

Time (Im)memorial

*An exploration of how memories and grief shape our perception of
time*

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Max, thank you for gifting me with your undivided attention and time, for being like a grandfather and a father to me, purely because you chose to; this is truly special, I understand this now more than ever. Thank you for introducing me to some of the things that I love most in the world now - language, words, stories - and for doing so in a way that had no other purpose than joy. And, most of all, thank you for seeing and accepting me for

who I was - am -, possibly the greatest gift anyone can receive in the precious time we spend on this earth; a gift that reverberates through my being to this day and lifts me up when the weight of this world feels too heavy to bear; a gift that I hope to be able to pass on to others, too.

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Lastly, I wish to encourage all autistic people to believe in their inner worlds and ways of expression. However you express yourself (or don't) is valid, and your way of seeing the world is unique, and needed, and your special interests aren't childish just because they are not commodifiable; they are beautiful, they are necessary, now more than ever.

Abstract

In the context of my master's thesis, I want to explore how the perception of time is shaped through memories and emotions, in particular grief.

Drawing from a wide array of areas, such as social sciences, literature and cinema, this project builds on a body of research about time; especially non-linear, fluid notions of time. The thesis shifts between personal memories on one hand and the collective experience of grief as a universal feeling on the other; time memorial and time immemorial. Water is a central motif, as it embodies the fluidity of time and is understood as a vessel for memories, holding simultaneously narratives from past, present and future.

Experimental in nature, the aim of this thesis is less about telling a story and more about invoking a feeling. The narrative is nonlinear, drifting like memories through various moments in time and place.

Keywords

Essay film; Non-linear narrative; Memory; Time fluidity; Grief

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Keywords.....	v
Preliminary Note: How to Read this Thesis	vii
Prologue – W-O-R-D-S	1
1. Behind the Mountains – An Introduction	2
2. Intent	4
3. A letter	6
4. Memories	13
5. Dialogues with the Absent.....	17
5.1 Remembrance, Liminality and Temporal Fragmentation.....	18
6. Silence and Sound.....	23
6.1 Use of Voice in Behind the Mountains.....	28
7. Nature as a Transcendent Vessel for Remembrance.....	31
7.1 Presence through Absence	34
7.2 Water as a Vessel for Memory.....	37
Conclusion	43
Epilogue: A personal memoir	45
References.....	47
Appendix.....	50
Table of Figures	57

Preliminary Note: How to Read This Thesis

This thesis is the process and result of a practice-led research process. At its center stands the question of how memories and grief shape our perception of time. The goal of this written document is neither to create a theoretical inquiry separate from artistic practice, nor merely to describe the latter. Instead, this is an attempt to deepen and enrich the artistic process through research, without separating from it. A digital archive of the practical research process can be found [here](#).

In truth, the two have never been separated to begin with. Permeable as we are as researching subjects, inspiration infiltrates us even without us actively seeking it, and no artistic process happens in a vacuum.

If I were to name one single starting point in the artistic process of this thesis, I had to go all the way back to my childhood, to a book that was gifted to me before I could even read, and that has grown with me ever since, and is still growing with me.

I will tell you more about this book later, but for now all you need to know is about its existence and importance. This thesis, then, follows the structure of what lies at its origin: A book, in which practice and theory unfold in a dialogue, orbiting around its central question. On a conceptual level, the research question leading this project may be formulated as the following: How can working within the essay film format enable non-linear storytelling to appear as one coherent work?

Prologue – *W-O-R-D-S*

Dear Max,

It feels both strange and strangely familiar to write to you

It's been quite some time, but the words I write with my pen always carry a part of you with them.

Sometimes they feel so heavy, so definite.

Some things are too vast, too fluid, to fit into a word, a number of syllables, neatly lined up after each other, with a beginning and an end

w-o-r-d-s

But you taught me to let the words tumble on the floor sometimes, and let them lie there in a messy pile, laughing together

“You say that when put into words, everything becomes too neat.

But sometimes there are things I can't bear without putting them into words.”

Terayama & Tanikawa, 1983, *video letter*

1. Behind the Mountains – *An Introduction*

In the essayistic short film *Behind the Mountains*, which is at the center of this thesis as both means and end of the artistic research practice, a letter exchange unfolds with a dialogue partner who is no longer alive. The film can be seen under [this link](#).

Shifting between personal memory and time immemorial, the work drifts through dreamlike images and reflections, moving within a space where linear time increasingly dissolves and life beyond the human body and lifespan is contemplated.

It looks at the traces we leave behind, and at how, through remembering, we create a space that transforms the border between fiction and reality into something fluid and alive.

Last year I started to write letters to a person who once was - and still is - very important to me. Max was our neighbor, but he was also like a father to me, a friend, and a teacher. He helped raise me, and in the many hours we spent together he would share his passion for the German language and storytelling with me. He taught me how to write and read by the age of four, and together we would spend endless hours inventing stories. Sometimes we would write them down or draw the fantastic creatures that emerged from them.

It has been 18 years since he passed away, but his presence lingers, and his influence on me lives on to this day. Some of the things I cherish most in the world - like the vast and wondrous worlds of books, storytelling and imagination - I learned through him. I often wonder what our conversations would be like now? He was a great philosopher, writer, linguist and poet. He was peculiar and kind-hearted, and possessed a great love for life. So, I started to write to Max - maybe it was part of a delayed grieving process, maybe I recognized his voice and writing in my own words. In a way, he had become a phantom, an absent dialogue partner, with whom I felt the urge to share my reflections about life with.

Funnily, after starting this project, his wife, Madlen, had found a letter written by Max and addressed to me, that somehow, he had never given to me. The dialogue that I had started now suddenly had a real aspect to it, a response from the past, in the Now. The words contained in the letter had gained a new meaning, as well as a sense of gravity.

In this way, our exchange became fragmented, nonlinear, disassembled and reassembled, creating something in the process that had a force of its own, mutable and alive. If it can be called a dialogue, I am not sure. But maybe that doesn't matter so much.

At the same time, the notion and perception of time have always fascinated me. The

concept of linear time as the sole existing temporality never made a lot of sense to me. Especially in times of grief, time felt more fluid, transparent even; moving in waves, spirals and at times converging and folding in on itself. This sparked my interest in exploring different understandings of temporality, and how they can be felt and experienced. Out of curiosity I had once asked a friend what time meant to him and recorded his answer. His words became the intro to *Behind the Mountains*, and a departing point for the ongoing research about the perceptions of time.

The memories of my childhood, which had shaped me so much, became a site for both inspiration and inquiry. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the 'phantom image' and *video letter* (1983) by Shuji Terayama and Shuntaro Tanikawa, the presented film moves within a space of liminality, where memories both reconstruct the past and present, while becoming forces of their own.

2. Intent

This thesis is grounded in a practice-led research methodology, in which artistic practice is not positioned as an illustration of theory, but as a primary mode of inquiry and knowledge production. It evolved through an interactive process of artistic production, reflection, and contextual reading. This process is as much part of this thesis as the result. Writing, drawing, filming, editing and sound composition, as well as listening, observing, remembering and imagining, have provided ways of thinking through and with the material, functioning as epistemic artistic tools. However, while epistemology, deriving from the Greek word 'episteme' for knowledge, concerns the "creation and dissemination of knowledge and the knowable" (Horrigan, 2007, p. vii), the knowledge obtained through this project is a-priori and non-empirical. The artistic process is, amongst other things, an experience. Both the processes that lie at its creation and the responses to it are highly subjective in nature. Neither is knowledge production the primary concern of this thesis.

The development of *Behind the Mountains* followed a nonlinear course, mirroring the temporalities explored in the work. Insights emerged alongside artistic production, and practical decisions were not guided by a predefined structure, but by attentive listening to the material as it unfolded. The intention was for decisions to be intuition-led, while questioning and situating them, nonetheless. The archival material, letters, and drawings are not treated as supplementary but as research material that generate insight into how memory, grief, and non-linear time are experienced and mediated. The research thus accounts for intuition, imagination, memory, and sensory experience as valid ways of knowing, while remaining critically reflective through contextualization within existing cinematic and philosophical discourses. This approach can be located alongside other practice-led research models that understand artistic processes as forms of embodied and situated knowledge.

In this sense, the written thesis and the film operate as interdependent components of one single research process. The film does not 'illustrate' the text, nor does the text merely explain the film. Instead, both forms think alongside each other, each articulating aspects of the research that the other cannot fully contain. Knowledge is thus produced in the space between theory and practice, between reflection and intuition, and between personal experience and collective understanding.

Although it cannot be placed neatly in one category, the process of the creation of this film shares many resemblances with the essay film. Etymologically, the term essay is related to trying out or experimenting, 'to essay' meaning 'to assay', 'to weigh' or 'to attempt'. The essay prioritizes an open format, which is subject to constant reinvention, its form being defined at the same time as it evolves. It doesn't necessarily follow a clear and linear narrative trajectory. This makes it both potent and problematic as a format, since it transgresses conceptual and formal norms and is therefore highly adjustable, privileging the open and non-predictable experience of its object, yet raises the question of whether it can even be placed within a formal and conceptual framework altogether (Adorno, 1958).

The essay has already been conceptualized by Michel de Montaigne in relation to the literary essay in his famous work from 1580 called *Essays*. He thought that the words in his writings should be approached as "tentative efforts at finding the truth about something" (Montero, 2012, 6). According to him, essays are characterized by the attempt of the essayist to inquire about something from their personal viewpoint, rather than striving to uncover and convey absolute truths. The essay, then, is both the building structure as well as the documentation of this process of finding truth and (self)-reflection. It is because of this ability to conceptualize one's own experience (judgment), that the essayist is in a process of constant reassessment of his:her ideas keeping him:her from reaching one indisputable Truth (Montero, 2012, 6).

