the same piece of art. This process can similarly resemble *involuntary memory*, a phenomenon that Proust described with such extraordinary skill in the famous scene of the *petite madeleine* (little cake). In this scene the protagonist of the *Recherche* experiences an extreme feeling of happiness and is illuminated with a childhood memory by the taste of a little cake; a scene that will be discussed in more detail later because it is explicitly addressed in *Forever*.

Proust developed his thoughts on the working of the human mind and its relation with the arts at the beginning of the twentieth century in the context of the rise of Darwinism and the industrial and technical revolution. These developments sparked interest in the study of emotion and radical new ideas about cognition. The question of how we produce moral behavior was no longer the exclusive field of moral philosophy and gave rise to the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology. Proust's thinking is of course based on remarkable erudition and deep knowledge of contemporary and classical authors whose ideas he developed and added to. To what extent his ideas were original is an ongoing debate, which we will not explore here, although for the purpose of this essay it is interesting to explore the extent to which Proust's use of the idea of involuntary memory was original. According to the neurologists Bogousslavsky and Walusinski, Proust was highly influenced by his former psychiatrist-neurologist Paul Sollier who had studied memory in depth and who also used this knowledge to provoke emotional surges of involuntary memories in his patients. In the numerous allusions to memory in Proust's novels there is indeed a large emphasis on involuntary memory. Proust emphasized direct and indirect associations, which may lead to re-experiencing as defined by Sollier. Proust also mentioned the floating of consciousness", which may produce a surge of vivid memories (an experience Proust may have undergone himself during his treatment by Sollier). However, Bogousslavsky and Walusinski observe that Proust went beyond Sollier in two matters: He emphasized the "shock" provoked by

the surge of a previously forgotten vivid memory, which may lead to an intense feeling of happiness and beatitude due to the affective overlap between the past and the present. This phenomenon leads to a synthesis of past and present in the subject, with a feeling of untemporality. Secondly, the resurgence of vivid past memories first produces an impression, which may subsequently lead to desire and decision, to be followed by action. (Bogousslavsky and Walusinski, 2009).

The authors plead for a rehabilitation of Sollier's work on memory, and thus indirectly for that of Proust, as they consider him a precursor in the field of the reunification of neurology and psychiatry for which the early twenty-first century is now providing the scientific grounds.

Consequently, I would argue that Proust's ideas on the working of the human mind are of great relevance now that once again the study of emotions is a central theme in both science (including the humanities) and the arts. As the leading neuroscientist, specialized in the relations between the working of the brain and creativity, Antonio Damasio, explains, after the cognitive revolution of the late seventies and eighties we are now experiencing an emotional revolution in (neuro)science as a result of revolutionary insights in the working of the human brain and the terrain of human consciousness (Damasio 2009, 2010: 7-15). This renewed awareness of the fact that we are not only rational, but are above all emotional beings also explains why the emotional processing of film by the viewer has become a major topic in the field of film studies. The power of film lies precisely in its emotional impact; as Carl Plantinga observes, moving image media relies first of all on images and sounds that exploit the innate perceptual capacities, although of course learned linguistic, visual and aural competences also play an important role. (Plantinga 2009: 112-113).

Both Proust and Honigmann reflect in an artistic way on the workings of our brain and its creativity in relation to our inner emotional life. However, where Proust's literate and philosophical writings (because of the very nature of language) are conceptual, Honigmann's filmic reflections are concrete. The more abstract or conceptual meaning of *Forever* is thus always subordinate to the experience in which this meaning is embodied. On a conceptual level Honigmann's interpretations of Proust's idea of the eternity offered by art and the redemptive work of involuntary memory, do not claim to offer any new insights on Proust, and are maybe even based on a quite basic interpretation of the same. I suggest that Honigmann, who was taught

at a French school, is a reader of Proust, not a reader of scholarship of Proust. Her modest work of art is of course in many ways incomparable to Proust's monumental cycle which inspired it. However, in *Forever*, Honigmann formulates a modern day version of Proustian aesthetics through the elaboration of (some of) his thoughts on art and life using the emotional medium of film. She reflects on the importance of art in human life through a systematic study of the different arts including music, painting, poetry, literature and film and thus reveals an implicit poetics: an ethical lesson in listening, watching and feeling by and through the arts, which is in turn studied and experienced by and through the medium of documentary film. To reveal how this is done, the next part of this essay will be dedicated to a 'close reading' of *Forever* based on an aesthetic and cognitive approach, although 'reading' is in this context of course not the right word as it includes 'seeing', 'hearing' and 'feeling', so in fact it would be better to speak of something that falls between a 'close experience' or 'close interpretation'. For the way in which Honigmann puts into practice Proust's precursory ideas on the working of our memory and emotional life, I will furthermore rely on some specific insights from cognitive film theory as elaborated by Carl Plantinga and Greg. M. Smith, as well as insights on human consciousness as theorized by Antonio Damasio, that can be seen as providing scientific grounds for Proust's view of these topics.

