

To Complete Mourning by Becoming Specters: The Mutualized Coming-to-Be in *The Red Violin**

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This essay enacts a dialogue between François Girard's film *The Red Violin* (1998) and Jacques Derrida's contemplations on "memory," "spectrality" and "the work of mourning" to envision the possibility of opening a hopeful condition of being for those who suffer from loss. In *The Red Violin*, Girard's cinematic experiments apply techniques of montage and of repetitive musical theme, practicing intertextuality of non-chronological stories by paralleling various memories of each individual character, blurring the biological and metaphorical boundaries between the living and non-living, and highlighting the fateful interrelations among time, space and different characters' life experiences. In this vein, the memories and beings of both the living and the dead are tightly woven together while reproduced—or further, relived—in temporal, spatial and trans-individual dynamics. Reversing the negative imaginaries of loss and death, both Derrida and *The Red Violin* agree with a messianic work of mourning by exploring the powerful potentiality of spectrality that manifests a way to mutualize the subject/ other, the living/non-living, into a promised being, thus gesturing towards an infinite future.

Keywords: *The Red Violin*, the work of mourning, memory and temporality, spectrality, Derrida

Introduction

As one of the major themes in literature, the work of mourning, portrayed through negative death imagery, usually represents the subject's extreme reliance on exterior objects and their struggle to work through the suffering of loss. However, based on investigations of psychoanalytic accounts of melancholia and the work of mourning, Jacques Derrida reexamines the relation between the subject and other subjects in an ethical perspective. In doing so, he reverses these negative images to develop a new philosophy of mourning, memory/remembrance, and spectrality that offers a hopeful condition of being for those who suffer from loss. As if to echo Derrida's theory, François Girard's film *The Red Violin* exemplifies a modified attitude toward death/loss. At the same time, it demonstrates a messianic work of mourning by illustrating the theme of spirit possession that signals a way to mutualize the subject/other, the living/non-living, into a promised being. With techniques of montage and of repetitive musical theme, the characters' life experiences and beings are tightly woven together while repeated—or relived—in temporal, spatial and trans-individual dynamics. Here, the work

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of mourning and the specter are still represented with their purpose of comforting the dead and the living, yet not simply bearing their responsibility to witness history and to execute justice. Instead, they are endowed with a gesture of openness toward infinite potentiality in a union and communion between the one and the other, the living and the non-living.

Jacques Derrida's Accounts of Memory and the Mutual Coming-to-Be in His Contemplation on the Work of Mourning

In his researches on memory and the work of mourning, Derrida emphasizes the subject's essential reliance on the reciprocal relation with the external other to constitute its subjectivity. His contemplations on the aporetic relation between the subject and object, interior and exterior, and living and non-living, eventually conducted a series of researches on the work of mourning and the theory of spectrality. In these writings, Derrida analyzes the mutual reliance between the subject and its unique but lost object through which the living could articulate themselves upon the non-living; together achieving an existential condition of "mutual coming-to-be." Such being(s) of reciprocally united "we," inspires Derrida to introduce an ethical perspective for a human beings to face the being(s) of oneself and ourselves, now and into the future.

Based on psychoanalytic theory, Derrida's formulation in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996) delineates how the individual subject requires a relationship with the other as a prosthetic technique to preserve and to continue their own memory: "There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside" (Derrida, 1996, p. 11). Nevertheless, with a drive for finding the origin of the thing, for returning home, the archive fever leads the subject to rebuild its relation with the past, the present and the future—a longing to return to its very origin, and yet also an eagerness for a permanent existence. It is like a *ghost* that speaks within us and haunts, in spatial and temporal transcendence, in order to *be memorized*. More than a question of the past, the concept of the archive carries a responsibility to resist forgetting, and it preserves the undetermined traces of the past. Such "spectral messianicity" may lead to a future path of reproduction and it involves the promise to an opening on the future. In its use of repetition, the injunction of memory is tied intimately with "the anticipation of the future to come" (Derrida, 1996, p. 79).

Through the concept of the archive, Derrida eventually carries out an examination of the dissociable relation between the self and the other: "The one, alas, or happily, is the condition of the other. And the other is the condition for the One" (Derrida, 1996, p. 79). The other, as the prosthetic exteriority of the self, plays an essential role in the archive system to repeat and to reproduce the self's memory. Through an archive, memory becomes trans-generational and trans-individual, and so does the self's being. In the mutualization between the self and the other, neither of their beings is still constrained by time—the past one can be brought to the present, and the future, to encounter other living beings, and the present one can expand its life experience by receiving the other's memories.