3. A letter

The choice of materials for this film has followed a natural course of necessity, availability, and ability. New to filming and editing, and cinema altogether, and with limited resources in terms of filming and recording equipment, I started with what was most familiar to me: writing and drawing. In total, there are about 10 letters that I wrote to Max, in the present time, containing reflections about time, life, death and other observations. Together with those letters, I drew: The stars, the universe, you, us, the water that seemed to flow through all my memories.

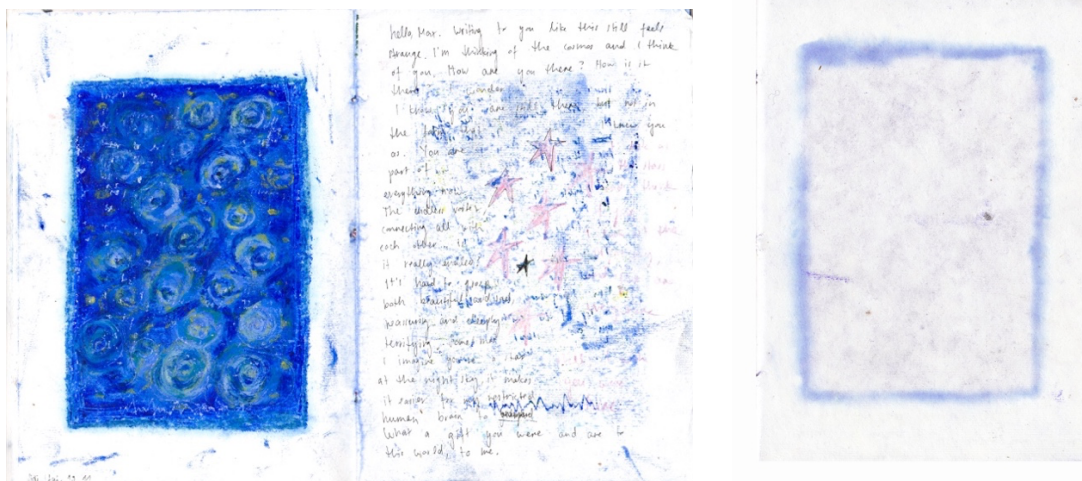


Figure 1: pages from notebook, letter to Max

Where photographs or videos were lacking, sometimes words filled in, and the other way around. To create a bridge between the two I added drawings, both depicting memories visually, giving form to what had never existed but was born from my imagination.

The use of drawings in the film also signifies interconnectedness; a tear that becomes part of the ocean, the world that lives beyond our perception and the world(s) we inhabit as children that seem to encompass everything.

Some of the drawings were drawn frame by frame to create a moving sequence, much like classical 2D animation, while others were filmed as static images, gaining motion by being integrated in the film.

Unlike conventional animation, which uses high frame rates to create a fluid and seamless sequence, there are fewer frames per second, which results in a slightly fragmented, rigged

movement. preserving the visibility of individual drawings.

This visible fragmentation aligns with the film's temporal fragmentation and segmentation. At the same time, the drawings retain a childlike aesthetic, as they stem as much from my childhood memories, as they do from the present moment.

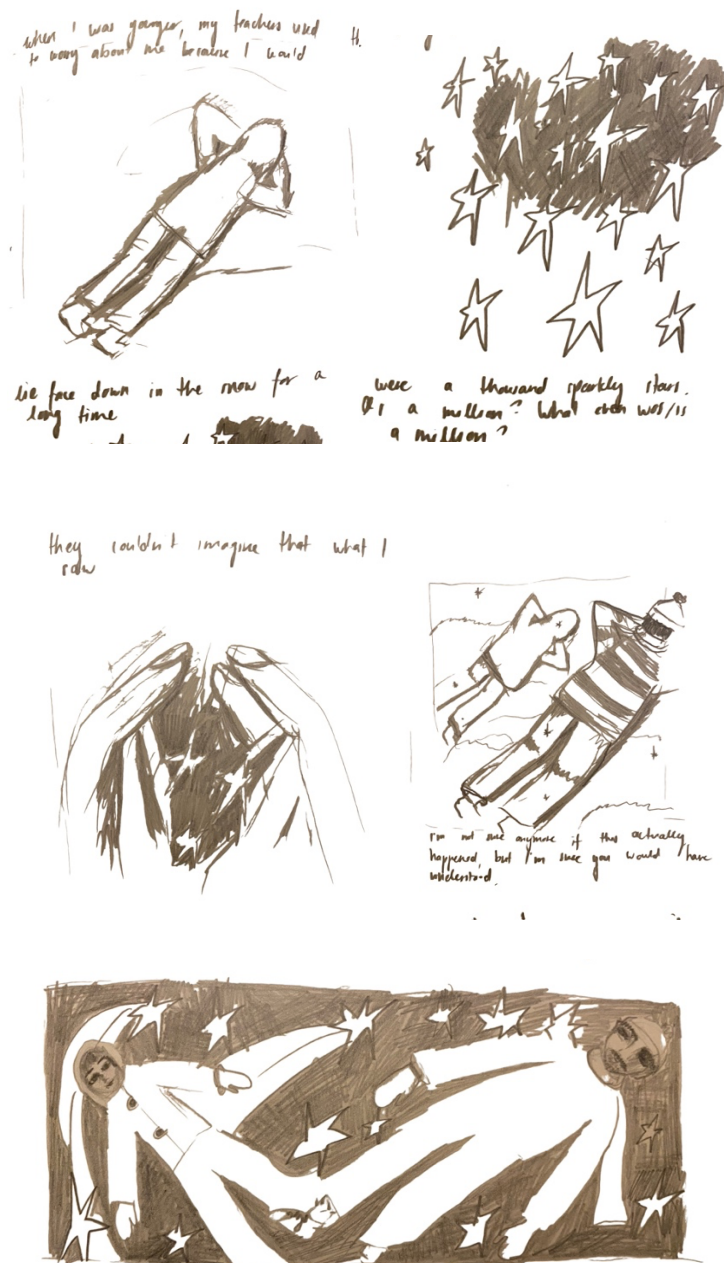


Figure 2: pencil sketches of snowflakes that look like stars, integrated in 'Behind the Mountains'

I started to go through the remains I had left of Max, which were many photographs and the book that he, together with his wife Madlen, gifted me when I was around three years old. It contains key moments from my childhood, and things that he wanted to share with me: a treasure hunt map and stories about mermaids and a princess living in the castle of Erlinsbach, poems and riddles, drawings, a whole section about Mozart. The book grew gradually as I grew older, becoming a little bit bigger with each year that passed. It is a book, much like Bergson's notion of memory as 'accumulated time'; some moments have been engraved into the perception of the past, and then further been preserved on paper. This book is from then, but it is present in the Now. The process thus far has come from necessity, I believe, to write words down.

Inspired by Shuji Terayama and Shuntaro Tanikawa's *video letter*, Jonas Mekas' *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* and Naomi Kawase's tribute to her great-aunt, Uno Kawase, in *Katatsumori*, the idea of something like a video letter started to crystallize, alongside the curiosity about how memories shape our notion of time. All the named works above have in common that they emerge through a fragmented structure, as they follow the obscure, winding and scattered paths of memory. Although each of these works is distinctive and unlike another, they are all deeply intuitive and intimate, as they grapple with the fragility, beauty and pain of existence.

I decided to revisit the place where most of my childhood played out, the house where I grew up together with my mother, my stepfather and Madlen and Max. I filmed the garden where I grew up, now in deep winter, looking deserted and uninhabited, and the house where we lived: the living room, changed but similar, the bench in front of the house, the stream next to the house with the wooden bridge crossing it, still there now renovated.



Figure 3: still from 'Behind the Mountains' showing photograph of Max and Lena on the bridge behind the house, Max is reading to Lena



Figure 4: still from 'Behind the Mountains', the same bridge as above, almost 20 years later

I filmed with the basic equipment I had: A camcorder and a sound recorder. It was cold and I didn't have a lot of time, and I couldn't really have planned the frames in advance as I didn't know what I would find. At the same time, this also gave me the freedom to capture those images and sounds that spoke to me most in the moment, through my childhood memories, especially those in connection to Max.

I sat down together with Madlen, and she generously offered me to go through the photo albums and the writings of Max she had collected. We found a poem that he wrote in memory of a dear family friend of his, reflecting about death, and life, and the letter mentioned earlier, which he had written to me when I was five, but had never given to me. Perhaps he wrote it with the intention to include in the book, and never had, perhaps he

thought it was too difficult for me to understand at the time. Here it was, another letter, written in the past, but only read now, more than 20 years later.

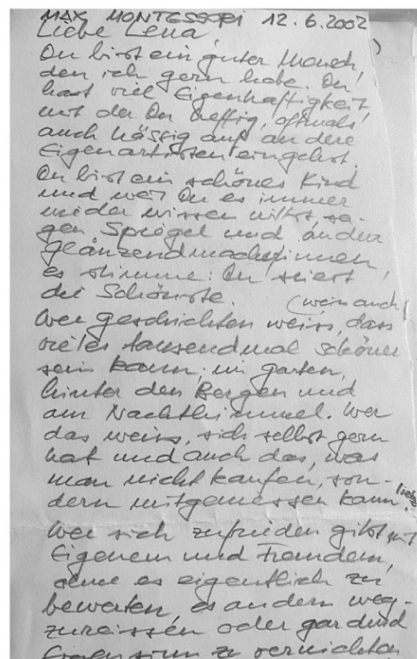


Figure 5: handwritten note with letter from Max to Lena

Dear Lena,

You are a good person whom I like.