Overture



Honigmann's documentary centers on interviews with several of the mourners that visit Père Lachaise. They do so not only to mourn the dead but also to remember and pay a tribute to them, be it their beloved relatives or various famous artists. Among the latter are Chopin, Proust, Appolinaire, Ingres, Simone Signoret, Yves Montand, Maria Callas, Michel Petrucciani, Sadegh Hedayat (Iran's foremost modernist writer), Georges Meliès and Modigliani. As can be observed, all the different arts: music, literature, poetry, the visual arts and film are included here. All the deceased artists mentioned above are associated with one or several of their regular visitors at

Père Lechaise, who are consequently the principal characters of the film. As we shall see, Chopin, Ingres and not surprisingly, Proust along with their living allies, are the most prominent characters of the film. The interviews are constantly alternated with what Greg. M. Smith calls *emotion markers*: shots that have no meaning for the narrative of the film but are used to emphasize a certain mood and provoke specific emotions in the viewer, such as, for example, a shot of a black cat in a lugubrious street used in a horror movie. Together with the selected sounds, music, use of color (including color intensity), mise-en-scène and durations of the shots, these emotion markers create the mood of a film as well as the emotions and feelings provoked in the viewer. Emotion markers are usually short and ephemeral in mainstream films, as demonstrated by Smith's research (Smith 1999: 117-126). In Honigmann's film on the contrary, they are long and intense and therefore as important for the meaning of the film as the interviews that form the more explicit narrative line.

The first three and a half minutes of *Forever* consist almost exclusively of a collage of emotion markers that provoke dual emotions in the viewer. There are, on the one-hand, emotions associated with loss and death, and on the other those associated with love and comfort. Three different categories can be distinguished within this collage: tombstones with inscriptions, stone statues of human figures and flowers plus images of real flowers and images of trees and people visiting the graveyard. The color-intensities used are natural, it is a bright summer day and there is only ambient sound. This collage serves as the *overture* of the filmic composition, the part (or *theme* in musical terms) that already contains in essence the meaning of the rest of the piece. In the establishing shot we see Père Lechaise from a bird's-eye viewpoint, far away in the background the sound of traffic can be heard. The camera zooms in a bit more on the graveyard and remains in a fixed position for almost ten seconds, trees that sway softly in the wind form the only movement. Meanwhile the background sound of traffic falls silent and is replaced by sounds of nature: the wind in the trees and chirping birds. In the next shot the camera rests on a tombstone with huge ceramic flowers and a treble-clef carved in stone and then zooms in while the title of the film appears: *FOR* in white and *EVER* in grey. Simultaneously the sound of chirping birds becomes a little louder. In this way it is of course suggested that although life is finite, music lasts forever. The sounds are clearly that of an edited soundtrack as the sound smoothly continues while the images are being edited. There is also an explicit 'sound' of (near) silence emphasizing the ambience of sadness, melancholy, serenity and contemplation we

associate with a graveyard. A long shot in close up of two fragile but flourishing pink roses swaying softly in the wind in the foreground, in front of a piece of gravestone, symbolizes the vivid love and togetherness that once was. These images are brought together in a shot of a statue, which portrays a woman putting a laurel wreath on the head of a reclining dead male figure, while in the background we vaguely perceive visitors passing by. *Forever* refers in this way to the convention that the only comfort for death can be found in art. Our focus is then drawn towards the type of human reality in which the knowledge we have of our own mortality is so prominently present. A shot of a broken gravestone, with the text 'for the brother I had' is followed by the image of an old gravestone that is partly covered with the roots of old trees, any text has been removed from it by the passing of time. Finally a visitor to Père Lechaise who is feeding the birds, walks toward the camera. Only then is there the first transition to the action of the film, when in the next shot, a girl approaches Honigmann and the camera to ask her if she can tell her how to find Jim Morrison's grave. Honigmann, whom we hear but never get to see in the film, tells her how to get there. The film viewer knows but above all *feels* by this point that the film is about death, loss, art, nature, life, volatility, transience and eternity: *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis*