This idea is further extended and explicated later in Derrida's theory of mourning. As he indicates, the traditional ritual of mourning could only demonstrate people's refusal to recognize the fundamental difference between the beloved's memory and our memory of them. Additionally, the ritual manifested the impossibility of "preserving" the lost beloved in our memory of them. Nevertheless, this theory of finite memory paradoxically states that we live in the memory of the deceased other while "he lives *in us*" (Derrida, 1989, p. 21). The ultimate distance between the self and the other leaves a "terrible solitude" in us while at the same

time “constitutes that relationship to self which we call ‘we,’ ‘us,’ ‘between us,’ ‘subjectivity,’ ‘inter-subjectivity,’ ‘memory’” (Derrida, 1989, p. 33). It is here, where memory discloses its finitude, that the subject can begin its journey to search for its friend, thus inaugurating the possible process of mourning. As Derrida emphasizes, the memory of possible mourning must be constituted on the condition of remembering and that the other’s “trace must be followed” (Derrida, 1989, p. 35). In this regard, the subject could not really bid farewell to the past; instead, they are required to “memorize” the memory of the other within themselves through a “mimetic interiorization.” That is, we have to bear the other within us while we respect their ultimate otherness—“like an unborn child, like a future” (Derrida, 1989, p. 35). It is true that part of us is engaged with—or even constructed by—the other. Our memories and beings are formed by each other. It is this profound affection and bond that leads us to forget the other’s singularity and alterity, and to incorporate, or in Derrida’s words, to *interiorize*, the lost other. However, once we can respect the absolute distance between us and the other—who has infinite alterity—we could also earn the opportunity to know and “become” ourselves.

This interiorization of the other endows the subject, who includes parts of the other within themselves, with a memory that becomes greater than they are and “sublimely greater *than* this other that the memory harbors and guards within it, but also greater *with* this other, greater than itself, inadequate to itself, pregnant with this other” (Derrida, 1989, p. 37). This inadequacy with oneself and the recognition of the other’s otherness bring the possibility to both the other and the subject to transcend the experience of death or loss. And since memory is offered with “traces” left by the other, it not only determines the anthropological temporality but also projects itself toward the future. The traces within memory seem to belong to the past and have never been present, but at the same time they always “remain, as it were, to come—come from the future, from the *to come*” (Derrida, 1989, p. 58).

Such traces of the other or the archive can both live within the living us and also be articulated onto the non-living, such as the technical object and human craft. Through the concept of “the commodity”, in *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida delineates the inevitable connection between technicity and iterability—the capacity to repeat in alterity—in this articulation of the living on the non-living. Exchange-value, as an exterior thing bearing an idealized value, spectrally possesses use-value. Put differently, the commodity is inspired by “an anthropomorphic projection” that breathes “the human spirit, the spirit of *speech* and the spirit of a *will*” into the commodities (Derrida, 1994, p. 197). On the one hand, the commodity plays the role of a technical object to carry and embody the human spirit. On the other, the originary value of the thing requires an external relationship to a human subject, both spatially and temporally—to be “used *by the other*” or “used *another time*” (Roberts, 2005 p. 35)—to make itself possible. Furthermore, with the help of technicity and “in its originary iterability,” a use-value “is in advance promised, promised to exchange and beyond exchange” (Derrida, 2004, p. 203). This promise to exchange, and being *beyond* exchange, represents the essential meaning of Derrida’s *spectrality*, leading both the interior and the exterior, the living and the non-living, the human and the technical object, to gesture toward an undetermined future. The time of the ghost, as Derrida repeatedly illustrates through Hamlet’s words, is “out of joint” (Derrida, 2004, p. 20). The living and the dead, the subject and the object, and the memory and the hope, are all recollected and united together within the ghost. We incorporate each other; and this “paradoxical incorporation” makes the ghost “neither soul nor body, and *both one and the other*” (Derrida, 2004, p. 5; emphasis added). The ghost lives within oneself, and one takes it within to continue *ones*’ being. In this sense, we live simultaneously in the past and the present, sharing the undecidable openness

to the future. All those beings depend on the interactions and relationships among themselves to develop a shared fate and future.

As Derrida admits, human beings' ethical relation with each other could help to deal with the problems of past and memory, thus hopefully leading to the potential of re-knowing oneself, the other, and of a mutual coming-to-be. With the technique of exteriorization, memory could be preserved; thus, both the past and the personal interiority could be repeated and extended onto the present and future. As a representation of human relationships, memory offers *atrace* that originates iterability when it is repeatedly and diversely re-read from within. In this way, memory makes possible a mutual coming-to-be for the subject, who interiorizes the other, and the other, who is kept alive within the subject. Accordingly, in memory, or what Derrida calls spectral inheritance, the subject/object, the interior/exterior, and the living/non-living, can evolve into neither the *what* nor the *who*, but their co-possibility aporetically maintains their singularity and alterity at the same time. It is here that human beings may achieve transcendence over the general fear of biological death and loss of the beloved. Coincidentally, François Girard's *The Red Violin* embodies this Derridean ideal.

The Red Violin: A Melancholic Spirit Possession, or a Mutual Incorporation to Move Beyond the Work of Mourning?

Directed by François Girard,¹ an innovative French-Canadian filmmaker, *The Red Violin* (1998) tells five interwoven stories through different languages and across various historical contexts. It is noted for the creative editing and setting of its episodes in order to illustrate the journey of a legendary violin which has been collecting memories of characters throughout spatial and temporal dynamics. The repeating and overlapping process of recollecting the trace left in memories among these different stories offers chances to re-read the memories from new perspectives. On the one hand, the violin is set as a site of memory and even a whole new mutualized *being*, where the memories of all the characters—in particular of the heroine Anna—can be re-read repetitively and diversely from within. Thus, the characters, especially Anna and her family, may be emancipated from an endless pity for the lost beloved. And on the other hand, as the film finally reveals, the red violin “is” the heroine Anna herself, whose soul/being possesses the musical instrument and even the other characters; at the same time, the incorporation of all the human characters' life-force and memories transforms the violin into a new entity that mutualizes all the beings into a union, finally bringing both the living and non-living—the living human character, the deceased human characters, their memories, and the violin—together towards a new life and unconstrained future when the violin is brought to the modern protagonist's child at the end of the story. The whole story signifies a process, the work of mourning, which aims not only to redeem the melancholic spirits possessing/possessed by the violin but also to live on in a new journey of endless encounters.