You have a lot of peculiarity, with which you react fiercely, often angrily, towards other peculiars.

You are a beautiful child and, and as you always want to know, mirrors and other glossy voices say it's true: You are the most beautiful.¹

Those who know stories also know that many things can be a thousand times more beautiful; a garden, behind the mountains and in the night sky.

Who knows this, loves themselves and also loves that which cannot be bought but can be enjoyed,

Who is content with what is her own and what is foreign, without actually valuing it, tearing it away from others or even destroying it through obstinacy,

¹ I believe this is a reference to *Snowwhite*. At this time, I was obsessed with fairytales, especially those about princesses. Max was often including a personal twist to those fairytales, criticizing and subtly undermining the duality between good and evil, whereas good was usually associated with beauty and evil with ugliness.

Who becomes content in this way becomes beautiful,
Perhaps the most beautiful thing is the serene,
and if you, too, were left as you are and as you become,
If you remain your innermost self,
that is to say, if you stay true to yourself and create from within,
instead of accumulating property and apparent possessions in front of you,
you would become self-contained, creative and happily free.
To be beautiful little is required; peculiar - not!

In this way, our letter exchange crossed faraway temporalities, bringing past elements to the present, even before I edited the film to follow an epistolary, non-linear structure. The letters thus became the core of the film, and the film builds around them in the form of a loose dialogue which spans across different temporal and spatial dimensions. It is structured as follows:

Intro, December 2023, Lisbon, Portugal

Letter from Lena to Max, November 2024, Caldas da Rainha, Portugal

Letter from Lena to Max, July 2024, Küttigen, Switzerland

Letter from Max to Lena, June 2002, Erlinsbach, Switzerland

Poem from Lena to Max, July 2024, Küttigen, Switzerland

Mourning poem, written by Max in memory of Florian H, June 2007, Erlinsbach, Switzerland

Poem written by Lena for Max before his death and for his funeral, November 2008, Erlinsbach

The letters are personal, but they also address universal questions about the meaning of life, and what lies beyond it. Besides they are a way to share a common interest in language and words, and the joy to express through them.

The intro of *Behind The Mountains* shows the moon and the sun as they rise and set. They are symbolic for the everlasting dance of coming and going, push and pull, life and death. They are also two celestial bodies, their impact not only felt in our daily lives, but substantial to it, yet outlasting us infinitely.

The sun and the moon are many things to me, but what am I to them?

The moon is connected to water, both mystically and physically, being the main body to create the gravitational pull resulting in the earthly tides. The film's narrative follows the course of water and moves like it, it starts by a little stream, encounters frozen ponds and snow-covered trees, then moves on to the sea, becomes a tear, and, finally, rests on snowy mountain caps. This is elaborated in a later chapter, but it points to the cyclical nature of matter, what remains or emerges when we leave; how water transforms but never disappears.

It is there where, tentatively, our fragile lives may be placed: in between the personal stories each of us carries with us, what makes you *you*, and what is too vast for us to grasp.

4. Memories

As I delve into an exploration of time, not only do the different timelines interweave and tumble into each other, but also the line between what is my research and what is the result of it dissolves increasingly.

Part of the initial documentation of the research process that eventually led to the making of the film, I decided to keep this phrase embedded in the final video. It shows the limbic place one finds themselves in when questioning time through memories, which themselves can be seen as either or both temporal fragments, and detached from a temporal plane altogether since they can exist both in the past or in the present. Memories can be made from things that have not been experienced themselves, but dreamt, told, or experienced through a video game, for example. This further brings in question the nature of which experiences we account for as *real*, and how we do so. When we take on the perspective of memories themselves, this differentiation may not exist altogether, and if so, more as a liminal state rather than a clear-cut line.

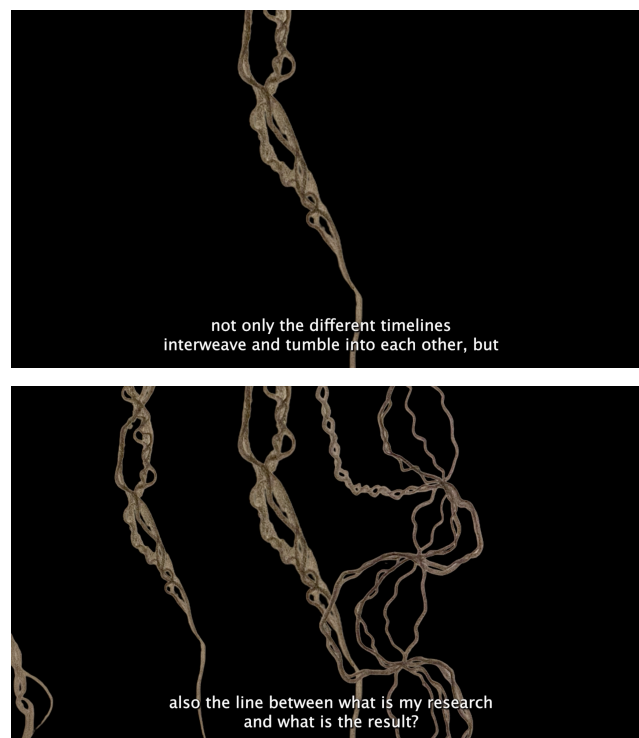


Figure 6: stills from 'Behind the Mountains'

The essay (film), through its heretical, fragmented and liminal qualities, in many ways resembles the memory-structure, and it is arguably not a coincidence that memory has been often addressed through precisely that format by renowned filmmakers such as Chris Marker or Jean-Luc Godard. In the first minutes of *Sans Soleil* (1983), the narrator reads the letters written by the fictional cinematographer Sandor Krasna, a pseudonym for Chris Marker:

He wrote me: I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?

Marker, or Krasna, describes memory making as an active process of its own in which we write and rewrite our realities and our histories. By remembering certain things, we omit others - forgetting and remembering not being separate but constituting one another. *Sans Soleil* drifts through images and sounds in a way that is both fragmented, piecing various moments, places and impressions together, yet also feels like one long stream of consciousness. There are various levels of closeness between the spectator and the film, at times the images and sounds are deeply immersive, comparable to the way that a smell can bring forth an old memory, making it feel so palpable that it is not only remembered but relived in the present. In other scenes the narrator, or, in this case, the words of Krasna told through a narrator whose identity remains largely hidden, reflect upon what Krasna perceives, creating a gap between what is shown and the reflection thereof. The filmed scenarios also function as gateways to pondering broader questions and imaginative scenarios, inviting the spectators to follow and to bring in their own critical thinking as well as imagination.

In *Sans Soleil* (1983), we meet the wildcat video game designer Hayao Yamaneko, who imports scenes from his life into his memory machine. As Hayao Yamaneko pushes the slider, memories of stray cats and takenoko dancers take shape, the footage pulsating together as purple then green then orange globules flickering in and out, as if alive.

I envy Hayao in his 'zone,' he plays with the signs of his memory. He pins them down and decorates them like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time: the only eternity we have left. I look at his machines. I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend.

The narrator looks at Yamaneko's machine with envy, as it makes memories come to life and manifest as not only visible entities but as creatures of their own, unaffected by the constraints of linear time.



Figure 7: still from 'Sans Soleil'

Later, in 1997, Marker attempts to create a medium that resembles Yamaneko's memory machine through a CD-ROM called *Immemory*.

Immemory resembles a memory-box (or memory machine), filled with postcards, family albums, books, movie posters and photographs - artifacts of meaning that are being remembered, and thus stored within the box. Within this 'memory box', to access some memories, one must first reach for others. Marker's *Immemory* demonstrates that memories exist on top of one another, some connected with each other and some not, forming something like a messy, mutable, loose carpet. By recollecting them, we insert fragments of reality or imagination into the memories, or rather memory containers, that we hold.

When creating *Behind the Mountains*, in a way, I delved into my own memory-box. There were drawings, letters and photographs there. There were also many undocumented memories, that I tried as best as I could to recreate visually, sonically or through words. At times, it is the approximation of a clear memory-image, but more often it is the feeling of a place, or a scenario, that re-emerges in a different form. When I draw, or write, I try to

remain in this dreamlike state of remembering, before my thinking mind can get in-between me and my memories. In many ways it is an insight directly into my memories, or my inner world, re-enlivened and imbued with new meaning as I go on to contemplate them in the present.

Angela Melitopoulos (2018) also compares the editing process of her work to the concept of memory. Through it, the editor has the possibility to expand or compress certain fragments of time, and to relocate and re-assemble them, bringing the past into the present, letting 'the dead' appear in 'the living'. She further elaborates that the video camera and montage form together a system that simulates the neurological function of memory. In her video *Passing Drama* (1999) she constructs a mental space in which memories interact with active and passive forces, as they do in the cerebral system. This notion aligns with Henri Bergson's theoretical outline of memory. According to him, memory is a form of accumulated time, introducing a selection, whereas perception functions within these 'syntheses of time'. If one takes this definition of memory, the montage process takes on a similar function, as within it the flow of time can be contracted and expanded. There is, of course, the difference that this manipulation, by definition, is conducted intentionally, while the accumulation of time as memory is subjected to a series of factors completely outside of control. From an artistic perspective, however, this is interesting, as montage can mimic the time contraction and expansion of memory, influencing our perception in similar ways. Lazzarato and Melitopoulos (2003, 124) explain how camera and montage correspond to the two essential types of memory that Henri Bergson defines in his *Matière et Mémoire* (1993):

We work with visual relationships and intensities generated through layering. We trigger a different relationship to linearity that corresponds to memory. One speaks of intensifying images and sound, of the associative potential and the different connectivities of visual relationships. This corresponds to our perceptual capacity, in which the power of our gaze changes things. It also corresponds to our memory, which allows us to transform a moment into hours, days or months. We finally touch upon the question of the ecology of the mind, which shapes our memory.

