



The Surfing Memory Syndrome

By Juli Carson

You ask me why an American would collect such old fart soccer matches. It's because being an American I have no childhood memories of this sport. Can you be a true supporter without memories of ecstatic victory and traumatic loss? Well maybe you don't need the triumphs. But the defeats...one's soul would be lost without them.

— Steve Fagin, *Oliver Kahn*

Memory, with all its paradoxes, is like a zoetrope. Simply, a zoetrope is a machine consisting of an open drum with vertical slits cut into its sides. A band of sequenced images is placed around the drum's inner surface. The drum is lit from above and spun. A viewer looking through the slits at the interior images sees a rapid succession of images producing the illusion of motion. As such, the zoetrope presents a contradiction. The perception of movement is created from a series of static images through the double action of illumination *and* obfuscation. Analogously, if our sense of time is produced from a sequence of images seen over the course of our lives, then our memory of a particular moment is simultaneously a recollection of one set of images *and* a forgetting of the larger set of images to which they belong. What then are we to make of the triumphs and defeats that determine which images come to light in memory? Defeat, in particular, is the psychoanalytic precept fueling the "machine" that produces consciousness. But it takes a detective to unpack the operation of such a machine — how it hums along, churns about and momentarily breaks down. This is the work of Steve Fagin's art.

The Surfing Memory Syndrome illuminates the scene of a crime. Clues are scattered about, but we still need to piece together the crime — much the way a psychoanalyst must piece together the discordant images of a dream. Even though the images in our dreams are all drawn from real-life experience, they don't automatically make sense to us because they're configured more as a code than a narrative.¹ Fagin's clues — first and foremost video loops from *The Manchurian Candidate*, Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and the 1975 European Cup Final — take us on a similar detour. Following the logic of a dream, they belong to completely different cultural registers: film thriller, avant-garde theatre, European football. So what are they doing



here stitched together? More pointedly, what are they *hiding* in plain view? Like *The Manchurian Candidate*'s Queen of Diamonds, Fagin's obstacles trigger a series of actions leading us through an uncanny maze of free-flowing associations related to cultural memories usually repressed by the machine's (diaphanous) iron curtain.

But wait. Stop. What *is* this machine? Is it a zoetrope? Perhaps. But, in the most literal sense, a zoetrope is just one machine connected to thousands of others. According to Deleuze and Guattari: "A machine might be defined as a system of interruptions or breaks... Every machine is a machine of a machine. The machine produces an interruption of the flow only insofar as it is connected to another machine that supposedly produces this flow. And doubtless this second machine in turn is really an interruption or break too."² In this sense, it is the relationship *between* machines — the flow — that becomes the focus. This flow is vast and real, ranging from money to shit to air to milk. "For example," they explain, "the anus-machine and the intestine machine, the intestine machine and the stomach machine, the stomach machine and the mouth machine, the mouth machine and the flow of milk from a herd of dairy cattle ("and then... and then...and then...")"³ According to this model, the most private parts of one's body ultimately connect to something as public as a dairy farm within a vast capitalist network.

Steve Fagin's Desiring-Machines

If desire is repressed...[it is] not that desire is asocial; on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors.⁴

What flows between Fagin's "machines" — *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, the 1975 European Cup Final — is the force of memory or, more aptly, the desire that memory produces. But, as D & G note, while the machine produces the subject, the subject cannot control it. That said, the machine can be unraveled a bit. When this happens, the machine's vulnerable parts are exposed, which is to say, *our* vulnerable parts are exposed. If memory produces such strong desire in us, it's because it is always fleeting. By definition, we can only long for that which is not here, and therein lays our vulnerability. Accordingly, what connects Fagin's discordant machines is the need to reconstruct a memory that was lost, damaged or never



really there. If defeat is the outcome, it is not the endgame. Rather, it is the fuel that drives the desiring-machine's rebooting after it momentarily stalls.

In *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), the son of a prominent right-wing U.S. politician is captured during the Korean War, implanted with false battlefield memories and brainwashed into becoming an assassin for the Communist Party. Sergeant Raymond Shaw is thus transformed into a sleeper agent. Later, back in the States, upon hearing the hypnotic suggestion — "Why don't you pass the time by playing a game of solitaire?" — the appearance of the Queen of Diamonds triggers Shaw to take orders from a Communist operative who, in an Oedipal twist, turns out to be his own mother. If Shaw feels no guilt for his subsequent acts, it's because he has no memory of them. Throughout the drama, Shaw struggles to remember something behind the implanted memory, the lost memory being his object-cause of desire. When he finally regains his memory, Shaw shoots his mother and stepfather at the Republican National Convention before turning the gun on himself. Like Oedipus, when Shaw's pursuit of his primal truth ends in self-discovery, the game is over.