The film begins with Anna, the wife of the master violinmaker, Nicolò Bussotti, in 1681 Italy, as he constructs his masterpiece with great expectation for their coming son. During a tarot card reading, Anna listens to her own fate from her maidservant Cesca. However, the violin starts its mysterious journey when both Anna and her baby die in childbirth. As the violin's journey gradually unfolds, the violin is implied to be the vessel

¹ Active in artistic film and classical music video, François Girard is best-known for his 32 *Short Films About Glenn Gould*; a film which depicts the life and works of the pianist Glenn Gould in an innovative way—as a “mixed genre in itself, neither fully documentary nor fully fictional.” It tries to keep “true to Gould by using his own words as much as possible and working around them visually” (McIlroy, 2002, p. 188).

containing Anna's spirit, or, to be *Anna herself*. In Girard's intelligent design, Cesca's reading of tarot cards literally merges Anna and the red violin together by revealing her fate in subsequent scenes; where the violin encounters its new owners and develops their new stories. Girard skillfully preserves the mystique of how and why Anna equals the violin until the final scene in modern Montréal—that is, Bussotti, in his silent but strong grief, varnishes his perfect masterpiece with his beloved wife's blood using a brush made of her hair. Here, as Brian McIlroy (2002) comments, "The two great loves of his life are therefore encased in one instrument, reputed to be his last violin" (p. 189). And Anna, *living on* as the violin, keeps her "being" in various encounters throughout the centuries. In the tradition of the ghost narrative, Anna's spirit has possessed the violin; her bodily parts and dedicating affection are ingrained onto the beloved object. This theme of "the violin as Anna" or "Anna's possession of the violin" transforms the film from a simple historical narrative which talks about the history of a violin into a "ghost story" that discloses the complicated memories and traumatic loss of the Bussottis, and at the same time further indicates the Bussottis' difficulty in working through the process of mourning.

According to Freud's (1923) discussion in "A Seventeenth-century Demonological Neurosis", the indication of a "strange object in oneself," which was conventionally considered one of the manifestations of demonic possession in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, is actually an example of melancholy in religious form (Westerink, 2014, pp. 337-338). Westerink, in his "Demonic Possession and the Historical Construction of Melancholy and Hysteria" (pp. 335-349), delineates that these religious reflections play a major role in outlining the modern medical and psychoanalytical conceptions of melancholy and hysteria; while today we can still find inspiration from these literary portraits of demonic/spirit possession to adopt fresh perspective towards melancholia and its cause—loss of the beloved. As we have seen in the case of the Wolf Man, when the melancholic patient tries to protect the dead sister from loss, he incorporates her within his own ego so that she could secretly be kept alive and even grow up inside of him—just like a ghost living within. And as regards the indications of the Wolf Man's case, it is convincing to relate the manifestation of melancholia with the conventional imagination about spirit possession—that is, in a religious expression, the Wolf Man appears to be possessed by his sister's ghost. Similar to the case of the Wolf Man, the possession of the violin occurs when the unexpected violent death of the beloved instigates the melancholic attempt to reclaim—and even to *continue*—their memories and their anticipated life. Through this incorporative possession, the Bussottis' memories and parental anticipation as well as Anna's being² are thus kept from vanishing. Here, corresponding with the Derridean formulation of technics of commodity, the red violin acts as a prosthetic archive of the inside through which the living being could articulate his/her interior memory upon the exterior non-living being. It thus creates memory-traces to be carried towards other generations; waiting to be re-read.

Girard makes the red violin more than a simple technical object to bear the human subject's memories, but a leading character to interact with the other characters and to direct their stories. Through Anna's spirit possession, the violin is rendered with unique spectrality that transforms it into an uncanny "being"—simultaneously as mother and child, living and non-living, human and non-human. In Girard's brilliant portrait, the violin first represents the anticipated child and subsequently Anna. Through Nicolò's blessing to their son, Girard elaborates, this child "will live for music. He'll bring us pride and beauty to the

² Anna's "being" includes not only her spirit but also her memories and life experiences. This phrase is chosen to emphasize her condition as a "being" *living* on the non-living.

world;” however, as we see through the development of the film, the one who fulfills this destiny is the violin.³ If the violin is an embodiment of the parents’ love and the child, it could also be understood that the violin/child incorporates the mother Anna within itself. In this regard, it is a “mutual incorporation” represented through spirit possession between the human being and the instrument—Anna’s spirit possession of the violin and the violin’s possession of Anna. Carrying a resonance from Nicolò’s dedication to encase “the two great loves of his life” into his last masterpiece, the violin serves as a character consisting of both the (deceased) mother and the (absent) child. And since the card reading scene repeatedly highlights Anna’s identity to the violin throughout the film, the violin can no longer be separated as a simple musical instrument. Rather than trading his final masterpiece, which is dedicated to his beloved, and even against his abiding faith in making violin for true artists, Nicolò chooses to donate it to a monastic orphanage. There, the violin begins its wandering travel outwards. In the director’s design, the violin literally becomes another form of being that keeps *living on* in a spatial and temporal diversity—just like what Cesca’s prophecy reveals in the very beginning: “You’ll live a long life, full and rich.”

