

Towards a Prosthetic Future: Digital Memory and Micro Movies

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Abstract

Memory is infinitely flexible and fluid. Not only does it offer a kaleidoscopic view into the past swarming with the spectral forms of distant events but also lets the contours of the present reconfigure remembered events so that they acquire new and subtle layers of meaning. The latest advancements in technology like photographs, videos, and short movies have aided us immensely in preserving the memorable moments of our lives for posterity. What lies at the heart of all such attempts is the urge to narrate our personal stories to the world around us. Digital storytelling has received a new lease of life, thanks to the rise of Instagram micro movies that are created by amateurs to share their cherished moments online. Whereas in the past we had to rely on our sensorium for receiving impressions from the outside world and on our brains to memorize them in a sequential order so that a semblance of narrative integrity was created, we now have the luxury of allowing computers to take over the function of memorization. With the help of a handheld recording device, we can capture our personal moments and store them in digital repositories from which they can be accessed as and when needed. The present paper looks at the ways in which the conventional understanding of memory is reforged by micro movies. It discusses the non-human agency of technology in recording the present and transforming it into the bundle of memories of/about an individual, and in so doing, addresses the interweaving of physical, mental, and digital spaces that micro movies facilitate.

Keywords: digital storytelling, micro movies, non-human agency, posthumanisation

Introduction

Memory is generally understood as the faculty of “encoding, storing, and retrieving information” (Squire 35). As a result of the many researches conducted in the field of memory, cognitive psychologists now believe that memory includes three important categories: sensory, short-term, and long-term memory, each manifesting a particular orientation of our awe-inspiring ability to process and retain information. Whereas sensory memory is not consciously controlled, being triggered by sensory impulses like smell and sound, short-term memory is at least in part voluntarily controlled and is used to store limited information. Long-term memory, as the name signifies, is used to store an indefinite amount of information for long periods of time. The emerging field of memory studies delves into the formation and consolidation of human memories, which have been scientifically proven to be more sophisticated than the recall systems of other animals. Human memory is formed through the accumulation of sensory content in a narrative sequence that aids recollection. In the past, the only avenues open to us to relate our memories to an audience were verbal or pictorial narration. But the advent of technology has changed all this, with the term “digital storytelling” encapsulating the strides we have achieved over traditional modes of narration.

Digital storytelling is a relatively recent phenomenon. Different from verbal narration, it employs video content to relate episodes from a person’s life in a manner that captures the attention of the

viewers. Since digital storytelling is backed up by computer-based tools that have lately evolved to obscure the distinction between reality and simulation, it has a distinct edge over verbal narration. Digital storytelling is increasingly being used nowadays in education, entertainment, and an array of other platforms devoted to the dissemination of knowledge and information. Virtual reality and augmented reality too aid in adding newer dimensions to digital storytelling.

It has long been ascertained that photographs and videos aid us in memorization more effectively than verbal content does. Mnemonic imagination, which forms the core of memory, is what comes into play when the mind processes visual information. As Pickering and Keightley argue in *Photography, Memory and Music*, “The mnemonic imagination facilitates the intelligible transformation and continuous ordering of past experience” (21). It also draws on our past experience and seeks fecund engagements with the future. Although this is the case, there have been very few forays into how photographs and videos create flexible orderings of past incidents and structure them into coherent narratives about the self and its role in society.

Digital storytelling entails a two-way movement between memory and imagination in a way that enables us to draw upon the past as well as apply its moods and tints fluidly to the present. When memory starts fuelling our imagination and expanding the contours of the past so that events which were thought of as self-contained start to outgrow their boundaries, new narrative patterns that help us cope with the flux of life are created. One method of digital storytelling is micro movies. A micro movie is a short film that narrates a story whose import can be conveyed in a short duration. Many online platforms that enable users to create, share, and view micro movies have emerged in recent years. One of the best examples of micro movies is the short videos Instagram users make and share. The content of these videos can range from vignettes of personal life to sales pitches. This paper attempts to discover how the non-human agency of technology enables a synthesis between memory and imagination so that video recordings of past incidents appear in a new light every time they are watched.