5. Dialogues with the Absent

This chapter explores the video letter as a form of dialogue with the absent. It takes a closer look at *video letter* by Shuji Terayama and Shuntaro Tanikawa (1983), and the way the connection between memory, temporal fragmentation, and presence through absence are addressed in it.

Video as a multimodal medium has the powerful ability to evoke thoughts and emotions through the different elements of sound, image, and words, both by implementing and withholding them, and combining them in various ways. Sound can build a bridge where an image is missing, and vice versa. A silence in between sounds, a black screen, or sometimes just a missing word, can evoke a feeling of absence.

In the making of *Behind the Mountains* one of the principal questions that emerged was how to document someone who is no longer alive.

How do you document someone who is no longer here? Who am I documenting? Is it you or is it my memory of you?

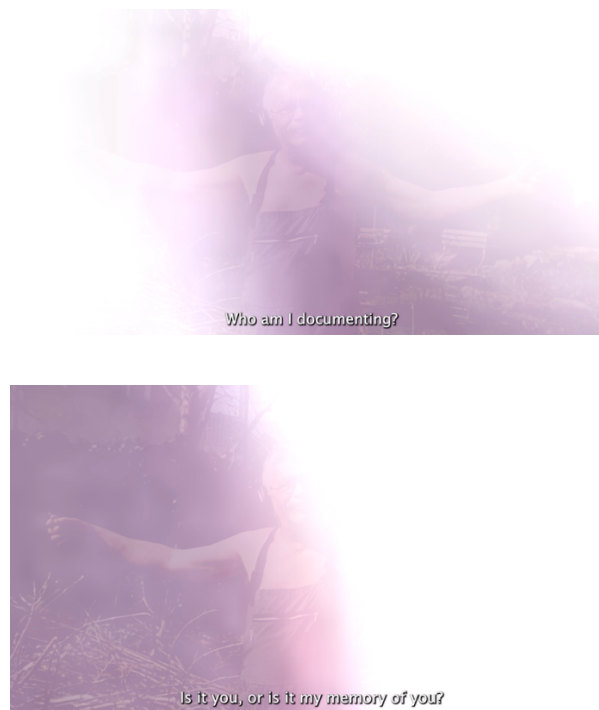


Figure 8: stills from 'Behind the Mountains'

5.1 Remembrance, Liminality and Temporal Fragmentation

Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life.

(Rilke, 1929/2016, p. 64)

This section deals with the question of remembrance, and how, by remembering, we move within a liminal space between fiction and reality. The lines between reality and fiction as well as the other and the self are being blurred as a result of the creation of meaning from a space of absence. It is a paradox that is explored by Gilles Deleuze. In his writings, particularly in *Logique du sens* (1969) he discusses the concept of the 'phantom image', which refers to images that exist in a conceptual or imaginative space, even when they are no longer physically present. Deleuze explores how these phantom images can influence our perceptions and memories, highlighting the complex relationship between reality and representation.

Shuji Terayama and Shuntaro Tanikawa approach this paradox from a videographic perspective, focusing on space between fiction and reality, but also the delineation of their own identity. In their video-dialogue memory and testimony are investigated, as they create a (fictional) space where new forms of temporality emerge. This is especially prominent in the confrontation of Shuji Terayama with his own illness and death. The letters touch upon the existential questions of life and death, documenting both the impossibility of grappling with the finitude of life, while being alive, yet creating something immemorial in the process. Within this space of loss and making, time is being redefined. The format of the essay-like film underlines a temporal fragmentation and realignment: It consists of 16 fragment letters, and, as noted by Raymond Bellour (2002), the epistolary structure serves to create an elliptical space of loss that brings word and image together through different possibilities.



Figure 9: stills from 'video letter'

The rhythm and character of the video exchange between the two longtime friends is strongly influenced by renga poetry. Renga, meaning 'linked poem', is a form of poetry that relies on the collaboration of multiple poets. Like in a conversation, the poets take turns in creating alternating three-line and two-line stanzas. This kind of exchange based on response to the counterpart(s) gives rise to spontaneity, similar to a 'real' conversation.

Both poets recorded their letters in their respective homes, their main principle being not to edit their individual letters, "but to compose directly, intuitively, paying attention to the speed and flow of their unfolding ideas" (London, 1990, p. 201). Both renga poetry and *video letter* have in common that they are improvisations, capturing and preserving an experience in the moment of articulation. Being influential Japanese poets, Shuntaro Tanikawa and Shuji Terayama have both, in different ways, experimented with the most traditional Japanese literary forms while stretching the edges of convention in the quest of experimentation and self-exploration. Barbara London (1990, p. 199) writes that "what makes Video Letter such an extraordinary tape is that Terayama and Tanikawa combined a venerated literary form with the most rudimentary consumer video equipment and moved far beyond the limitations of traditional Japanese artistic vocabulary, the abstract and external subject matter of ka-cho-fu-getsu (flowers, birds, wind, and moon)".

The letter format and the setting of the two poet's homes give the video something very intimate. Ordinary objects are interwoven with philosophical questions of meaning and identity (Terayama & Tanikawa, 1983, 00:45:23):

[...]

These are my socks.

This is my handkerchief.

These are my trousers.

These are my briefs.

This is my left foot.

This may be my blue heaven.

Who am I?

Is this my poem?

Terayama's illness which results in his subsequent death is hinted at only on the margins, or rather as part of a life of one that continues even when faced with his own mortality. In between feeding his dogs and showing pictures of his aging mother to the camera, Terayama carefully prepares his medicine which he swallows with a cup of water.

Sunday, September 26th, 9am

From Shuji Terayama to Shuntaro Tanikawa

[...]

Thank you for your letter, Tanikawa-san. It is because we live in an age when we can't clearly tell "meaning" from "no meaning",

that we get stuck in words.

I can't help but feel life is not "meaning" or "no meaning",

but the illusion of no meaning.

Yes, the illusion of no meaning.

And the body gradually gets left behind

(Terayama & Tanikawa, 1983, 00:35:38)

Tanikawa concluded and edited the video exchange in the end, and in this way *video letter* became "a kind of epitaph or mourning poem for Terayama" (London, 1990, p. 199). The video ends with the camera slowly following Terayama's final electrocardiogram, the line of his heartbeat straightening, and Tanikawa reading the poem 'The Forest Keeper', and instead of Terayama's name, there is now an empty space.

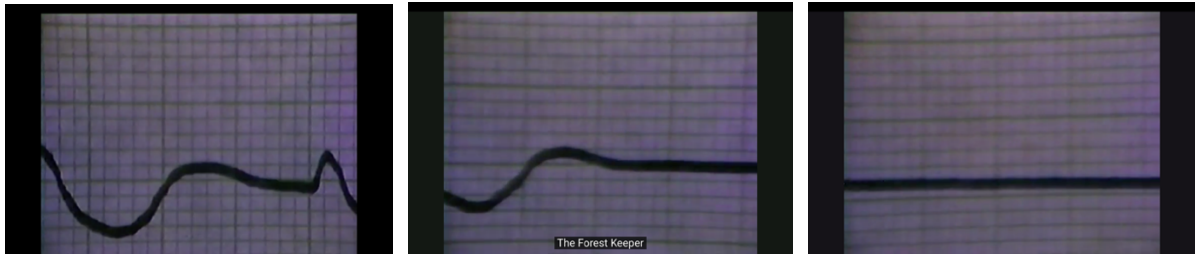


Figure 10: stills from 'video letter'

It is in this blank space, and the silence that follows in the end, when the last poem is not read, but only printed on a paper facing the camera, that Tanikawa bears witness to the final moments in the life of the artist, and his friend, Terayama.

These instants silently highlight the experience of loss, death and suspension. Not by pointing out something but by the feeling that is given rise through absence. Miguel Mesquita Duarte compares the act of witnessing this moment to Blanchot's 'near death' experience: Although it is not a 'near-death' experience, as in Blanchot's account, the irremediable and inexorable death, which is reported by someone else, has in common with Blanchot's text the fact that it also sharply translates the disturbing experience of the interruption of time and existence, throwing us into a space of impermanence and indefiniteness between being and non-being, between the present and the absent, between before and after (Duarte, 2014, 184).

The video ends with an image of a paper attached to a post by the sea, fluttering in the wind. It reads:

20 years old. In May I was born
 I tread on the leaves
 and read young horse chestnuts
 Now is the time
 At the entry to my season
 Bashfully towards birds
 I raise my arm
 20 years old. In May I was born.

(Terayama & Tanikawa, 1983, 1:13:38)

In the act of remembering someone who has passed away, we not only keep the image of the dead alive; we enliven it; we take it with us as part of the flow of life that continues, and as most things, is not entirely impermeable, but responds to its new context, shifting and molding, a thing from the past, alive, in the present.



Figure 11: still from 'video letter'

6. Silence and Sound

IX

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live

I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun. It's not my own face I see there, but other faces, even your face at another age. Whatever's lost there is needed by both of us— a watch of old gold, a water-blurred fever chart, a key. . . . Even the silt and pebbles of the bottom deserve their glint of recognition. I fear this silence,

this inarticulate life. I'm waiting for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water for once, and show me what I can do for you, who have often made the unnameable

nameable for others, even for me.