Through Cesca’s prophecy, the violin’s fate is gradually introduced into a ceaseless journey through various encounters. More than a commodity or an ordinary technical object, the violin, after being breathed into with its creator Nicolò’s dedicating anticipation and Anna’s soul, is endowed with unique power to bring out a special life-force from its owners either to perform extraordinarily or to maintain a strong faith and conviction. The film illuminates an insight that the artistic work bearing great passion and human spirit—“which through the centuries will provide its mysterious hue and voice” (Yacowar, 2000)—could become a masterpiece, and, further, a soulmate for its owners and entangle them with a profound affection for each other. According to Yacowar, though Anna’s possession “humanizes” the violin, “the extension of the inanimate into the human implies the demonic as well as the ascendant”. Such spectral humanization complicates the relationship between the violin and its owners, driving the violin to continue to exert a peculiar fascination on these characters, haunting to “cultivat[e] fatal host-parasitic relations with each violinist that it possesses, while motivating other individuals to steal it, sell it” and to propel it on its journey (Bates, 2012, p. 363).

Such a fascination to allure people and even to build “fatal host-parasitic relations” repeatedly reminds the audience of the violin’s spectral essence as Anna’s spirit, which joins in, and even brings fatal influence over, the other characters’ lives. On the one hand, all of the owners’ complicated passions and life-forces can rest in a spiritual and artistic harmony when they play the red violin. It is suggested that their spiritual vibration with Anna’s soul enhances their ability to perform and their faith. On the other hand, as if being cursed or “incorporated” by the violin, the owners all die from extremely emotional conflicts while being threatened with the loss of the violin. It seems that the owners and the violin have incorporated each other and have thus become forever inseparable. One of the most touching but lamentable scenes takes place in an eighteenth-century Viennese orphanage, where the talented child prodigy Kaspar Weiss clings to the violin in his sleep as a child would to their mother. When the plot seems about to comfort the audience with this talented boy, who may represent the Bussottis’ stillborn child, a fulfillment of Nicolò’s wish, Kaspar collapses in deprivation of the violin. His weak heart abruptly stops forever during an audition “when it appears that his playing might lead to [the violin’s] sale” (Yacowar, 2000). Nevertheless, instead of being forgotten, the

³ Though Cesca only refers the violin to Anna, the absent child is also “encased” within it. As E. Jones also proposes, the violin represents both the parent’s love as well as the anticipated but stillborn child.

characters' memories are carried within the immortal violin and are finally recollected in an auction house in modern Montréal where their descendants compete to retrieve the violin.

Though the tarot card prophecy only suggests the union of the violin and Anna, the strongly affective connection and life experience between the violin and its owners also lead to their inevitable sharing of the same fate, and further, to them being collected within *a united being*. In a strong bond, the violin's journey carries each character's life, faith, and memory, upon itself in a constantly forward motion. With techniques of montage and of repeating musical themes, the characters' life experiences and beings are tightly woven together while remade—or further, relived—in temporal, spatial and trans-individual dimensions. The spectral essence of the violin blurs the boundary between human being and object, the interior memory and the exterior prosthesis, the living and the non-living, while at the same time endowing the violin with power to transcend temporal and spatial limits. Resonating with Derrida's formulation of spectrality, based on which "paradoxical incorporation" makes both the ghost and the possessed living being become "both one and the other" (Derrida, 2004, p. 5), the violin and its owners are united within one being that lives simultaneously individually and together, in the past and the present, and even shares the undecidable openness to the future by breaking the boundaries of time. By directing the Bussottis to an undetermined, but anticipatable, future, the spectrality of the violin and the mutual incorporation save the Bussottis from the doom of melancholia. In a mournful but beautiful tone, Girard portrays this spirit possession as a blessing; a release which completes the process of mourning.

Montage: The Interwoven Fates in Temporal, Spatial and Transindividual Dynamics

Cut and connected in a technique of montage, the film is composed of five primary segments. The film opens on 1681 Cremona, Italy, at Nicolò's studio, filled with many string instruments. Then the scene shifts to present-day Montréal, where the Red Violin is being introduced on the auction stage. After the camera zooms in and focuses on the violin, the scene abruptly returns to the Cremona scene where the violin is created as the Bussottis' blessing of parental love and prophesied with the Moon tarot card, signifying a long, full, and rich life. Following Anna's death and Nicolò's varnishing of the violin, the film shifts to the Montréal auction scene and then changes again to the violin's donation to the monastic orphanage in Austria. After Cesca's prediction of sickness is inserted, through the appearance of the Hanged Man tarot card, the film jumps forward to eighteenth-century Vienna. At this point, the orphan prodigy Kaspar Weiss shows his divine musical gift and receives love and a sense of security with the violin, while at the same time constructs a reciprocal relationship between himself and the violin. Young Kaspar's playing with his disproportionally small hands also echoes Anna's comment on the violin—"too big for a baby"—thus reminding the audience of Nicolò and Anna's expectation for their son. Though buried in Kaspar's grave for him to "play in heaven," the violin re-starts its travels after being dug up by a group of gypsy travellers. As Cesca predicts through the Devil card, the violin comes to experience its "time of lust and energy loosed across mountains, oceans, and time."