Instagram and the Rise of Micro Movies

Instagram, which was launched in 2010, can be defined as “a mobile photo and video capturing and sharing service” (Hu & Manikonda & Kambhampati 595). Now into its twelfth year after being launched, Instagram has become one of the most used social media platforms, spawning thousands of new accounts on a daily basis. Instagram’s appeal lies in its versatile photo-sharing features that allow users to post pictures of their current activity, the people they are hanging out with, and the places they have visited, and garner numerous “likes” for the same. Perhaps, the foremost motive of using a platform like Instagram is to stay updated about what others are doing, which means a very dynamic form of social competition is what keeps it alive. Thus, it is a shared space where the private and the public come together in the ultimate blurring of boundaries. Instagram realizes this neo-liberal ideal by translating the voyeuristic desire for invading other people’s lives and an equally relaxed attitude to being self-revealing into a desirable social activity. The voyeurism it promotes follows the trajectory of the television’s stoical broadcast of media images that strove to maintain the illusion that they were not directed at any form of self-absorbed consumption and that they were highly natural productions. This kind of pseudo-voyeurism that the television capitalized on in the 80s and the 90s, that of feigning oblivion about an implied viewer and of annihilating every bit of critical self-consciousness, is stripped of its gimmickry by social media platforms wherein users upload photos and videos about their personal lives to be openly fetishized by others.

User-generated short videos or micro movies uploaded on Instagram offer a dizzying variety of content to digital media consumers. They are popularly used to share day-to-day activities with friends or family and are edited using filters and uploaded online with the accompaniment of a

suitable background score to give added layers of meaning to intensely personal experiences. Since they are usually produced by amateurs using smartphones or camcorders and have a reassuring unprofessionalism about them that directly taps into the rawness of unmediated experience, the interest they generate in consumers is largely of the benignly voyeuristic sort.

The practice of filming micro movies can be traced back to the 1990s when new advances in digital technology made video recording devices accessible to the general public. This accessibility also ushered in a kind of self-expression that was not anchored in commercial interests but was fuelled by the urge to discover new and unconstrained modes of capturing the self. However, back in the 1990s, the internet and its myriad possibilities were still in a nascent stage, and it was only after 2010 that micro movies began to migrate to online spaces, generating in their wake heightened media consumption among viewers accustomed to watching only well-defined and genre-specific content till then. The spontaneity of many of these micro movies which were a combustible combination of the scandalously personal, political, and farcical offered the viewers a gateway to a relaxed form of entertainment in which goofiness and a permissible degree of incompetence were the norm rather than the aberration. Coupled with the ability of micro movies to gratify consumer expectations about the personalization of entertainment, their low budget requirements, relative absence of equipment constraints, and minimal distribution costs, ensured that the new format was there to stay.

Micro movies act as outlets for the creativity of individuals who would otherwise have remained obscure. As they are not bound by the censorship laws of production companies that have a reputation to keep up or by high-brow aesthetic considerations, they evade both extremes of moral probity and overmuch intellectualism and operate in a parallel world where “freedom of expression” is the buzzword. They also decentralize state-controlled mediascapes through the circulation of user-generated content that falls outside dominant ideological apparatuses. Once they are uploaded online, it takes only a very short time for micro movies to be disseminated. Videos that are feverishly devoured and shared go on to become “viral,” making a nod to the contagious power of the digital space.

Micro movies can last for anywhere from a few seconds to half an hour, the general rule being that the shorter and more captivating the video, the more its ability to generate discussion and to stay in demand across media platforms. Although micro movies both encourage and cash in on the diminishing attention spans of consumers and their latent demands to be titillated constantly, it is undeniable that a lot of ingenuity and talent are required to produce a video that can convey a powerful message in a few minutes. The growing phenomenon of micro movies has resulted in online video service providers, professional content producers, and even state-owned media, trying to piggyback on their popularity. Nowadays, not all micro movies are produced with purely non-commercial reasons at heart. Many are produced to meet specific objectives ranging from inciting media consumers to react against polemical issues to generating fanbase through negative publicity. Since video-sharing platforms like Youtube and Vimeo offer a sizeable remuneration to amateurs who can pull in a steady stream of viewers, thus fostering a media environment conducive to targeted advertising, micro movies have evolved along the lines of commercial films. With the micro-movie format being increasingly used by advertising companies to promote products/brands, they have penetrated the mediascape like never before.

Memory in Micro Movies

Astrid Erll, in his book *Cultural Memory Studies*, argues that “on an individual level, media representations provide [the] schemata and scripts which allow us to create in our minds certain images of the past and which may even shape our own experience and autobiographical memories” (397). In other words, media transforms the past considered as a “foreign land” to which access was

deemed possible only in moments of intense introspection into a shifting landscape which can be visited anytime. Whereas traditional memory operates by means of invocation, digital memory operates by means of mechanical recall. Perhaps the greatest hurdle biological memory faces is its need for an occasion to invoke certain events. Without suitable triggers, our mind does not return to past episodes and the floodgates of memory remain woefully closed. However, digital memory, being stored in online repositories, can be replayed endlessly regardless of the occasion. If a particular emotional state is a prerequisite for the mind to string together memories about a person/event in the case of biological memory, digital memory is not constrained by any such emotive criteria.