Before starting the interviews, Honigmann thus creates a mood or feeling that arises from dual emotions. Using a dialectical montage style, with sharp cuts between shots connected by sound, there are, on the one hand the emotions associated with loss and death and on the other those of the comfort that can be provided by art, love and nature. Together they produce a particular feeling, a particular mood in the viewer. I use *feeling* in this context, and following Damasio, as the cognitive processing of emotions. Emotions are, in his view, largely unlearned and based on automatic processes, feelings however are formed by the perception of (different) emotions and appraisal of stimuli, and unlike emotions they don't have to lead directly to action but have a slower-working effect. The repetition of the different clusters of images and sounds in these first sequences of *Forever* and the emotions they provoke are cognitively processed by the viewer and result in a specific feeling or mood (the two terms are used in this context as synonyms). It is as variations on the same themes that we furthermore make sense out of this collage of images and sounds, because as the careful reader of Proust knows (and as already explained) it is only through repetition that the experience of a piece of art can be fully

comprehended or fully ‘felt’. Due to the overlap between the past and the present experience of the piece of art, one may experience feelings of exquisite pleasure, enlightenment and eternity.

Chopin

Forever’s filmic overture consists of variations on a single mood, just like Chopin’s Nocturne, nr. 8 in Des-Dur, Opus 27 nr.2, which we become so familiar with after the opening sequences: while we see a close up of Chopin’s portrait engraved on his tombstone, the nocturne starts sounding softly. A little later Chopin’s admirer comes into scope, a Japanese girl who mourns at his grave and pays him a tribute with a red rose. While the music continues we hear the girl in a voice over as she leaves Père Lechaise and travels through Paris by metro. We learn that she started playing the piano at the age of five; we’re also told that she came to Paris because she loved Chopin and that her present teacher helps her discover ‘the heart of Chopin. Sound and image fall together in the shot where we see the girl from the back, sitting behind the grand piano in her apartment playing Chopin’s Nocturne. Then, while we still hear her playing Chopin on the soundtrack, the monologue changes smoothly into an explicit interview form as Honigmann asks her what she means by the ‘heart of Chopin’s music’. It is romantic music, the girl explains, that expresses Chopin’s sentimentality, a longing for his homeland, the beauty of melody and sometimes sorrow; “there is every kinds of feelings in his music (*sic*).” “Does it provoke special feelings in you?” asks Honigmann. While the camera slowly zooms in on her face she tells us that her father died suddenly, seven years ago, at the age of 47, due to overwork. She speaks with some difficulty, searching for words not only because of her limited knowledge of the English language but because of the painful memory she is referring to; “He also loved Chopin’s music very much”, she continues, so every time she plays Chopin, she pays tribute to him. This sequence lasts for a whole minute and just when the viewer starts getting an uneasy feeling, wondering if it is ethical to get so close, pictures of the girl and her father from her childhood are intercut while in the voiceover she says, “I hope he (*sic*) pleased about that.” The camera returns to her face for another twenty seconds while she remains silent, this is followed by a shot in grayish shades of a single white-grey rose between gravel and tombs in Père Lechaise with the sounds of chirping birds in the background. The viewer comprehends that with Chopin’s music she not only honors her father but is also reunited with him in what Proust called

an *instant of eternity* and thus finds a way to cope with this traumatic experience; accepting the dual emotions of love and loss through the beauty of Chopin's art.



During the film, Honigmann slowly builds up our feelings of empathy with the girl. We return to her apartment three more times, where she is rehearsing, over and over, mainly the same part of Chopin's Nocturne; within the film experience, these musical phrases function as Proust's *petite phrase*

(little phrase). With this term, Proust refers to a vital recurrent component in a musical composition that brings back the whole of its experience. Just like the *petite madeleine* it serves as a trigger of involuntary memory, in this case an artistic and aesthetic involuntary memory that Proust described in such a brilliant way in his *Recherche* by means of both Swann's and the narrator's experience and comprehension of the music of the fictive composer Vinteuil.ⁱⁱⁱ The different scenes of the Japanese girl rehearsing Chopin are always preceded by the *little phrase* of the Nocturne and only then does the image follow. The second time she is filmed at her apartment we see her *en face* sitting behind her grand piano. She remains silent; all that could be said has been said and can only be fully expressed and experienced through her playing. The film ends with a scene in which the girl gives her first public performance of the nocturne. The relation between the viewer and this character is thus gradually established.

