



# DEPICTING DEMENTIA: REPRESENTATION OF COGNITIVE HEALTH AND ILLNESS IN SELECT ANIMATED SHORT FILMS

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## Introduction

In *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to Renaissance*, Minios quotes an Egyptian scribe's ancient script: "Old age has descended... The heart is forgetful and cannot recall yesterday" (Minios 15). Though dementia can occur in youth, it mostly affects the older people with symptoms such as moments of forgetfulness, difficulty in comprehension and communication, withdrawal, fearfulness, etc. The abstract nature of the symptoms caused due to the impairment of cognitive domains poses a hurdle for the visual portrayal of the condition. Through its limitless possibilities of representation, animation possesses the capability to bring to sight what one cannot see. In the selected films dealing with dementia patients, the animation is used as an effective tool to illustrate a dementia patient's inner turmoil, allowing the viewers a glimpse into their consciousness.

## Metaphor and Metamorphosis

In *Late Afternoon* by Louise Bagnall, Emily, an elderly woman is given a cup of tea by her daughter Kate in a sitting room. When her biscuit falls into the cup, Emily looks into the red-coloured tea and is soon transported to her subconscious state. It is a white open world with a weightless, underwater feeling where she swims around and discovers a red blob of colour. Upon entering it, she revisits an event from her past: the time she spent as a child at a beach and a rock pool, wearing a red frock. In the span of an afternoon, she is shown swimming into colourful blobs of paint multiple times, navigating through her memories of the past. This metaphor proves apt for the representation of the fleeting mind of a dementia patient, drifting between the past and the present. The watercolour visuals present a fluid momentum as Bagnall wanted "the memories to feel dynamic and flowing in contrast to the static nature of the sitting room" (Bright).

The changing nature of colour in films dealing with dementia is a recurrent theme to represent the visuospatial difficulty the protagonists face even in seemingly familiar environments. In *Memo* by Gobelins Animation School, the protagonist, Louis, is suffering from memory loss but "resists the overprotection of his daughter to keep his independence", as is stated in the description of the video. Despite his daughter advising otherwise, Louis visits a nearby store to buy coffee. As he reaches the aisle, the colours of the products bleed out of them, blurring the boundaries. He tries to run away from the flood of a seemingly white colour overtaking his surroundings, until he is left alone – a tiny figure in a large white frame – accepting his inability to orientate even in a familiar environment. The loss of memory and spatial comprehension is represented as a creeping, engulfing white flood. But the white fog soon fades away as his daughter, Nina, finds him sitting by the side of the road and the surrounding regains its colours.



The familiar surroundings losing its colour as Louis tries to get home (dir. Scheiber et al., prod. Gobelins, 2017)

Similarly, in *Late Afternoon*, when Emily realizes that her carepartner is her daughter, Nina, she goes to hug her and they are shown embracing as all the colours which represented Emily's memories of the past, circle around them. In relation to both the films, it is the warmth of companionship which brings the colours, a semblance of normalcy, into the lives of the patients.

The fluid nature of animation which facilitates metamorphoses, "the constituent core of animation itself", allows the transition from one stage of life to another seem effortless (Wells 69). There is a glimpse of Emily as a child and later, as a young woman in the sitting room where Emily, as an elderly woman, is seated in the present. Along with maintaining narrative continuity, such metamorphosis enables to better define the abstract stage in contrast to the fixed setting. The transitory nature of animation as a medium enables the shape-shifting in which the metaphor of her swimming into her subconscious affects the very manifestation of the metaphor (Forceville and Paling, 116). Along with the visual imagery, the music is



As Emily shifts through her memories, she is shown as her past self in the present setting (dir. Bagnall, prod. Cartoon Saloon, 2017)

equally important. While there is no music when Emily is seated in the sitting room, the light-hearted scenes dealing with her subconscious begin with a calm, sweet melody and later, turn rapid and disharmonious as she explores dark-themed unpleasant memories. It also helps in demarcating the inner space from the outer world. Acting as a meaning-making mechanism, the musical compositions enrich the metaphorical meanings in the film.