Micro movies aid us in remembering certain moments over others. Using them, we can consciously decide what aspect of our life people should remember more than others. For instance, you can project yourself as particular kind of person, say a dog lover, through micro movies, and amplify this idea so much through repeated posts that the collective memory about you will be as a dog lover though this might define only a fraction of your personality. Micro movies facilitate a rare synthesis between the past, the present, and the future. Once our personal moments are recorded for live streaming, they become part of the cognitive dimension of everyone who watches these videos. Whereas our personal lives are mostly lived out in seclusion from the rest of the world, our technologically-mediated lives are lived amidst an online community that is always eager to comment on those personal preferences that we consider sacrosanct in the tangible world or at least open to criticism only by our close friends. It is in the context of the privacy of memories that we need to place Instagram micro movies. These videos have invented a space where imagination and memory can be creatively blended to gain insights into the spatiotemporality of our lives.

Micro Movies and Memories

Before we attempt to trace the connection between micro movies and digital memory, we need to differentiate between individual and collective memory. Individual memory is the capacity to form autobiographical memory without which we are unable to create a sense of continuity in our personhood. Collective memory, on the other hand, draws upon the accreted memories of a group of people. The primary difference between personal and collective memory is that the latter is more susceptible to change over time since accounts of the same incident might vary from person to person, with narratives articulated from a position of power supplanting others in the course of time. Digital memory, which is a mediated form of memory, represents the convergence of individual and collective memory. During digitization, our identity adapts to the ways in which we want to project ourselves to the cultural systems surrounding us. It is on the basis of such adaptation governed by notions of being recognized as belonging to a particular group or having an affiliation to certain ideals that solidarity forms in the digital world. It is this melding of personal desire and the collective memory about its varied manifestations, leading to the semblance of a continuous digital self, that micro movies facilitate. In this way, micro movies create veritable living memories of a person through shared practices of sending, downloading, and saving videos, thereby giving rise to a culture of digital remembrance. In such a scenario, it is not forgetfulness but data erasure that becomes the greatest threat to memory.

Since our memories are vivified over time through the reiteration of remembered details, they are prone to a high degree of distortion. Added to this is the tendency of newly-formed memories to fade over time though they might give us the illusion of permanence at first. When certain memories that make up a large personal narrative are eroded by the vagaries of time, what happens in the background is not just the gradual dimming of remembered events but a realignment of blocks of memory, resulting in a changed narrative about over selves. Since the mind has an essential plasticity that provides us the illusion of an unbroken and organic past flowing seamlessly into the present, this change is often not perceived by us. But, with the help of micro memories, such distortions can easily

be made sense of. Replaying a micro movie many years into the future, we get insights into how we handled a past situation, a realization we would have been denied if we relied only on our long-term memory.

Instagram micro movies point to a progressive exteriorization of human memories. We are at a stage where we can longer think of individuals in isolation from the technological gadgetry that they are part of. If the dividing lines between embodiment and memory were thought to be clearer before, we have now entered a phase where our memories have become necessarily embodied and vice versa. As Bernard Stiegler argues in “Technologies of Memory and Imagination,” Individuals are becoming instances that cannot be thought except from the point of view of the prosthetic complex (rather than the reverse)” (35). Memories no longer remain confined to our minds so that they wither away upon the death of the individual, rather they float around in cyberspace, with the possibility that they will remain alive as long as the data is not erased.

There are two ways in which the digital storage of memories can be understood: we can either postulate that they exist as active prostheses to our mental content or that our embodiment itself is a minor episode in the relatively longer and more durable repetition of our externally stored memories. Whichever way we choose to look at it, it is clear that the non-human agency of technology has contributed to a posthumanisation of memory. Memory has overflowed its boundaries disrupting the conventional distinction between the interior and the exterior. The more radical manifestation of this exteriorization is the contemporary dallying in Transhumanist circles with the possibility of mind-downloading, which should enable all our memories to be effectively copied onto a computer hard drive without loss of information. Although mind-downloading scenarios are more hypothetical than anything else, the questions they set in motion regarding the embodied nature of memory are profound. When it becomes possible for sense impressions that are already stored in the minds as memories to be stored again in a digital repository with the aid of advanced technology, we can be sure of celebrating the triumph of Cartesianism over monism. But so far, such expectations have turned out to be projections of our overzealousness about technology. No matter what happens in the future, we can rest assured that technology will continue to play a monumental role in bridging the gap between mental and psychic spaces.

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