(Rich, 1978, p. 22)

What if we perceived the inaudible as sounds? Why are we saying that we 'see' something to prove its existence and are equally attuned to create mind-images, but not mind-sounds, to perceive something in sounds, something we have never heard. Hearing sometimes feels like the gothic sister of seeing, silenced, reaching her vast network through the underground world, protruding everything. Like a mountain collapsing, listened to from underneath it, the roaring, the vibration traveling through mark and bone into every cell of every-thing.

Silence and sound, then, don't feel so far away from each other, in reality they reside in the same space, like two sides of the same coin. Pauline Oliveros (2005, p. 14) writes in *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* about the symbiotic relationship of silence and sound: "There is no sound without silence before and after. [...] Sound and silence are relative to one another. Time relationships may be instantaneous to very long. Listening to sounds means listening to silences, and vice versa.

There is no absolute silence unless there is zero vibration. Silence means that we can hear no sounds. Silence is the space between sounds."

I heard extraordinary plains raining on the sea (10)
I heard an unending field of white daisies (21)
I can hear the rabbit stunned by the headlights (22)

You can hear whole days sinking, strange sunny mornings, unfinished loves, goodbyes cut short that sink into the sea.

You can hear surprising baits that rain with sunny days stuck to them
[...] You can hear the sky. (8)

I heard a sea and a sky hallucinated, I heard suns exploding with love fall like fruits,
I heard whirlwinds of fish devouring the pink flesh of surprising baits.
I heard millions of fish which are tombs with pieces of sky inside, with hundreds of words that were never said, with hundreds of flowers of red flesh and pieces of sky in the eyes.

I heard hundreds of loves that were stopped on a sunny day.
Baits rained from the sky. (9)

(Zurita, 2009, pp. 8 – 22)

The sound in *Behind the Mountains* functions like a connective tissue throughout the video, operating relationally rather than illustratively. It builds a bridge between past and present, still and moving image, the visible and the imagined.

It connects visual fragments to a whole, carrying them along, while at other times causing an interruption. Sound and Stillness work together, stillness giving rise to sound, at times symbolizing its absence, at times creating a field for deeper listening, while also functioning as its own force; a still presence, a presence of stillness.

The spacing of sound and silence underlines the film's non-linear temporality. Listening becomes a temporal act, inviting the spectator to remain with the image rather than move through it. Stillness invites the spectator to *dwell* rather than to follow, allowing images to function as containers for memory. Sound and Stillness imitate the experience of time and memory, by condensing and expanding moments, allowing time to flow or to thicken.

The contrast between image and sound, and the suspension of one or both elements mirrors the experience of grief and remembrance, during which time often feels suspended or dilated.

It also enables the images to function as sites of projection, allowing memory and imagination to enter.

The soundtrack chosen is both a homage to Max, as well as the sonic carrier of memories.

I hear your voice mixed with opera music, behind a cloud of cigarette smoke. Old carpets piled on top of each other. A paper hanging on the wall saying: I'll give you my heart. That's all I have.



Figure 12: stills from 'Behind the Mountains' showing animated drawings of smoke

The memories from my childhood are imprinted on my mind as multisensorial items, so vivid they almost seem to have a life of their own. I tried to recreate these images, through the senses available to film: The opera music sounding through the open door of the house. When you enter, the air is hazy, and there is a strong smell of cigarette smoke. The living room is warmly lit, and Max is sitting on the couch, wearing his glasses, reading. Above him a small piece of paper is taped to the wall, reading, *I'll give you my heart. That's all I have.*

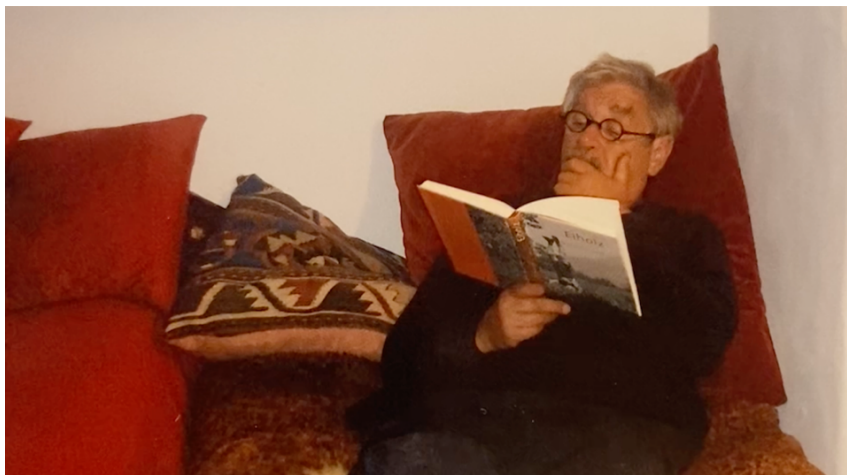


Figure 13: stills from 'Behind the Mountains', on the bottom showing Max reading in the living room, on top the same living room, empty, 20 years later

Soundtracks used in *Behind the Mountains*

Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007: II. Allemande, composed by J. S. Bach and played by Eric Jacobsen

Mot Kvæld, Op.42 No.7, composed by Agathe Backer Grøndahl with lyrics by Andreas Jynge

Das wohltemperierte Klavier in C Major, 1-1 Prelude BWV 846, composed by Johann Sebastian Bach and played by Gregor Quendel

Arabesque No. 1 (L. 66) in E Major, composed by Claude Debussy and arranged for a music box by Gregor Quendel

Molto adagio sempre cantante doloroso, composed by Guillaume Lekeu and played by Quatuor Debussy

These compositions are direct references to my childhood, classics that I would hear over and over again. The choice could have fallen on lesser-known compositions or a more abstract soundscape, but it didn't feel quite right.

Debussy's *Arabesque No. 1* (L. 66) in E Major, and Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* in C Major, 1-1 Prelude BWV 846 have been adapted for a music box, invoking a sense of nostalgia, childhood, and something reminiscent of a different time. Music boxes operate using a clockwork mechanism, wound by a key, to turn a cylinder with pins. In a way, their melodies appear as segmented and are played repeatedly. In *Behind the Mountains* the music box appears each time there is a sequence of drawings which is linked to the past, and to memories from childhood.

The soundtracks usually appear only in fragments rather than as a whole; imagine opening a door to an old memory, and music flows out of it, then opening a different door, and so on.

6.1 Use of Voice in *Behind the Mountains*

The essay film is a form that permits, and maybe requires, subjectivity and reflection, often using voiceover to create a space for personal inquiry. Laura Rascaroli (2008) argues that the essay film, by using voice to create a space for subjective reflection, challenges the idea of objective truth. *Behind the Mountains* is explicitly subjective and personal; rather than erasing authorship and conveying my personal reflections as universal truths.

Filmmakers like Chris Marker and Jonas Mekas demonstrate how voice can blend personal observations with broader philosophical questions, inviting the listener to engage with the film.

In *Sans Soleil* (1983), the narrator's voice is reflective and poetic, inviting the viewer to ponder time, memory, and the act of observing. The narrator's disembodied voice (we don't know anything about her, only her voice appears in the film, reading letters written to her but never any response *from* her) creates a certain distance between the images and the words. The question arises if the images are a product of her imagination, evoked by the letters she's reading, or if they reflect the memories and observations of Sandor Krasna (a pseudonym for Marker), or if they come from a shared space within this letter exchange. In contrast, Jonas Mekas' voiceover in *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000) appears raw and unfiltered, creating a sense of immediacy, as if speaking directly to the viewer/listener. Watching the film feels like opening a multidimensional photo album which, both intimate and fragmented, captures the spontaneity of lived experience.

Both in *Sans Soleil* and in *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*, voice is employed in a way that creates either proximity and distance. The voiceover doesn't necessarily steer the narrative but adds another layer to it; observing, questioning, pausing.

Moreover, it brings the director into the film as a perceivable part of it. Raymond Bellour (2002, p. 327) writes that 'subjective cinema' and 'autobiography' contain "the filmmaker's choice of keeping close to the subject of themselves, of telling the story of their life, of using their own experience to articulate the question 'Who am I?' with varying degrees of explicitness and all its attendant consequences". He further writes:

There is something vertiginous in the video image, in its rationale, in its very being, How can one not see, in the myriad dots that make up its frame, a welter of ideas, drawing in those seeking to recognize themselves in the image and tending to take a lateral course, to join at

least some of the dots together?

By what it invites us to conceive and allows us to represent, the video image is one of the keenest manifestations of thought, vibrant, and unstable.

As briefly outlined in the previous section, Oliveros' (2015) work emphasizes the relationship between sound and silence, arguing that silence is not the absence of sound but a space for deeper listening. In *Behind the Mountains* silence and sound appear alongside voice to create a rhythm of presence and absence. There are moments where the voice drops away, allowing the viewer/listener to sit with the images and sounds, and to experience grief and memory in their own way. There are other moments, in which the voice is replaced with the sound of a stream, the wind in a tree's leaves, or ocean waves. Rather than being reduced to background noises, they appear on the same plane as the voice.

There is also a sense of responsibility in using my own voice. I feel I owe it to the film's subject, which is, at least in part, about grief and loss, to show my own vulnerability. There are losses too great to imagine, too heavy to bear, and too difficult to put into words. I will never fully understand some people's experience of loss, not only because of their gravity but because each loss is personal. By using my own voice, I want to say: I will never fully understand your loss, or your grief, but I will expose my own, in the hope that it may create a space for things unsaid to exist, and to grieve alongside each other.



