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Integrative Seminar I: Memory

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The Artist's Dilemma: Memories, Experiences, & the Path to Moksha

Those who create art are tasked with the importance of preservation, whether rendering historical moments intact or their own memories and experiences. It's with this capability that artists can make a moment in time stand still, allowing viewers to experience the journey themselves, or the artist to relive it over and over again. When we break this idea down, however, it becomes troublesome. Considering mental health issues and even cultural beliefs, we question if it's healthy to keep recalling the past, whether it be traumatic or pleasant. As someone who both creates art and follows a philosophy that dissuades attachments, this concept is very complicated to address and make sense of. The concept of moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is present across multiple South Asian religions. In general, a follower of these philosophies aims to arrive at moksha through lifestyles that transcend attachments and promote new and open-minded experiences. As an artist, it's difficult to separate the desire to depict memories versus experiences; however, by being attached to memories, we are held back from experiencing the future with a fresh mindset. In order to arrive at moksha, artists need to distinguish between recreation of a memory and inspiration of the experience or feeling of a memory.

To preface, the majority of this contemplation that arose in order for me to write on this topic stems from my upbringing in a Hindu family. Subsequently, I am aware that arriving at moksha specifically is a very curated belief that many artists might not share. Nonetheless,

discussing how attachment can prevent liberation, whether liberation might mean moksha for one and happiness for another, is vital to anyone on an artistic path. Speaking of moksha, it's very similar to the concept of 'vairagya,' or detachment. Following detachment practices refers to having no attachment to outcomes or products of our desires. This idea was integrated into Indian culture since ancient times, well before the first millennium BCE. "The main goal of [this] effort became a transcendence of the attachment for this illusory world, a liberation[, or,] - moksha.¹" Being unattached grants the freedom to experience phases of our life with open minds, therefore accepting what comes our way as new and fresh. By letting go of the past, we are able to fully experience the future, and even surpass the physical world, which is the true meaning of liberation for many in my culture. So where does this leave artists, and those who *rely* on memory, trauma, and experience, to inform their practice?

A hard truth about creating art is that articulating a memory dilutes the experience - what you put on paper is never a true representation, which can be unfulfilling. This idea is tough to digest, as exploring memories in art is one of the key inspirations for many, including myself. With this comes the dilemma of constantly thinking about how things *used* to be. Throughout this essay, I've integrated the memory that I have the most attachment to as application of theory is easier to understand. My attachment is to my dog, Gabbar, who passed away in March, 2023, due to cancer. For six months after his passing, I didn't process my grief with what had happened, as I was still in school and I still had to commit to college and go to competitions and graduate and I didn't think I had time for it. For the past three months, the classes I have been taking have all related to memory in some shape or form. This enabled me to finally reflect, and I found myself relating numerous projects to Gabbar. The problem with this is that being attached to the past diminishes the present. I found myself sad over drawing my dog over and over again,

¹ Dabetić, "Ascetic ideal in India," 107.

but I kept chasing the idea of recreating his memory. It's needless to say that as humans, we will always keep our loved ones in our memories, and we *should*. However, if memories of your loved ones don't allow you to move forward, the attachment will only fill your life with misery.

My mom, Sonika Das, is a corporate management professional, but she's also an artist, a life coach, and has taught me almost everything I know about Hinduism and the philosophy behind moksha. I talked with her for her expertise regarding not only moksha, but what attachments mean for artists, specifically for me and my dog. "Memory can be both liberating and an attachment, allowing you to either be creative and use your experience of your memory to move forward, or causing you to live in the past."² In our discussion, she used the following example: I could keep drawing or painting my dog based on photos and videos that I have of him, thinking of the past and what was going on within the frame. Or, I could create art of him in "doggy heaven," or our cultural equivalent, doing things he liked, maybe giving him wings so he can chase squirrels all the way up a tree or with an endless supply of peanut butter. The latter clearly isn't a memory from the past, but it's with this kind of mindset that I can both commemorate his memory with joy and move forward. I would be pulling from the happiness that I always generally had with Gabbar to create that piece of imaginative art, rather than thinking about the feelings I *used* to have in a snapshot that I could recreate. In essence, there's a lack of wonder that you look at the world with if you try to see things the way they were. If I kept relying on photos and videos of Gabbar, what would happen when I don't experience Gabbar-esque memories with my current dog, Zuko? Why shouldn't experiencing joy with Zuko mean as much to me as experiencing joy with Gabbar? When dealing with the loss of a loved one, a big idea is that you will never be able to replace them; there's no comparison you can make to anyone because they occupied such a unique space in your life. Now, why can't we use