In the beginning of the Vienna scene, Girard presents the flow of time by changing the members of the violin choir while the background remains the same. In contrast, Girard shoots this episode of traveling with the gypsy in a continuous movement, in which the setting swings quickly among different geographical backgrounds. The camera keeps fixed on the violin while it is played by various anonymous gypsies as they dance, move, and spin unceasingly. In the transition scenes of both Vienna and the gypsies, the contrast between the violin and those numerous vague faces not only highlights the violin's position of permanence and

immortality, but also implies the violin's charm to allure people to keep it traveling on to meet the next person who truly matters. Furthermore, in the gypsy scene, Girard presents the view experienced by the violin to the audience—what it sees, where it goes, and whom it interacts with, and thus individualizes and humanizes the violin by bringing forward the theme of Anna equaling the violin.

Eventually, in late nineteenth-century Oxford, the violin falls into the hands of the famous violinist Frederick Pope, whose lustful passion and talent get revived by the violin along with his inspiration for composition and performance. However, since he treats the violin as a lover and requires his mistress Victoria to accompany him during his passionate playing, the violin is finally shot when jealous Victoria regards it as a “sluttish muse.” In Girard's clever setting, the woven words between Pope's and Victoria's love letters underline not only the intensive love between the human lovers, but also verify Pope's treatment of the violin as his true lover, in particular when his voice seems to talk to the violin in a lustful caress. As Yacowar (2000) comments, “the playing of the violin is so entwined with Pope and Victoria's physical love that she only has to hear him playing through a door to know that he is with another woman”. This scene of London ends with Pope's decision to kill himself, shifts briefly to the Montréal auction scene and from there swings to a view of the ocean—after Pope's suicide, the violin is brought across the sea to China as a commercial object to be traded for money.

In the new setting of China, the passage of time is again presented; this time, while the violin sits in a music shop. Similar with the Vienna scene, the store is an immobile background, and the surrounding people keep moving and changing. Nevertheless, the camera focuses on the position of the violin from the outside of the store and pushes forward, from the outside to the inside. It zooms in toward the violin until it is bought by a violinist as a gift for her daughter, Xiang Pei. This way of presentation portrays the violin as the only thing that never changes, and, at the same time, reveals its new fatal encounter. Moving back to Cremona, the fourth card, “Justice,” is drawn; foretelling the violin's fate to undergo a trial and persecution. Then, the setting returns to China, Maoist Shanghai, where the violin is suffering from its prophecy during the Cultural Revolution. As Yacowar (2000) observes, “draw[ing] for strength upon her dedication to music against the inhumanity and capricious extremes of the Cultural Revolution,” Xiang Pei decides to protect her red violin and even runs the risk of playing the forbidden instrument for her nephew Ming as “a lesson in humanity”. Although Zhou Yuan, the disgraced music teacher amid accusations of treason for his teaching of Western classical music, is convinced by Xiang Pei to protect her violin well, he eventually, alongside his beloved instruments, makes a martyr of himself. As McIlroy (2002) comments, this episode valorizes “the inexorable pull of art and family gifts,” which reminds the audience of the Bussottis' faith by “a close resemblance to the opening Italian section” (p. 190). By presenting the violin as an essential role to echo with or even to enhance those characters' faith and love for music and family, Girard suggests an inevitable bond between the characters in Cremona and Shanghai. Their spiritual interaction disturbs the anthropological temporality, offering the characters the potential to move beyond biological death. Before we can learn Xiang Pei's future, the film returns to the Montréal auction house, where the adult Ming is waiting to bid on the Red Violin and thereby “to expiate his guilt for the long ago betrayal” (Yacowar, 2000).

In Cesca's explication of the final card, “Death,” that reversely signifies “rebirth” because of its upside-down positioning, the scene is carried back to Shanghai while Cesca's voice continues to narrate her final prophecy:

I feel the fast air sweeping around you, carrying you... furious wind... and then stopping. Your journey will end. No question. I see it. One way or another, your travels are over... But you are strong by now... strong like a tree in the forest. You are not alone. A crowd of forces, friends and family, enemies, lovers... No, Madame. Don't be afraid. In this card, I see a rebirth. (Girard, 1998)

When her voice comes to “rebirth,” a police officer closes Zhou Yuan’s eyes, bereft of life by his suicide, as if all the painful suffering, whether of Zhou or of the violin, has come to an end. The violin, then, is brought to her last destination in this film—the auction house in 1997 Montréal. There, Mr. Ruselsky, a vain and self-aggrandizing figure, and all the descendants of the violin’s previous owners gather together, endeavoring to win possession of the Red Violin.

The five plots are cleverly introduced by the tarot card reading in the main scenes of Cremona, yet they are interrupted and recollected in the repeated scenes at the Montréal auction “at various points, always from a different perspective of the previous one” (McIlroy, 2002, p. 189). The card readings provide “a structure for flash-forwards to the future adventures of the violin” (Ebert, 1999), that conjure up the Bussottis’ memory while, at the same time, pushing the violin towards the future. In contrast, the scenes at the Montréal auction organize the film in flashback, as each bidder reveals their relationship with the violin. Different from the Cremona scenes, whose plot plays out fragmentedly but still keeps moving along in linear temporality, the plot of the Montréal auction is arranged in a non-linear temporality. Until it turns out to be the setting of the film’s conclusion, the Montréal scenes keep interrupting the other main scenes; and repeated at each step are those last brief moments before the auction’s host introduces the Red Violin. Each time we return to these present-day scenes, however, along with the repeated elements, such as the arrival of the appraiser, Charles Morritz, and the host’s greeting of Mr. Ruselsky, the camera turns to a/some new character(s) to introduce his/their motive behind the bidding. This not only heightens the tension among the bidders that eventually reaches its climax in the final scene, but it also intensifies the violin’s fatal relation with the modern era and its temporal transcendence.