Ingres

As already observed, Ingres is, together with Chopin and Proust, one of three prominent artists through whom Honigmann reflects on music, visual arts and literature in *Forever*. After Ingres is introduced by a few shots of his tomb, the film sharply cuts to a middle-aged woman who is walking through an art museum. "Valerie, what does it feel like to be all alone in the Louvre?" we hear Honigmann asking her. "It feels good," she answers, "though I don't have the

feeling of being all alone, I feel surrounded by a big family.” She reveals that as a young girl, she dreamt about secretly spending the night in the Louvre where the figures of the paintings would (she then believed) come to life. The scene focuses on the portrait of Caroline Rivière whom Ingres painted when she was 13 years old, just a year before she died. Although the painting seems very realistic, Valerie is convinced that Ingres exaggerated the curves. “It is obvious that form prevails above resemblance, and it takes precedence over realism, because realism, of course does not exist,” she continues. “Is that also what interests you?” asks Honigmann, “Yes,” Valerie replies, “I like to discover what is behind the appearance, but the work of art always keeps its secret.” Here Honigmann seems to give us not only the key to art but also to her own documentary-film(s), and in particular *Forever*. The viewer is advised: realism does not exist, form always prevails above resemblance and in the company of art you are never alone. It will comfort and enlighten you when you try to fully understand it. To do so you will have to follow Proust’s lessons and Valerie’s example and watch attentively, over and over (just as the Japanese girl plays Chopin’s nocturne repeatedly). At the same time you will learn that the piece of art will never reveal all its secrets and that there will always be more to discover. During this interview, shots of Valerie’s face, which expresses happiness and serenity, are intercut with shots of the portrait, which captures the upper body and face in medium close up, concluding finally in a very cinematic image: an extreme close up of the eye area of Carolina Riviera’s face. In this way, Honigmann visualizes Proust’s idea of the *petite phrase*: that the synthesis of past and present experiences of a piece of art can provide one with a feeling of extreme happiness and a sense of eternity. These are also feelings that Honigmann provokes in the viewer, not only through Chopin’s Nocturne or Ingre’s portrait but also, most tellingly, through the film itself.

Sound and Music Versus Image and Visual Art

Despite this focus on the visual arts, it is made explicitly clear that sound prevails over image. In the scene following the interview with Valerie, there is at first sight a puzzling shot of a trio of blind Parisians who we meet, not like all the others at Père Lachaise, but walking on the streets of Paris. In the next shot they sit down to *watch*, or more precisely, *listen* to a movie; they have rented *Les Diaboliques* by Clouzet, featuring the actress Simone Signoret. Together with them we first only *hear* different scenes from this film. They understand amazingly well what is going on, noticing all kind of details that we, the seeing, would normally not observe, or at least

not consciously hear and thus pay little or no attention to. The blind ‘viewers’ really enjoy the film and express a great admiration for Signoret. This scene can be interpreted as an instruction of how to watch, or better, how to *experience Forever* in which music and sound, as we have already noticed, almost always have precedence over the image. We learn in this way that for a full comprehension of film we should try to improve our visual literacy by utilizing the audible and sensitive literacy of the blind. In the next scenes we get the opportunity to put this lesson into practice during another collage of *emotion markers* lasting two minutes. While we see the common tomb of Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, we hear Montand singing *le temps de cherises*, a song of love and loss that became symbolic of the resistance of the Commune of Paris. The music leads us to the memorial celebration of this event commemorating these early advocates of socialism. From the victims of the Commune we pass to those of the Spanish civil war through to several memorial statues and then to the individual and family graves of the victims of the Holocaust, until Montand’s song comes to an end with: *J’aimerai toujours le temps des cerises. Et le souvenir que je garde au cœur* (‘I will always love the cherry season, and the memory of it that I keep in my heart’).

Proust

Images of Proust’s tomb appear several times during the first hour of the film. It is introduced near the beginning with a short and superficial interview with a family that visits his grave and a woman who regularly cleans the tomb and waters his flowers. However it is only after one hour that Honigmann really turns our attention explicitly to Proust’s art and ideas, this time through an interview with Stéphane Heuet, author of some adaptations of Proust’s great work in a series of five graphic novels. Like the Japanese girl, we first meet him at Proust’s tomb, where (in voice over) Honigmann asks him when his passion for Proust started. Over shots of him walking home through the streets of Paris he answers that when he first tried to read Proust, at the age of twenty, he hated it and found it to be extremely boring. Later on his wife infected him with her love for Proust, which he started to reread to show her how tedious and snobbish Proust was, but to his own surprise, this time he felt a great admiration for the *Recherche*. To love Proust, he understands now, you need to have suffered and loved; you have to be somebody. For him to properly understand Proust he also needed to know visual art, not only because of the many allusions and the discussions of visual art in Proust but also because, in