² Sonika Das, in discussion.

the same ideology when it comes to experiences? Another problematic circumstance is when people are caught up in the fact that they will never experience the same comfort or happiness or other feelings again. But, just like people, experiences come and go. “You can never have the same experience twice. As your environment changes, your experiences will change.³” So why bother comparing two things that will never intersect?

Focusing on art practices and moksha, it can seem a bit paradoxical to create subject-based art while still attempting to arrive at moksha, which is done when there are no attachments to the outcome. It’s great to express love through art, but how do you move on from that? We don’t have to fill the space that love held in our lives with anything, let alone art. Of course, this thought puts artists in a complicated position of “where does a lifetime of being an artist lead me if it isn’t about what we create”, but “non-attachment doesn’t mean to be indifferent ... of your efforts, or not to be ambitious,⁴” it just means that the importance of all your actions is equal. Creating a piece purely based on experimenting with aesthetics should be made with just as much effort as an attempt to depict a late loved one. Our desires should be with the journey we go through to create, not the product. With this mindset, we won’t be able to beat ourselves up over a failed attempt at the recreation of a memory; there’s so much lost in translation, and briefly mentioned before, experiences are diluted the more we try to articulate them. Our approach is always new, informed by our ever-changing perspectives. Therefore, no two art pieces will ever be the same, so allowing ourselves to be detached will help us move on.⁵

There is, however, the fact that many rely on happy memories to get through life. Bonds, being attachments or happy memories, have been proven to promote health and happiness⁶.

³ Sonika Das, in discussion.

⁴ Rogers, “Non-Attachment.”

⁵ Sonika Das, in discussion.

⁶ Feldman, “Neurobiology,” 82.

Before Gabbar passed away, I had already created multiple pieces of art that starred him; he was my happiest living memory and experience. And that was great for me for the time being; he was my first dog, so he was a very new subject matter. I had to experiment with techniques for painting fur and dog anatomy and I foundationally learned a lot for my art practice. It didn't seem like I'd get bored of him, either, as with each new day there was a new experience I could depict. This is a case of a bond, not attachment, which isn't harmful; I was accepting of new experiences everyday because, with a pet that typically doesn't live half our age, there was no day like the present. Even so, this had the potential to become an attachment. For example, if Gabbar did something really cute one day and I recorded it, and it never happened again, but I was so enamored with that previous action that I constantly only wanted him to do it again, I'd be living in the past and not embracing the new, present experiences that he was giving me. I wouldn't be appreciating him, and I wouldn't be allowing him to make me happy just by him existing with me. Not appreciating the time we've had with a loved one is one of the biggest regrets we all face in this mortal world, which eventually prevents us from being at peace with ourselves, and potentially arriving at moksha.

In summary, we all need to cope with life's happenings, and whether or not you're on the path to moksha, feeling at peace with life is an underlying purpose for all. For some, coping means journaling or talking about it, and for others, like many artists, it's by creating art. Fundamentally, whichever way we choose to cope with our memories is valid. It's when the coping turns into reliving that we need to reevaluate. Holding on to memories can often be detrimental, as when we take one experience and make it the reason for our daily struggles, we feel as though we are reliving it and never getting past it, causing this cycle of grief⁷. By using our memories to create art with new subject matter, we are able to create new experiences for

⁷ Bryant, "Cognitive," 718.

ourselves and still acknowledge the significance of the memory, essentially moving on from the past. The next step in this path towards moksha or peace is to allow ourselves to create simply for the act of creating. We aren't forgetting our past if we choose to create based on aesthetics over the memory of a loved one or a valuable object. A key to feeling liberated is accepting that all your efforts are worthy and important. Creating for the act of creating, and not for the product, is liberating: there are no expectations, no judgements, and no regrets. It's with this that liberation, whether that be moksha or happiness, is attainable, and that the artist's dilemma is no longer a dilemma.

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