*Figure 14: stills from 'Behind the Mountains' showing tree
in winter in the shared garden behind the house*

7. Nature as a Transcendent Vessel for Remembrance

The use of moving images and sounds of nature, especially trees and water bodies, is being employed to create an (audiovisual) space for connection that transcends the time span of a human body. At the same time, they embody signifiers, symbolizing the person who is no longer here, yet is ever-present.

Time as objective reality has never made much sense to me. It's what happens that matters. How can minutes and years, devices of our own creation, mean the same thing to gnats and to cedars? Two hundred years is young for the trees whose tops this morning are hung with mist. It's an eyeblink of time for the river and nothing at all for the rocks. The rocks and the river and these very same trees are likely to be here in another two hundred years, if we take good care. As for me, and that chipmunk, and the cloud of gnats milling in a shaft of sunlight—we will have moved on.

(Kimmerer, 2015, p. 227)



Figure 15: still from 'Behind the Mountains'

I also believe that this touches upon one of the key messages contained in Max's letter. He writes, *"Those who know stories also know that many things can be a thousand times more beautiful; a garden, behind the mountains and in the night sky."*

If we widen our gaze to that which eludes our Selves and instead love *"that which cannot be bought but can be enjoyed"*, we may become content, and experience 'true' beauty and fulfillment. The letter is personal, an encouragement to be *peculiar*, and ultimately both to

accept oneself, and others as they are. But it also contains an anti-capitalist message, urging us to love that which cannot be bought, and instead of focusing on a hegemonized and shallow notion of beauty, to appreciate that which cannot be commodified.

*“...who becomes content in this way becomes beautiful,
perhaps the most beautiful thing is the serene,
and if you, too, were left as you are and as you become,
if you remain your innermost self,
that is to say, if you stay true to yourself and create from within,
instead of accumulating property and apparent possessions in front of you,
you would become self-contained, creative and happily free.
To be beautiful little is required; peculiar - not!”*



Figure 16: still from 'Behind the Mountains'

It is from this letter that I adopted the film's name. It is both a tribute to Max, as well as referring to a (fictional) place, behind the mountains. Just because it is imperceptible to us, doesn't mean it is nonexistent. Life continues beyond our selves, and we would do well to remember it. I am reminded of a phrase (and title of) Ocean Vuong's book *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. On earth we're briefly gorgeous, but the traces we leave resonate far

² The original of this letter is in German and includes a lot of word games and rhymes that were difficult to translate. Like any translation this one is an approximation.

beyond.

Whenever I see a mountain, I am reminded of Max, and that which he has left behind.

7.1 Presence through Absence

“I haven't really thought about memory 'through' decay yet, but it makes me think tangentially about the decay of affect and what that could possibly mean, look, or sound like: possibly, grief. or maybe the decay of affect is or ends with silence, like all decays.”

(Murter, 2023)

“Of nature's one duty for flesh — decay, decay, decay...”

(Reeves, 2017, para. 1)



Figure 17: still from 'Behind the Mountains' depicting an empty bench in Max and Madlen's garden

As explored in the previous chapter, absence does not necessarily equal emptiness, but is imbued with meaning, carrying with it a sense of silent presence. On a temporal plane this can be compared to *dwelling*: a pause, a holding of space.

Rather than explicitly stating the death of the 'protagonist', *Behind the Mountains* centers around the lingering presence of someone who is no longer alive. Everyday objects carry traces of presence rather than explicit narrative meaning and images function as containers for memory. An empty chair, a snow-covered garden in winter in which the flowers and trees' leaves have disappeared, a letter unanswered.



Figure 18: stills from 'Dialogue with a Woman Departed'

In *Dialogue with a Woman Departed* (1980) Leo Hurwitz makes a tribute to his deceased wife and colleague Peggy Lawson, who died in 1971. She was his life partner and her presence, as becomes clear in the film, is still tangible after all these years.

The film starts with a frame of the tree under which Peggy is buried. The camera then goes on to follow the trees' trunk and its branches, eventually closing in on the tiny droplets that have formed on the smaller twigs reaching up to the sky. Although the film centers mostly on Peggy Lawson's life and her activism, Leo Hurwitz employs the symbolism of cyclic nature to create both a space of remembrance for his dead wife, while also grappling with her death as part of something bigger and universal, transcending life from a human perspective. The film ends with a frame of the same tree, creating a kind of enduring frame for the ephemerality of life.

*Are we exposed to this like plants, which can grow, flower and then fade.
And others, early lost or in the shadow, perish before they are ripe and whole.
When are we whole, as sons or fathers? As sisters, mothers, friends and
companions?*

*When we wither away, when they soon cut us down.
We don't know and still see
That the blossom in our vase can spoil
And that, like Flori, young people must die.
We then walk out of the death chambers, mourning
And feel that we have inherited something bitter
In the early death that remains
Because there will never be an answer, and only the glimmer of eternity lights up:
like light on broken glass.*

poem by Max Feistle, in memory of Florian H.

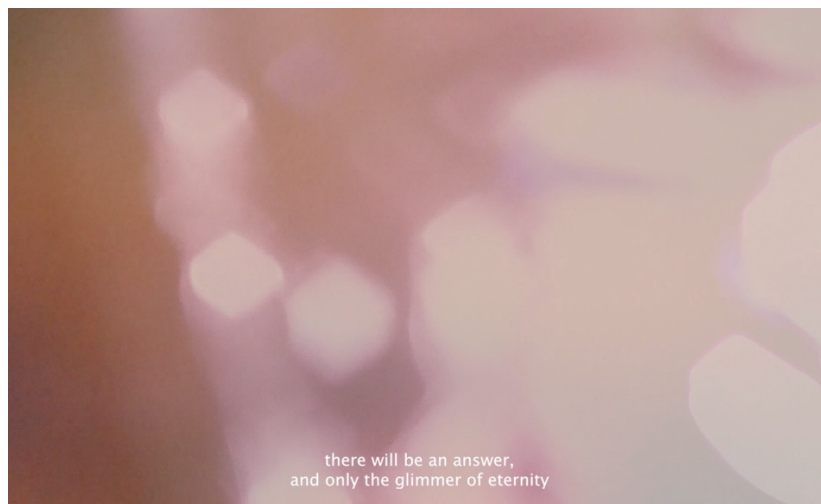


Figure 19: still from 'Behind the Mountains'

7.2 Water as a Vessel for Memory

Water is a central motif throughout the whole film, connecting one scene with another, like a river, taking things with it here and there, changing speed and direction but never ceasing in its flow.

The film is loosely structured as it follows a non-linear structure: There is an Intro and something like an Epilogue. The Intro starts with the image of the moon, and Fernando sharing his reflections about time:

You know, like when it comes to the time, it's not a very easy thing to answer because somewhere, somehow, we do not yet understand time.

Time can be, at the end, many things, you know, because we don't know.

It can be an illusion. It can be a perception. It can be a creation.

It can be nothing at the same time.

But the way we perceive time reflects on the way we live in this world.



Figure 20: still from 'Behind the Mountains'

His words ponder upon the limits of our understanding of time, at the same time showing how even, if we don't fully understand time, it still shapes our life, by not just simply existing but by our way of adopting its existence into being: Maybe we don't need to fully understand something to live and experience it. There is also a shift of perspective:

Now, if we talk about time as the sun goes up and down and if we take time and this matter and we put it in the world that we live it would make sense.

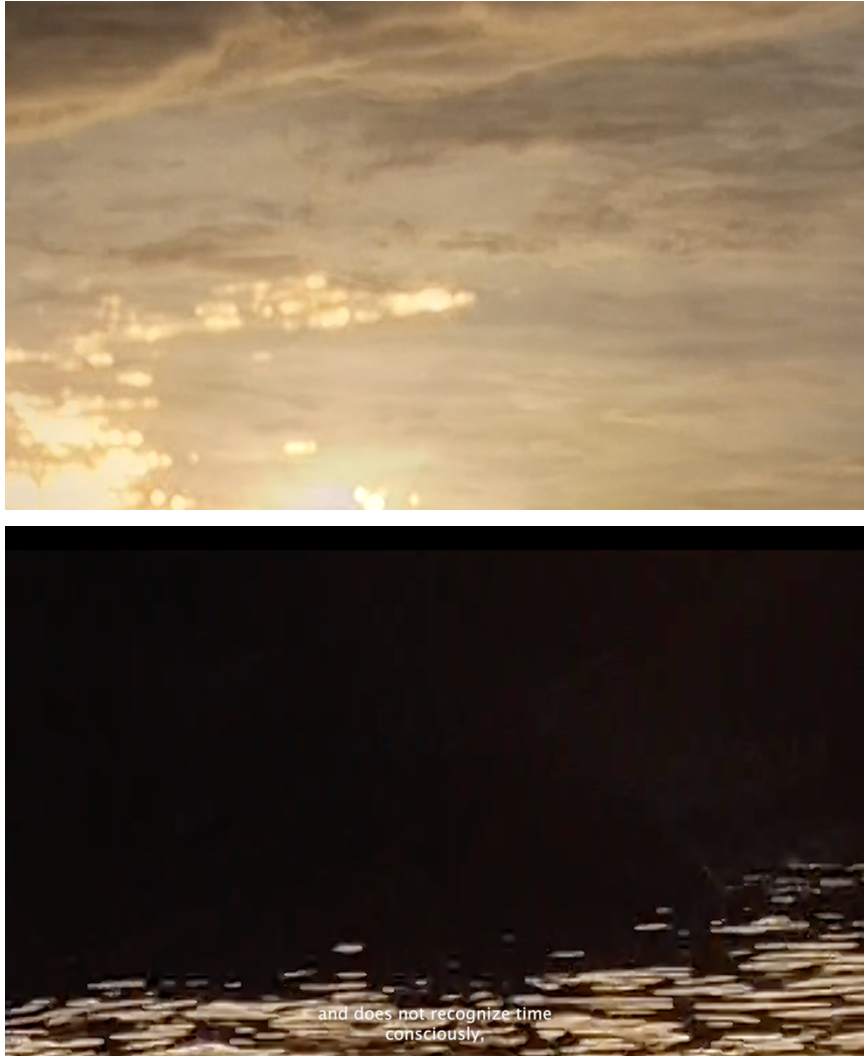


Figure 21: stills from 'Behind the Mountains'

We don't (fully) understand time, but we know that the sun rises and sets every day, as does the moon. There is something comforting about turning our gaze to these bodies so much larger than ourselves. Ever-present, ever moving in the same orbits, impacting our lives so profoundly.