his view, Proust is a frustrated painter, who thinks in images. That is why Heuet started to adapt his work into graphic novels and also as a draftsman he wanted to interpret Proust's work in his own way. Heuet then describes the famous moment of *involuntary memory* and quotes from the first volume of his graphic adaptations, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Combray: "I was enveloped in a wonderful feeling. Without knowing why. Where could this intense joy come from? It was connected with the taste of the cake but I sensed it went a lot further, that it was of a different order all together. It is plain that the truth I am looking for lies not in the cake, but in myself. I had to start again three times. What affects me must be the visual memory that belongs to this taste and tries to emerge with it. Will this moment from the past reach the surface of my consciousness? And suddenly the memory is there. It was the taste of the 'madeleine' aunt Leonie always gave me on Sundays after dipping in her own thee or tisane. And like the Japanese game of throwing in a bowl of water, tiny bits of paper, which having submerged...unfurl, unfold, take on colors and forms and change into flowers, houses and clearly identifiable people so all the flowers of our garden and that of Mister Swann's park, the water lilies in the Vivonne, the good villagers, their houses and the church, all of Combray and its surroundings, everything with the physical shape, the town and its gardens materialize out of my teacup" (Heuet as translated in Honigmann 2011).

After reading this fragment Heuet reflects in a kind of monologue on the meaning of the *Recherche*, which goes as follows: "In this sense Proust gave us eternity, because if you can live again all the different moments in your life, the notion of time becomes insignificant. This explanation of the involuntary memory is so deeply imbedded in the collective memory of the French that they even use the expression 'this is my Madeleine de Proust' to describe a similar experience in their own lives. The *Recherche* is also the story of a man who spends his whole life searching for happiness. First he seeks it in his family, in his mother, then in a small circle of friends, and then in love, in society, in snobbism, but he finally only finds it in art. For Proust true life is art [emphasis added]. Proust teaches us that art can make us experience eternity. (Heuet in Honigmann 2011)."² "But that is not true", Honigmann replies. "It is, just take Leonardo da Vinci, if you go to the Louvre you will find 4 Cubans, 10 Chinese, 15 Dutch and 20 French people, all staring at the gaze of a woman that has returned to dust, the painter is no longer with us, but they both continue to move us. Isn't that eternity?" Heuet responds, passionately. After a final close up of Heuet's face whilst he pronounces this last statement, there

is a sharp cut to a statue of a woman in Père Lechaise, the camera carefully follows the lines of her body as if painting it, establishing the idea of film as art. Back at Proust's tomb, following this, we meet a Korean boy who expresses his gratitude to Proust by offering him a packet of cookies. His poor English restricts him from explaining what Proust's oeuvre (which he studied for ten years) means to him. Honigmann encourages him to speak in his own language, and although we don't understand a word of his fluent speech, his passion for Proust is clearly communicated through sound. More than eleven minutes are in this way dedicated to conveying the greatness and universality attached to Proust's art. The film's theoretical understanding of Proust, based on a possibly simplistic opposition between the eternity of art and the transience of life, is summarized in the monologue of Hueut. Honigmann's own passion for his work and its emotional and poetic understanding moves far beyond this and is reflected not only by the scene with the Korean boy but in the whole of her film, which itself constitutes a real tribute to Proust.

Georges Melies and Film-art

The idea that art is for everyone and is a latent ability of human beings seems also to be the message of the next scene featuring Michel Petrucciani. After some shots of his tomb we hear and see an extract of a live performance of this famous, physically deformed, but incredibly virtuosic jazz musician. His music continues as a soundtrack to a scene dedicated to one of the founding fathers of the fiction film: Georges Meliès; a close up of the bust of Meliès' statue that sits above his tomb introduces his famous one-shot silent film *Un homme des têtes* (1898). From this minute long film featuring Meliès' magically disembodied head(s), we return to the stone version of it at his tomb, followed by a shot of anonymous graffiti on Meliès' tombstone: *See you soon on the moon*, referring to the unforgettable masterpiece and first ever science fiction film by this cine-magician: *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). Although the scene with Meliès only lasts one and a half minutes, the point is clear: through film, music and visual art are reunited and transformed, merging through movement. This filmic self reflection of Honigmann's reveals her own conception of filmmaking in which rhythm, tonality, melody and composition play such a crucial role.