## Unreliable Narrators and Storytelling

In *Kahanikaar (The Storyteller)*, Nandita Jain tells the story of an old man coping with dementia through the eyes of his granddaughter, Nirmala. When she asks her grandfather to tell her the story about how the coconut got its face, he tells the story of a young fisherman who with the help of a spell is able to remove his head and jump into the sea, enabling him to catch several fishes. A jealous young fisherman finds out the secret and buries the young fisherman's head in the sand. Soon, it grows into a coconut tree and all the coconuts had little faces on them. In the film, the folktale acts as a symbolic underscoring, reflecting the confusion faced by Nirmala's grandfather.



The difference between the visualization of the grandfather's telling of the story and Nirmala's retelling (dir. Jain, prod. Judy Naidoo, 2011)

When the grandfather begins to tell the story, the visualization involves the usage of bleak colours and ominous music. When the boy jumps into the sea, the fishes seem wicked with protruding sharp teeth and long moustaches. Quite early in the film, the viewer is given hints of the grandfather struggling with dementia as he uses a spoon instead of a knife to cut a fish but the most prominent one is his inclusion of the three-headed demon into the folktale that he wrongly remembers. As Nirmala begins to tell the story, playful music takes over with the fishes depicted as innocuous, almost foolish. At the mention of the boy fervently looking for his head, the grandfather rushes out looking for his own 'head', saying, "Don't let the demon get to it". The juxtaposition between the young boy and the old man, especially during the back-and-forth between the tale and reality, makes the similarity in their predicament apparent. When Nirmala states that the headless young boy then turns into a beautiful fish and lives with the king of the fishes for the rest of his life, a colourful fish, like the ones in Nirmala's retelling, is seen leaping across the screen, merging the imaginary realm with the reality. The end expounds on the need for companionship and the 'colour' it could



Nirmala and her grandfather sitting near the sea and the fish from the folktale appears: innocuous and colourful (dir. Jain, prod. Judy Naidoo, 2011)

bring in the lives of the people coping with dementia. Storytelling is a common and pivotal part of human existence, a social function for people of all ages and at all stages of their life span (Fels 535). As people with dementia fabricate details of the story, as in *Kahanikaar (The Storyteller)*, they are considered "unreliable narrators" (Gibson 4). The grandfather's divergence from the original folktale is represented as a negative symptom of dementia, unlike *Niebla*.

Emilio Ramos' *Niebla* is a fictional animated short film imitating the interview style of a documentary film crew. The protagonist, El Pep, is an old man who narrates about the mysterious fog in the village he resides in and the resulting visitation of a strange flock of flying sheep. Though the story is apparently fictional, it is never refuted in the film with the listeners seemingly paying rapt attention. Unlike *Late Afternoon*, the reminiscent fictional past is animated just like the reality: the characters are in 3D while the backgrounds are in 2D. The similarity in the representation of the reality and the imaginary past presents the latter with empirical validation, making it significant and 'real', like Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (Roe 163). Moreover, there is a particularly unheralded scene in the real-time of the



The amalgamation of the uncanny in reality as El Pep narrates the story (dir. Ramos, prod. Producciones Atotonilco and Pompeu Fabra University, 2006)

film: keys and spatulas hanging on a string in the man's kitchen (Jessen). Such an inclusion in the real-time of the film helps giving the uncanny-ness of the present and the imaginary past equal epistemological weight.

## Conclusion

The divergence in the act of storytelling by dementia patients is met with fear and concern, compelling evidence of their loss of memory and identity. *Niebla* takes a different route with the protagonist implying multiple times: "Truth belongs to me". When one perceives a dementia patient's departure from fact as imaginative variations of their normal, usual selves, their creative potential could be seen as a strength to be harnessed. Moreover, the imaginative version can help eliminate or re-imagine unpleasant memories of the past. Animation can bring to sight their innovative understanding of their past, reminding us that memory is too slippery for our 'selves' to be reliant on 'truthful' memories.

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