There is also the intricate connection between water and the moon: The moon shapes the movement of water bodies on earth into what we know as tides. This ebb and flow movement is replicated in micro-format by the push and pull of ocean waves. Essentially, everything is water; the clouds in the sky that then transform to rain and fall down on the earth. The soil, that carries this water, which collects under the earth's surface in large

pools, and rivers. The mountains, covered in solid water in the form of ice and snow, springs bursting from their tops joining the river waters that wind through the land until they merge with the sea; and so, the circle continues.

The center part of *Behind the Mountains*, framed by images of the moon and the mountains, starts by a little stream.

*I like to watch the water. I grew up next to a river and I could always hear the sound of it.
When life feels too fast, I sit by a river and I catch my breath, and everything feels okay for a moment.*

When I close my eyes and remember my childhood, the first memory that appears is the sound of the little stream next to our house.



Figure 22: still from 'Behind the Mountains'

Water can be seen as a motif for (collective) memory, remembrance and temporal fluidity. It is understood as a vessel for memories, holding simultaneously narratives from past, present and future.

Beyond just being a motif, water inherently encompasses the past and the present. The quantity of water that has existed in the biosphere of the planet earth millions of years ago is the same yet has continuously transformed from snow to clouds to rain; rivers lakes and the sea. One of the water molecules that we are made of approximately 70% may be the same as a snowflake that has once danced in the sky a hundred years ago. Water, then, is

both eternal yet everchanging; its perpetual presence is precisely shaped by its fluid and adaptive nature.

Rios da memória, rios voadores, que mergulham, que transpiram e fazem chuva.

(Krenak, 2022, p. 19)

When I look at the snowy mountain caps glittering in the sun, I am reminded of the light reflecting on the ocean droplets. The mountains, the sea, the little stream by the house I grew up, the salty tears; they're all connected.

Ailton Krenak (2022, p. 14) describes so beautifully how the Andes are a carrier of many waters:

Andes para formar aquele mundo aquático. Ele carrega muitos outros rios, mas também a água que a própria floresta dá para as nuvens, e que a chuva devolve para a terra, nesse ciclo maravilhoso em que as águas dos rios são as do céu, e as águas do céu são as do rio.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a distinguished botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, captures the shapeshifting quality of water in a passage in her essay *Learning the Grammar of Animacy*. In Powatomi, Kimmerer's ancestral language, water is treated as a subject, as something - someone - alive. Water's capacity of transformation mirrors in Potawatomi, as well as in other Indigenous languages. These languages are rich in grammatical animacy and have a lot of wisdom to offer that extends far beyond language. The way we speak about things shapes our understanding of the world, and us as part of it.

In *Behind the Mountains*, water is not just a motif but a living entity, a vessel for memory and a bridge between past and present. Robin Wall Kimmerer's reflection on the 'grammar of animacy' resonates deeply with this approach. She writes, "*A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb wiikwegamaa—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live.*" (Kimmerer, 2015, p. 55)

This idea of water as alive, as a subject rather than an object, mirrors the film's treatment of water not as a static symbol but as an active participant in the narrative. The film's imagery -from the stream of my childhood to the ocean's vastness - invites the viewer to perceive water as a force that transcends time and connects all life.

It also reflects my own relationship with water. As a child, I understood water as a living presence, as a companion in moments of joy, grief and remembering. In *Behind the Mountains*, water becomes a character in its own right, a carrier of memories, and of the narrative of the film itself while also offering a sense of continuity and renewal.

“To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. This is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.[...] This is the grammar of animacy.

R. W. Kimmerer, 2015, p. 56



Figure 23: still from 'Behind the Mountains'

our world was so small

our world was so small, yet it contained the whole universe

a tear rolls down my cheek.

I turn my face towards the sun

If you'd look closely, you would see

a thousand tiny fractals of light, contained by an almost invisible layer.

the tear reaches the corner of my mouth, changes its shape and melts on my tongue.

it tastes like sea water.

imagine this tear in the ocean;

one tiny drop in this vast body of water.

I sense you in the stars, the sea, the air I breathe.

one day, I, too, will be stardust.

we will dance through the air, together, an eternal dance, contained in one single instant:

Now.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how memories and grief shape our perception of time, and how non-linear forms of storytelling can be translated into a coherent whole.

It has argued that the essay film, through fragmentation and dialogic address, mirrors the temporal logic of memory and grief themselves.

Rather than approaching time as a measurable or linear structure, the research has treated time as something lived, felt, and continuously reshaped through memory, loss, and imagination.

Drawing on thinkers such as Deleuze, Bergson, and writers and filmmakers working within essayistic traditions, the thesis has shown how cinema can think through absence and uncertainty without resolving them into fixed meaning. In this sense, the essay film does not aim to explain experience, but to create a space in which experience can be encountered, both intellectually and sensorially.

Behind the Mountains emerges within this space. It is built on a conversation addressed to someone no longer physically present, yet persistently alive through memory, language, and (im)material traces. The film does not attempt to reconstruct the past as it was, nor to document a life conclusively. Instead, it engages with remembrance as a liminal act, one that continually reanimates the past in the present.

Nature - especially water - is employed throughout the film as both motif and method. As a material that is eternal yet ever-changing, water embodies the temporal fluidity explored in the work, carrying memory across scales of time that exceed the human lifespan. By situating personal grief within broader natural cycles, the film seeks to place individual loss within a continuum that is at once intimate and vast. This does not diminish the specificity of grief, but allows it to resonate beyond the personal, touching upon collective and more-than-human temporalities.

Methodologically, this thesis has been grounded in a practice-led research approach, in which artistic practice operates as a primary mode of inquiry. Writing, drawing, filming and montage have functioned as epistemic tools: Ways of thinking through material rather than merely representing it. The written thesis and the film thus exist as interdependent components of a single research process, each articulating dimensions of the inquiry that the other cannot fully contain.

Ultimately, this research does not seek to offer definitive answers about time, memory, or grief. Not least because processes related to memory and grief are deeply personal, even if they can show up collectively, too. Instead, it proposes the essay film as a form uniquely

suited for dealing with uncertainty, ambiguity, and temporal multiplicity.

Epilogue: A personal memoir

It is you who taught me to read and to write and showed me how each story contains a fraction of the entire universe.

Telling a story means holding a thread, which, if you pulled on it, would shake the whole web.

If you spin it carefully, the listener will catch a glimpse of this web.

Stories live beyond us. They contain and shape our world beyond our bodily margins.

They invite our imagination, and our empathy, defying time and showing us that the very

personal can touch upon the weight of everything.

To spin a thread from one place to another there needs to be two components, maybe three. One is the person telling the story, one the listener, and then there is a link of some sort, which can pass the space in-between. This space can contain centuries, continents or just one person next to another.

This film contains much of what I could and could not put into words. Certain moments in life function as pivot points, where what has long remained underground surfaces all at once. The past year marked such a moment for me. I was diagnosed with autism at the age of twenty-eight, and I began to process the death of someone who had been central to my life during my childhood. Delayed emotional processing is common among autistic people, yet grief itself rarely follows a linear timeline. Although most of this film was completed before my diagnosis, the connection between these experiences and the work feels undeniable.

As a child, I trusted my inner voice more than spoken language. For a long time, I barely spoke, yet I was deeply drawn to words and their imaginative potential. When I was two years old, my mother moved with me into an old house divided into three apartments. In one of them lived Max, a retired professor of German literature. While my mother was working, he cared for me and shared with me his love for language. He taught me to read and write at an early age and spent hours telling stories he invented as he spoke.

Sometimes we would draw these stories together: talking rain boots, mermaids with strange names, and fantastic creatures that seemed to exist only because we named them.

For me, words opened worlds. Combined with images, they reached where language alone could not, and images in turn gave form to what words could not fully contain. These shared acts of storytelling became a refuge, particularly once I entered school, which felt confusing and hostile. I sensed that I did not quite fit in, though I did not yet know why. While others were concerned about my silence or my “strange” behavior, Max never tried to pull me out of my inner world. His confidence and attentiveness were unwavering. Looking back, I see how his way of accepting people as they were shaped not only my relationship to language, but also my understanding of care and connection.

When we moved away from that house, my sense of safety collapsed. Shortly afterward, Max became ill with cancer. I visited him during his illness, but there was an increasing distance that felt impossible to cross. Shortly before he died, he asked me to write him a poem and read it to him. In it, I promised that he would remain present in the world: in trees, lakes, and mountains, and in the way they are seen. At his funeral, I read this poem aloud without shedding any tears. Grief arrived later, delayed and fragmented, accompanied by guilt and a sense of unreality.