This enigmatic auction section finally ceases its interruption and repetition. Before the auction, Charles Morritz is invited to appraise the violins. Having sought Nicolò Bussotti’s legendary Red Violin for a lifetime, Morritz recognizes the red violin almost immediately. He endeavors to verify this, but chooses to withhold the violin’s true identity. As the revelation of the violin’s identity and secret approaches, the association between the violin and the human, Anna, becomes more and more direct and obvious. The director arranges Morritz’s scenes to contain an increasing number of loving interactions with the violin. These scenes are silent, and thick with a gentle tension; Morritz appearing to treat the violin as an individual human being. Furthermore, Girard includes more point-of-view shots from the violin’s perspective by putting the camera inside the violin and looking out through its f-hole. Sometimes it seems that the violin is observing the people around it, and sometimes it seems that the violin and Morritz are looking at each other; or, that the violin is trying to attract his attention. For example, after one of brief, but delicate, moments in which the violin and Morritz look at each other through its f hole, the camera shifts back to Morritz’s office where he cannot help turning to look at Anna Bussotti’s portrait. In addition, when Morritz and his co-worker, Williams, conduct an experiment on the violin, Girard juxtaposes shots to parallel the violin’s vibration and Anna’s labor pains. Seeming to sense the violin/Anna’s weeping, Morritz immediately stops the experiment. Whether involving his professional intuition as a researcher or owing inspiration to the violin’s summons, Morritz comes to suspect the violin’s association with Bussotti’s wife. Thus, he commissions a DNA test of the violin’s varnish. Following the disclosure of the

results of this test, the scene shifts back to Cremona, where Girard portrays in delicate details Nicolò bearing Anna's body toward his studio under the moonlight. He cuts her hair to make a brush and gently caresses her arm to urge her blood to flow and to mix into the violin's varnish. After Morritz fails to hide the violin's identity from the auctioneer and the public, it is eventually put up for auction. Nevertheless, after struggling with a sense of unease brought on by his discovery of the red violin's secret, Morritz substitutes a copy for the real violin and presents it to his own daughter.

As the one who truly understands the violin's value (rather than merely its price), and as he senses its existence as an "impossible thing," a unique being, Morritz is chosen by the violin to move forward united together. In the very end of the Montréal scene, just after Morritz promises his daughter a "very special" gift, the camera takes on the moon rising in full, echoing not only the first tarot card but also Anna's expecting words in the very beginning of the story: "Our child will come when this moon is full." Here, Yacowar (2000) comments:

It is the father's love of art and his daughter that makes this gift "something very special," not the \$ 2,400,000 (albeit Canadian) that Mr. Ruselsky paid for it. Morritz's theft, because it makes music a loving gift to a child, keeps Bussotti's blessing alive. Only for its abusers does the Red Violin carry a curse.

Rather than being constrained as a museum piece (by the modern monks and the representative of the Frederick Pope Foundation), held as a memorial (by Ming), or played by the vain violinist who is unable to recognize its value (Mr. Ruselsky), it is "perhaps fitting that the violin," as McIlory (2002) points out, "after trips through Europe and China, should end up in the 'New World' to begin its travels again" (p. 191). The process of mourning comes to an end, and there awaits the promised rebirth.

This shifting between linear and non-linear temporality and locations that "cuts and connects one flow of movement alongside another," presents these movements from different points of view that cannot be achieved from the ordering observer (Colebrook, 2001, p. 44). Due to this technique of montage, *The Red Violin* not only allows the audience to learn of the characters' various life experiences, but also endows the violin/Anna with a spectral ability to transcend the biological limits of anthropological temporality. It allows the violin to collect memories from her own life and from those of the other characters across the centuries. "Collecting points of movement as change or alteration," montage presents "no single line of time, nor movement within time," and thus helps Girard to make *The Red Violin* "expand the visual scope beyond characters within a human drama" to challenge the traditional concept of human time (Colebrook, 2001, p. 44).

Repeated Musical Theme: Anna's Transgenerational Haunting and the Mutualized Being

Due to the complexity in the temporal and spatial structure of the film, both Girard and the film's composer, John Corigliano, prove that the music "plays a very important narrative role in our story" (Girard, 1997). For the film must be tied together with something harmonious in a "solid basis, musically" (Adams, 2001). In Girard's confirmation, "many characters are scripted with musical notes as much as with words; the soul of Anna Bussotti could not survive without her theme; the journey through three centuries and three continents could not possibly exist without music" (Girard, 1997). As one of the most highly regarded composers in the contemporary United States, Corigliano applies "different historic musical styles and his own personal compositional styles developed over more than four decades of compositional activity" (Deall, 2008, p. 15), thus "utiliz[ing] different stylistic cues in order to fit the time period in which the drama takes place" (Deall,