The 'Petite Phrase' of Visual Art: The 'Scene of Empathy'



Shots of extremely long duration on the human face, in medium close up, close up and extreme close up are widely used in *Forever*. These shot are not only of the faces of living characters, for example, the Japanese girl (Chopin's interpreter), Valerie

(Ingres' interpreter), or Stephane Heuet (Proust's interpreter), but also of the faces of the dead immortalized in art, like, as we have already seen, that of Caroline Rivière (portrayed by Ingres) or Proust in his bust at Père Lachaise. Plantinga describes long duration shots of the human face as the *scene of empathy*, in which the universal recognition of facial expressions implies an underlying innate ability to perceive a number of basic emotions such as fear, sadness or joy. The viewing of the human face thus moves us, (just like music!) beyond linguistic communication and elicits an emotional response in the viewer, as we tend (as proved by neuroscience) to react to the sight of another human face with *affective mimicry* or *facial feedback* resulting in emotional contagion. A natural reaction of *facial feedback* (and from an evolutionary perspective a very important reaction in order to survive) is to empathize with the other, which consists in the capacity to know, feel and respond congruently to what the other is feeling. This does not mean that we *identify* with the other, because identification implies a loss of the self in the other. However, to elicit empathy with the characters in a film it is not enough to show the emotions on their faces, it is the form in which this is done, and the credibility of the context in which they appear that determine how effective the depiction of the human face is. The credibility of scenes of empathy is in fact extremely precarious; there is very little distance between empathy and sensationalism or exploitation (Plantinga, 1999). Honigmann's scenes of empathy however do not produce feelings of voyeurism, as they do not give the impression of having been included in order to sensationalize the characters or their emotions. So why does the viewer experience Honigmann's representation of the characters' emotions as credible and respectful? First of all, it is because they are not victimized but represented as people holding onto their own dignity and autonomy; an effect that is reinforced by the lack of any mediating voiceover. This limited presence of the filmmaker in the film, who as we have seen is, apart from her voice, physically absent, gives the film (at least apparently) a very accessible and certainly open form. The

characters seem to open themselves up for us in a very natural and spontaneous way, guided only by a minimal amount of prompting in the form of questions that are neither leading nor suggestive. Furthermore the emotional scenes with different characters become more intimate gradually and after the various climaxes, distance is created again. This means that we are invited to *empathize* with the characters' emotions, their sorrow and traumatic experiences, to feel with them and admire them at the same time from a distance, as they act upon their feelings in a constructive way and with great dignity. Honigmann thus uses the *scene of empathy* in her film as the *little phrase* of visual art. We are invited to reflect not only upon the characters situation and attitude, but also upon our own, and if we wish, to act upon it in our own way. In her artistic, and probably partly intuitive examination of the relationship between perception, memory and art, as well as her construction of an (at least partly) autonomous self, Honigmann aligns herself with Damasio's rejection of the impression, also represented in other contemporary neuroscientific research, which claims that our ability to deliberate consciously is a myth. According to Damasio, elucidating conscious as well as non-conscious mind processes creates the possibility of fortifying our deliberative powers. To demonstrate this he postulates three stages of self: *protoself*, *core self*, and *autobiographical self*. The latter is defined in terms of biographical knowledge pertaining to the past as well as to the anticipated future. In addition to a *material me* (formed by the *protoself* and the *core self*), the *autobiographical self* constitutes in humans a *social me* and a *spiritual me*. However, all these self-levels endow our minds with a variety of subjectivity, as they may operate simultaneously. As Damasio puts it: The ultimate consciousness product occurs from numerous brain sites at the same time (...) much as the performance of a symphonic piece does not come from the work of a single musician. The oddest thing about the upper reaches of a consciousness performance is the conspicuous absence of a conductor before the performance begins, although as the performance unfolds, a conductor comes into being. For all intents and purposes, a conductor is now leading the orchestra, although the performance has created the conductor – the self – not the other way around. (Damasio 2010: 22-23).

Climax and Conclusion

The film comes to its climax and conclusion in the last twenty minutes. Beginning with the music of an unknown French *chansonnier*, Danielle Messia (who, we are told by a guide at Père Lachaise, died at the age of 23), which fades away, followed by a zoom-in on the eye area of a female figure painted by Modigliani. In the next shot we meet an admirer at the tomb of this painter who, as he tells us, greatly admires the portraits that Modigliani managed to make in his short life. “There is a tremendous force in them, they emanate a sense of calmness and a serene melancholy (...). His paintings are not realistic ...but he painted what his models meant to him,