Years passed before I could begin to understand what his death had meant to me. Although he was not related to me by blood, he was as close to a parent as one can be. Our culture tends to rank relationships hierarchically, yet some of the most formative connections are those not structured by obligation. Max offered time, attention, and a shared love for language without expectation. This form of connection, experienced in childhood, continues to shape how I perceive the world.

This is the background from which *behind the mountains* emerged. It is not the film’s sole narrative, but it informs its every image and sound. What we receive from others does not end with them; it continues to live through us, transformed, carried forward, and rearticulated in new forms. The film, like this thesis, is an attempt to attend to that inheritance — and to the spaces in which memory, absence, and imagination persist.

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Appendix

Appendix A: [Link to Film *Behind the Mountains*](#)

[<https://youtu.be/LLtjs9-6Jv0>]

Appendix B: [Digital Archive Thesis Project](#)

[<https://www.are.na/lena-rubitschung/essay-film-non-linear-narrative-memory-time-fluidity-grief>]

or as [pdf](#): [https://drive.google.com/file/d/11FXZEHZcSp8UU-s2_J9kOap2wWKbm1LZ/view?usp=sharing]

Appendix C: [Link to Process Video Investigation Master Thesis](#)

[<https://youtu.be/ftXkz1ImT5A>]

Appendix D: Transcript of [Behind the Mountains]

Transcript: [Behind the Mountains]

Director/Creator: [Lena Rubitschung]

Year: [2025]

Source: [<https://youtu.be/LLtjs9-6Jv0>]

Note: = Line break in the original text.

[00:00:20.12 - 00:00:45.10] Fernando:

You know, like when it comes to time, it's not a very easy thing to answer because somewhere, somehow we do not yet understand time.

Time can be many things at the end, you know, because we don't know. It can be an illusion. It can be a perception. It can be a creation.

It can be nothing at the same time.

But the way we perceive time reflects on the way we live in this world.

There are things that we lived, and they passed. So it's the past. It's one definition of time.

But if I reflect a little bit better about the past, I'm going to realize that the past is also an illusion. It's because it is just in our brain, in our minds, and of course affects our feelings too.

Now, if we talk about time as the sun goes up and down, and if we take time and this matter and put it in the world that we live in, it would make sense.

Because if the universe itself does not apply and does not recognize time consciously, you know. Out of the blue, outside Earth, everything changes. Everything keeps going.

Everything, you know. So the universe itself does not apply [time], it does not recognize [it] consciously. So we can define time as a creation, as everything has been created by humankind. Not only time, but everything.

[00:05:05.17] Narrator:

I like to watch the watcher. I grew up next to a river, and I could always hear the sound of it. When life feels too fast, I sit by a river and I catch my breath, and everything feels okay for a moment.

They say water is a vessel for our memories. I believe it carries our memories, and their essence, as it holds everything that ever was and will be.

[00:06:26.09] Narrator:

As I delve into an exploration of time, not only do the different timelines interweave and tumble into each other, but also the line between what is my research and what is the result of it dissolves increasingly.

[00:06:52.05] Narrator:

What if the whole sense of life is to stop looking for sense and start observing and listening, to realize that meaning is already everywhere? Not as something to be made or to be found, but as something to be noticed.

[00:07:22.20] Narrator:

How do you document someone who is no longer here? Who am I documenting? Is it you or is it my memory of you?

[00:07:43.22] Narrator:

I tried to find you, and I can see you everywhere: in the stars, in the flowing water of the river, in the trees, books, cigarettes, bread with butter, words. All the words. I hear your voice mixed with opera music, behind a cloud of cigarette smoke. Old carpets piled on top of each other. A paper hanging on the wall saying: I'll give you my heart. That's all I have.

[00:08:38.22 - 00:09:06.18] Narrator:

Liebe Lena, du bist ein guter Mensch, den ich gern habe, du hast viel Eigenhaftigkeit, mit der du heftig, oftmals auch hässig auf andere Eigenartisten eingehst.

Du bist ein schönes Kind und wie du es immer wieder wissen willst, sagen Spiegel und andere Glänzendmachestimmen, es stimme: Du seiest die Schönste.

Wer Geschichten weiss, weiss auch dass vieles tausendmal schöner sein kann; ein Garten, hinter den Bergen und am Nachthimmel.

Wer das weiss, sich selbst gern hat und auch das, was man nicht kaufen, sondern mitgeniessen kann, liebt.

Wer sich zufrieden gibt mit Eigenem und Fremdem, ohne es eigentlich zu bewerten, es anderen wegzureissen oder gar durch Eigensinn zu vernichten,

Wer so zufrieden wird, wird schön, vielleicht ist das Schönste, das Gelassene und wenn man auch Dich so liesse, wie du bist und wirst, wenn Du im Innersten eigenhaft, nämlich du dir selbst haftend und aus dir selbst schaffend bleibst, statt vor dir Eigentum und scheinbaren Besitz anzuhäufen, würdest du eigen-artig, schöpferisch und fröhlich frei.

Schön zu sein bedarf es wenig; Eigenartig - nicht!

[Translation]:

Dear Lena, you are a good person whom I like. You have a lot of peculiarity, with which you react fiercely, often angrily, towards other peculiars.

You are a beautiful child, and as you always want to know, mirrors and other glossy voices say it's true: You are the most beautiful.

Those who know stories also know that many things can be a thousand times more beautiful: a garden, behind the mountains and in the night sky.

Who knows this, loves themselves and also loves that which cannot be bought but can be enjoyed. Who is content with what is their own and what is foreign, without actually valuing it, tearing it away from others, or even destroying it through obstinacy.

Who becomes content in this way becomes beautiful. Perhaps the most beautiful thing is the serene, and if you too were left as you are and become—if you remain in your innermost self, that is to say, if you stick to yourself and create from yourself, instead of accumulating property and apparent possessions in front of you—you would become self-sufficient, creative, and happily free.

To be beautiful, little is required; to be peculiar—not!

[00:10:36.22] Narrator:

Our world was so small, yet it contained the whole universe.

A tear rolls down my cheek. I turn my face towards the sun. If you looked closely, you would see a thousand tiny fractals of light contained by an almost invisible layer.

The tear reaches the corner of my mouth. It changes its shape and melts on my tongue. It tastes like seawater. Imagine that tear in the ocean, one tiny drop in this vast body of water. One day I, too, will be stardust. We will dance through the air together. An internal dance contained in one single instant: Now.

[00:11:53.24] Narrator:

Are we exposed to this like plants, that can grow, flower, and then fade?

And others, early lost or in the shadow, perish before they are ripe and whole.

When are we whole, as sons or fathers? As sisters, mothers, friends, and companions?

When we wither away, when they soon cut us down.

We don't know and still see

that the blossom in our vase can spoil,

and that like flowers, young people must die.

We then walk out of the death chambers mourning

and feel that we have inherited something bitter:

the early death that remains.

Because never will there be an answer,

and only the glimmer of eternity lights up:

like light on broken glass.

[00:13:50.24 - 00:14:01.20] Narrator:

Gedanken - Reisen

*Viele Reisen konntest du schon erleben
Die schönen Erinnerungen bleiben an dir kleben
Bereue nicht, wenn du nicht mehr kannst gehen
Freue dich, denn die Spiegelung der Erinnerung wirst du immer sehen
Ob in der Toscana oder auf dem Weissenstein
In Gedanken wirst du immer auf Reisen sein
In Gedanken kannst du fliegen, dich an den kühlen Fahrtwind schmiegen
vorbei an schillernden Feen,
über Hügel, Meere, Häuser, Seen
In Gedanken wirst du deine Flügel ausbreiten,
und über die endlose Weite gleiten.
Mit Fantasie und Erinnerungen
wird das Bild der Vergangenheit in dir erweckt.*

[Translation]:

Thought Travels

You have already experienced many journeys.
The beautiful memories will stay with you.
Don't regret it when you can no longer go.
Be happy, because you will always see the reflection of the memory,
whether in Tuscany or on the Weissenstein.
In your thoughts, you will always travel.
In your thoughts, you can fly, nestle up to the cool breeze,
past shimmering fairies,
over hills, seas, houses, lakes.
In your thoughts, you will spread your wings
and glide over the endless expanse.
With imagination and memories,

the image of the past is awakened in you.

Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1: pages from notebook, letter to Max.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Figure 2: pencil sketches of snowflakes that look like stars, integrated in ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Figure 3: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’ showing photograph of Max and Lena on the bridge behind the house, Max is reading to Lena</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Figure 4: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’, the same bridge as above, almost 20 years later</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Figure 5: handwritten note with letter from Max to Lena</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Figure 6: stills from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Figure 7: still from ‘Sans Soleil’</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Figure 8: stills from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Figure 9: stills from ‘video letter’</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Figure 10: stills from ‘video letter’</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Figure 11: still from ‘video letter’</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Figure 12: stills from ‘Behind the Mountains’ showing animated drawings of smoke.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Figure 13: stills from ‘Behind the Mountains’, on the bottom showing Max reading in the living room, on top the same living room, empty, 20 years later.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Figure 14: stills from ‘Behind the Mountains’ showing tree in winter in the shared garden behind the house</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Figure 15: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Figure 16: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Figure 17: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’ depicting an empty bench in Max and Madlen’s garden.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Figure 18: stills from ‘Dialogue with a Woman Departed’</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Figure 19: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Figure 20: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Figure 21: stills from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Figure 22: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Figure 23: still from ‘Behind the Mountains’</i>	<i>42</i>