2008, p. 13). Thomas May praises how the work “encompass[es] classical elegance, gypsy passion, and angst-ridden harmonies” and “etches vivid portraits of the film’s various epochs but also gives an overarching sense of unity to the episodic character of the script.” For Corigliano, the film *The Red Violin* involves “the sense of fate, inevitability, and the inability to stop it from moving—that it’s like this giant machine that never can stop; the travels of this violin are almost preordained” (quoted in Deall, 2008, p. 95). To underline the fate motif of the film that cyclically re-appears and even haunts the entirety of the film, and to unite the separated sequences together with respect to their historical context, Corigliano applies a chaconne throughout the film’s score—a type of music composition in which the melody can be developed into several variations based on a main theme:

The idea of this ‘fate motive’ made me compose what became a “chaconne,” against which all the themes were built, so that they would be heard at the beginning of the piece and they would be underlying all the other themes. (Thaxton, 1999)

This chaconne is composed based on “Anna’s theme,” which is singable and hummed by Anna during the opening scene. The song “gets taken over after her death by the violin” (Thaxton, 1999) and continually haunts the remainder of the film. As the film begins with some blurred images of violins in Bussotti’s studio, shot deliberately out of focus, the accompanying music here is also scored without a clear melody until the first two notes of Anna’s theme are heard. They are overlapped by different parts of the violin section, but eventually emerge into the clear melody of Anna’s theme, played by a string orchestra, during the initial shift of scenes from Cremona to the Montreal auction. It is noteworthy that the debut of Anna’s theme is played by the string orchestra in the auction scene, rather than being sung by Anna herself. This, echoing with the story’s plot and the montage of settings, foreshadows Anna’s destined journey and her future encounters—she will be recreated into a new being that continues living with, and through, many other individuals. Anna’s humming of the theme, emerging when the shot focuses on a close-up of the auctioned Red Violin and immediately preceding a return to the Cremona setting, not only marks the introduction of the heroine, Anna Bussotti, but also represents the close relation between the violin and Anna. Later, in a brilliant design, Anna’s theme “mutates into a solo violin melody” (Girard, 1997) when Nicolò varnishes the violin (with Anna’s blood) right before the scene shifts from Cremona to the violin’s first journey. Here, “the rhythmic correspondence beautifully unites the visual images and the musical accompaniment,”⁴ in effect symbolizing the violin’s birth as well as reinforcing the implication of Anna’s possession of, and transformation into, the violin. It also meets Girard’s expectation that the score for this film must “give a sense of life to an inanimate object” (quoted in Glaser, 2003, p. 12). As Glaser also points out:

The musical silence that has prevailed in the film since her death is broken at the moment Bussotti’s brush first touches the unvarnished instrument. At that instant, when Corigliano states that we “hear the violin ‘come to life’” (Adams, par. 19), we hear one more repeat of *Anna’s Theme*, this time overtaken by a solo violin and accompanied by the *Chaconne* harmonies. *Anna’s Theme* has transferred from voice to violin, where it will remain for the rest of the film. The scene’s climax occurs with a crane shot of Bussotti hanging up the varnished violin. We look down upon the freshly varnished Red Violin, as if we are Anna watching from heaven. (Glaser, 2003, p. 20)

⁴ This is a description from Sergei Eisenstein, referenced by Bogue during his praise for brilliant musical accompaniment in cinema in *Deleuze on Cinema* (2003, p. 186).

On the other hand, Corigliano's chaconne also "helps to *define* each of the violin's owners" (Glaser, 2003, p. 12). First, the composition of the whole chaconne is developed according to the various styles of western music that "reflect the stylistic and cultural influences associated with each of its owners" (Glaser, 2003, p. 2), from Baroque to gypsy, Romantic to Modern, while still allowing Anna's theme to show up in a violin solo. Anna's theme usually re-emerges when the plot comes to introduce another of the violin's fateful encounters or in on-screen performances played directly by the main characters. More significantly, style and timbre of these soli alters in each different performance to reflect the individual characters' relation with the Red Violin.⁵ For example, compared to Xiang Pei's unskillful but touching playing for Ming, which demonstrates her fondness for music and her family, the playing of Anna's theme by Mr. Ruselsky, who fails to recognize the violin's uniqueness and even asserts that it is "nothing special," appears dull and soulless. Furthermore, as Morritz senses the bonding essence between the violin and Anna, the camera turns from his eye to Anna's portrait and is accompanied by a mixing together of Anna's and Morritz's themes: "*Morritz's Theme* repeats, this time with the addition of a solo cello playing *Anna's Theme*... The two melodies enter in a quasi-canonic style, sharing identical stepwise beginning motives" (Glaser, 2003, p. 36). This design not only reinforces Morritz's unique position for Anna/the violin but also foretells their fated journey together into the future. Corigliano (1997) has explained that "Underpinning the theme is an inexorable seven-chord chaconne, evoking the Tarot and the fate it signals". With "a variation of either the seven chords or Anna's theme" (Adams, 2001), Corigliano was able to build all of the film's caprices and other musical pieces, including several solo etudes for the two virtuosos of the Vienna and Oxford sequences, as well as the other violin soli played by Xiang Pei or Mr. Ruselsky which eventually become "*Morritz's Theme*." In this vein, Corigliano claims that "even though the audience was not necessarily consciously aware they felt, through the whole thing, that there was unity" (Adams, 2001).