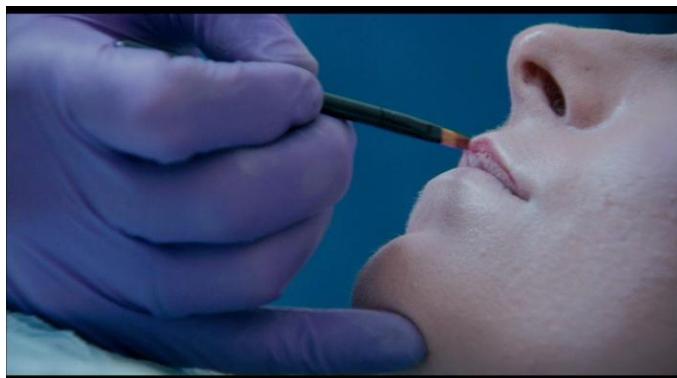


the paintings are mirrors that reflect the painter’s feelings,” the man explains. His interpretation of Modigliani’s portraits can be read as a continuation of what we learned from Ingres’ interpreter Valerie (realism does not exist and form prevails over meaning) and gives us another clue to the meaning of

Honigmann’s conception of art. We may infer that she suggests that *Forever*, although a documentary, should not be seen as ‘reality’ and that her portraits of the other can also be seen as self-portraits.

Modigliani’s admirer, we discover, studied history of art and works a lot with the human face, he tells us, but to our surprise and shock, he is not a painter or sculptor, but an embalmer. “I preserve and prepare the bodies of people who have passed away, so the face is very important, it’s the last image the relatives recall of a person who died,” he answers to Honigmann, while the camera zooms in on his own face. “You work a little like a painter, because you have to try to restore the face the way it was,” he adds, and then, searching for words, “people almost expect me to bring their dead back to life.” Then there is another shot of a whole minute of the Japanese girl’s face, rehearsing the Nocturne. Another crosscut brings us back to the embalmer finalizing the restoration of a young woman’s face framed *en profile* and in a medium close up. It’s very obvious that she is really dead, as the skin is already turning blue at the ear.

Furthermore the embalmers outfit, plastic purple gloves and a blue apron, make clear that this is not a beauty-treatment. While he finishes her make-up with delicate gestures, he says: "She was called Elizabeth. A very beautiful woman." He explains his job is to conceal signs of illness or suffering' and 'not to make people look more beautiful or younger than they were when they died.' He considers it his task to show both their natural beauty and imperfections, but keeps his distance from the people he is treating. "If I would become emotionally evolved with all of them it would exhaust me, I have to take care of myself." While he finishes the treatment of Elizabeth's face, shots of his face are altered with that of hers, zooming in on the dead woman's face a little bit more every time. While he carefully paints her lips he says: "death is not a pretty thing, but it is part of human life, it is with us every day, we have to accept it," surmising that "People who are afraid of [others] death[s] are afraid of their own death too." The last images are that in which he folds the stiff fingers of the women's hands followed by a medium close up of her reclining body, all dressed in white. The only color left is that of the sensual red of her painted lips. Although Honigmann warned us that reality does not exist, it is shocking for the viewer to realize that this is a real dead woman because it is a documentary and not a fiction-film. As a result the impact of this scene is even more intense as we are confronted with death in a way we are not used to.



The sequences with the embalmer are followed by a short but emotional and thus contrasting interview with a woman mourning her husband who died very young, almost ten years ago, at the age of 33 from a bee-sting. While she waters the plants on his grave, she tells us that she

only met him when she was already fifty years old and although she had been married before, it was only with him she discovered the real meaning of love. They had three years of extreme happiness, she is grateful that she learned what love is, "many women never get to know it," but will always miss him. "Death is very hard", she says, and It took her a long time to accept that he would never come back. "What was he called?" Honigmann finally asks, "His name was

Thierry, and I am Michelle," she answers while her voice breaks and tears come to her eyes. "We hear of death every day but when it touches us personally it is very hard to bear." Honigmann thanks her, wishing her courage. From the shocking confrontation with death in the scene of the embalmer, we pass from his professionally detached attitude to the intense emotions of the woman who still suffers from the sudden death of her beloved. This tragic and passionate love story from an ordinary, but at the same time extraordinary, woman prepares us for the climax of *Forever*.

Right after the scene with Michelle, via a shot of red roses on a grave, and for the first time without the sound bridge of Chopin's nocturne, we reach the final scene of the film in which the Japanese girl gives her first public recital of Chopin's Nocturne. We hear a female voice announcing her and finally get to know her name: 'Yoshino Kimura', while she carefully paints her lips in her dressing room. With the images of the lifeless lips of Elizabeth being painted by the embalmer still fresh in our memory, this little familiar gesture is suddenly shocking. Whilst Yoshino gives her public interpretation of Chopin's Nocturne, the camera zooms in on her face for four whole minutes, nearly the whole duration of the composition. We notice here a great similarity in presentation to Ingres' representation of Caroline Riviera's face. We are once more reminded of Elizabeth's red lips of through an extreme close up of Yoshino's mouth, making little whispering movements as she plays. The camera gets even closer and follows, as a painter with his brush, the lines and surface of her face. Or is this 'film art-portrait' bigger than life, bigger than reality?



After a last extreme close up of her left eye there is a sharp cut to the image of a bright full moon, high in a dark sky with the title of the film superimposed on it: *FOR* is placed to the left of the moon and *EVER* over the top of it. Whilst in the establishing shot of the film *FOR* was in white and *EVER* in grey, this time it is reversed, thus

emphasizing the dual emotions created by the film. 'This is film', Honigmann seems to remind us, with her reference to Meliès' image of the moon. 'Realism does not exist'. Or does it? For

Honigmann's moon is not fictional, but is the real moon, and hers is not a fiction film but a documentary; yet we see only a representation of the moon.... In alliance with Proust, Honigmann concludes that only through art can we really move beyond ourselves by encountering the other and experience eternity. In Honigmann's view and as has been shown, through love and care for the other we can also practice, to put it in Foucauldian terms, the 'art of life' (*ars vitae*) considered thus as an essential aspect of Art itself (Foucault 1984 60-63).^{iv} Like Proust, Honigmann searched in *Forever* for the meaning of art in human life, mainly through music and painting and in a more intellectual way through an understanding of the fundamental idea's of Proust's *Recherche*. Also just like Proust, she tried to compose her piece of art like a piece of music, a documentary-film of which the essence, or the 'heart', to use Yoshino Kimura's term, can only be comprehended when we carefully listen, watch and feel the film - in short, experience it over and over. This practice, Honigmann agrees with Proust, may lead to feelings of great pleasure and a sense of enlightenment and eternity in which we are reunited not only with our former self but also with the artist and, as in Yoshino's case, with those we lost. In such a way we may experience art, and thus live, to the fullest, knowing at the same time that it will never reveal all of its secrets.

Epilogue

The night falls over Père Lechaise, Chopin's nocturne comes to an end and instead of the cheerful chirping of birds we now hear and see croaking crows. We are reminded that as Walter Benjamin already observed, the eternity Proust opens to view is intertwined time, not boundless time (Benjamin: 2005: 244). While the credits of the film are shown there is a volatile shot of graffiti; the title of Jim Morrison's most famous song *The End*, accompanied by a simple drawing of a flower and the name of the songwriter 'Jim'. Morrison, here, is also cleverly marginalized in *Forever*; he is the first and last musician Honigmann refers to, and there are several small references to his grave that is one of the most visited at Père Lechaise, but his music is ignored. As mentioned before, the music of an unknown French *chansonnière* Danielle Massia, was to the contrary, not only extensively referred to but also played. Like Modigliani, Honigmann chooses her own models in her Proustian search for the meaning of art in human life and she films what her models mean to her. Portraying the other she thus creates in her documentary film *a truth* that falls somewhere between art and reality. She is well aware that her

portraits can also be considered as a self-portrait; that there is no representation without self-representation, and no such thing as objectivity. All of her portraits, like that of Modigliani,



mirror her own feelings, which, in a way brings us back to Proust's belief that only through art can we escape from ourselves and meet the other, or to speak through Damasio; there is always the self leading the performance and it is only through the performance that the self and thus the other can be created.

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Notes

ⁱ *Forever* was produced by Cobos Films and together with *El Olvido* (2008) by the same producer, Honigmann's most awarded film. For each film she received over a dozen different international film awards. Two awards were conferred for her entire work: the Hot Docs Outstanding Achievement Award (2008) and the Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award (2007) A complete list of the awards that Heddy Honigmann has received may be found on her homepage: <http://www.heddy-honigmann.nl/honigmann/doc/awards/awards.php>

ⁱⁱ My interpretation of Proust's oeuvre relies heavily on my own reading of his texts and is inevitably influenced by my knowledge of secondary literature on the topic. In those cases where my interpretation is clearly based on a specific secondary text, the reference is mentioned.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez's essay *Proust Musicien* (1984) dedicated to the fundamental role played by music in the evolution of the novel through a study of the texts devoted to the Sonata and Septet of Vinteuil.

^{iv} It is my thesis that the whole of Honigmann's oeuvre may be considered as a series of ethical contemplations on

ars vitae or ‘how to make of our own life a work of art’ in the way Michel Foucault reformulated this concept based on Greek and Roman philosophy (see Foucault *Le Souci de Soi, Histoire de la sexualité III*, 1984). This idea will be further developed in a forthcoming essay of which I gave a first exposition at the *Documentary Now* conference in London in 2010.

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