Since music is an art of temporal alteration and requires the interaction between human subject and technical object to be inscribed and performed, as *The Red Violin* represents, a musical instrument could become an agency onto which human individuals could articulate their memory, life experience or belief; or further, a vessel through which people could build communion among themselves. The significance of the violin clearly stretches far beyond a technical tool for those musicians; instead, it plays the role of a soulmate, matching itself with the performer so that their music could be properly and harmoniously produced. As an artistic form that is able to continuously construct new relationships and interactions with various new encounters, music reveals new possibilities in every performance. More than a form of melodic repetition, music is able to repeat itself in alterity by each performer's interpretation, emotion, and even personal life experience; thus reaching an endless process of becoming by mutualizing the self with each new encounter.

Conclusion

With techniques of montage and of repeating musical themes, the entirety of *The Red Violin* is unified in brilliant rhythmic correspondence between visual images and musical accompaniment. Under the circumstances, the fates of the characters are tightly woven together in highlighted repetition, and death loses its power to dominate time—the characters' beings, in particular Anna's, continue to (be) re-live(d) in each new encounter. The red violin correspondently embodies the "spectral messianicity" in Derrida's concept of archive fever, longing to return to its very origin and yet eager for a permanent existence. Speaking within its owners

⁵ In fact, all the violin soli are played by the violinist Joshua Bell rather than the actors/actresses throughout the film.

and in haunting spatial and temporal transcendence, the violin endeavors not only to *be memorized*, but also to lead itself and those who share in its communion toward a future path of reproduction. A path that signals “a movement of the promise and of the future” (Derrida, 1996, p. 30).

Through the chaconne that repeats Anna’s theme in variations performed by/for the other characters, and with techniques of montage that leap between, and make connections among, its different stories, *The Red Violin* represents the possibility that the human individual’s being could be re-read or even re-lived through the life experiences of other human beings. Furthermore, as the film expresses, not only Anna’s but also the other characters’ memories are carried through centuries and beyond geographical boundaries; they are re-memorized, they accumulate, and they are recovered in the modern day. In this vein, the violin enables those human individuals to repeat the essence of their beings, such as their memories or souls, in alterity. Anna’s life is not ended with her biological death in childbirth, and Nicolò’s loving devotion does not vanish when Anna and their child leave; instead, in the form of the violin’s spectral essence, Anna—or even the child—allures people to carry herself/themselves and the family’s memories onto a ceaseless journey toward the future, seeking to fight against the doom of death/loss as a process of mourning. By building close bonds with each other in a rich spiritual life, the violin (the non-living) and its owners (the living) cultivate a reciprocal communion that preserves the violin in a living gesture with the chance to be re-read; that carries the dead protagonists’ memories out of their pitiful past and toward the future. As Anna’s theme debuts in the playing of the string orchestra, rather than Anna’s singing, the harmonious strings represent Anna and the other characters’ future as a united, trans-individual, being. A future evoked by Cesca’s final prophecy: “But you are strong by now... strong like a tree in the forest. You are not alone. A crowd of forces, friends and family, enemies, lovers... No, Madame. Don’t be afraid. In this card, I see a rebirth” (Girard, 1998).

Regardless of the harmonious outcome, it is not until almost the last episode that the scheme of leaping scenes comes into effect and halts the mournful atmosphere of the repeated violent deaths. When the violin is taken to the protagonist’s little daughter, rather than to those descendants who just “belong to the past,” it echoes Anna and Nicolò’s anticipation for their future/child, and also suggests that Anna and all the “contributors” of memories and life experiences are reborn and projected toward a future of possibilities. As the prophecy has foreseen—she/they will reverse the death (tarot card). Through the long journey of mutualization and becoming, the red violin becomes a trace that originates *différance* when the events and memories are re-read repeatedly and diversely from within. Here, Anna is no longer just Anna; she is “the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside” (quoted in Lucy, 2004, p. 145). They have become the others and the one simultaneously, the alterity and the singularity, in a novel existential condition of “mutual coming-to-be.” This emancipation from a closed Self grants Anna and the other characters with undecidability and diversion from the original destined death. They recreate their becoming in the reciprocal and repeating trace, toward a future of unlimited potentiality. As Derrida advocates, in order to make mourning possible, one has to “memorize” the memory of the other within oneself through a “mimetic interiorization.” And thus, mourning could free itself from an endless pity on a rejected past, and at the same time lead toward an openness to the future—“only by remembering them, by returning to them, are we to have a future” (Brault & Nass, 2001, p. 29). Bearing the other within itself while respecting his/her ultimate otherness, the red violin carries Anna, Nicolò’s devotion, the Bussotti child, and all the other characters within itself—“like an unborn child, like a future” (Derrida, 1989, p. 35). In the light of the full moon, this “unborn child” ultimately gets their (re-)birth when Morritz brings the violin to his daughter. The

film ultimately goes back to the Cremona scene, where Cesca has completed her prophecy, and ends with the cleaned-up and covered tarot cards, signaling an end to predestiny. In other words, the future will not be determined by any expectation, but is left unknown and open to a messianic potentiality. Beginning with illustrations of memory and history, *The Red Violin* completes the process of mourning in which the dead are comforted, and both the dead and the living can approach a messianic hope.

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