In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), memory straddles the delicate balance between what's *gone* and what's *there*, producing a state of unrequited desire in the protagonist. Beckett's one-act play opens with Krapp sitting alone at his desk on his 69th birthday. We watch him engage in his annual custom of hauling out an old tape recorder and reviewing one of his earlier years — in this case a recording he made when he was 39 — before making a new recording where he comments on the events of the previous twelve months. Krapp intends to reflect on who he once was, who he is and who he will become. This birthday ritual oscillates between a melancholic nostalgia for those recorded events Krapp can't remember and an envious loathing of his younger self who brags that he's "thirty-nine today, sound as a bell" (despite his various annual additions). Indeed, Krapp's new tape begins with an agitated complaint, waged as much against time as it is at his former self: *Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for 30 years ago... Perhaps the best years are gone but I wouldn't want them back.⁵*

Left: Oliver Kahn: *The Book*
Center: Samuel Beckett
Right: *Manchurian Candidate*: A Garden Party
Cover: Oliver Kahn: *The Book*

For soccer fans, the mention of the 1975 European Cup Final — when Germany's Bayern Munich defeated Leeds United of England by a score of 2 to 0 — provokes a desperate yearning for a moment that *refuses* to recede into the past. The historic match ended in rioting after a disallowed goal and controversial decisions by a referee gave the game to Bayern. The trauma still persists today, manifested in chants of "We are the Champions, Champions of Europe" by Leeds fans throughout the half-time interval at away games. That the trauma still lingers is further evidenced by a popular YouTube video showing the controversial goal and decision over a soundtrack of Edith Piaf's "No Regrets." As Fagin notes, *The defeats...one's soul would be lost without them.* This is the *jouissance* (or pleasure-pain) of being a non-German soccer fan. "I never tire of telling my American friends," Fagin recalls in his video *Oliver Kahn*, " 'Soccer, it's not difficult. It's simple. It's a game played for 90 minutes by 22 men and Germany *always* wins.' "

Oliver Kahn: The celibate machine

*The celibate machine reveals the existence of a much older paranoiac machine, with its tortures, its dark shadow, its ancient Law...A genuine consummation achieved by the new machine, a pleasure that can be called autoerotic.*⁶

A crime is in progress in the backroom of *Surfing Memory Syndrome*. While the front room is dramatically lit, this more interior space has the flat lighting and furnishings of a middle-class family room, complete with a Lazy-Boy lounge, tv, tray and monitor. *Oliver Kahn* plays on the monitor, looping a visual montage of soccer games, autobiographic narrative and movie clips, including *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. Fagin's voice-over recounts his attempt to construct memories of historic soccer victories and defeats by watching them on videotape. If there's a crime at hand, it's a staged revolt against the primordial Oedipal scenario of our collective upbringing in a thousand family rooms (more machines) where the so-called Law-of-the-Father *always* wins. But it is precisely in this Father's den that Fagin puts something where it doesn't belong: *Oliver Kahn*.

While *Oliver Kahn's* narrative centers on Fagin's attempt to create counter-memories to his own recollections, the video's structural logic recalls D & G's notion of a celibate machine, one that strongly defies the Oedipal scenario. Whereas the Oedipal complex proposes fundamental oppositions and categorizations — mother/father, child/parent, self/other — *Oliver Kahn* blends, repeats and perverts such oppositions. This structural blending is echoed by Fagin's repetition and perversion of key actions carried out by the protagonists of the three desiring machines — Krapp, Shaw and Leeds United — in order to take on their combined egos as his own. Viewing *Oliver Kahn* in a reconstructed "set" of the Oedipal drama (the family room), we are reminded of the primordial choice forced upon the fledging subject. *It's either your mother or your father. Never both.* But the choice of neither the mother nor the father *precisely* reflects the celibate machine's logic. Schizophrenically self-contained, the celibate machine operates as a spoke in the wheel of the Oedipal meta-machine, which brings us back to another celibate machine: the zoetrope.

Creating an illusion of action from stasis through the double action of illumination *and* obfuscation, the zoetrope is at once active and passive. In psychoanalytic terms, it is *autoerotic*. This autoerotic autonomy, be it in defeat or victory, is what Fagin's character seeks in his reconstructed memories. And, for a moment, he achieves it. After watching numerous European soccer matches, Fagin explains his anguish over one of the more disappointing losses: "Three fans were bemoaning the fact that their team kept losing and was facing relegation. 'I blame the managers,' said the first, 'He should sign more players.' 'I blame the players,' said the second, 'If they worked harder they would score more goals.' 'I blame my parents,' said the third, 'If I was born in another part of town I would be supporting another team.' Well [Fagin concludes] I guess finally I found something I can't blame my parents for."

As we know, we are only *products* of the machine. We can interfere with it, but we can't permanently change it. Indeed, there is a history of such *interference* within Modernism: Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*; Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*; Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*; Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. These projects celebrate the schizophrenic celibate machine. But even when interfered with, the Oedipal meta-machine eventually pulls itself back together. Subsequently, Duchamp, Artaud, Bataille and Beckett all rejoin the canon, and the machine continues to hum along — until the next interference and the next coalescence and so on. *Oliver Kahn* is a fellow traveler among these meddling celibate machines. That said, Fagin's bittersweet lines at the end of *Oliver Kahn* evoke the celibate machine's double action of defiance and reliance. *What's the difference between a Jewish mother and a Rottweiler? Eventually the Rottweiler lets go. Oh Fuck. Who am I kidding? I'm the one who'll never let go. Nor can we. Be it the family or the avant-garde. We can't let go. As Beckett said, I can't go on. I'll go on.*

- 1 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 212.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 36.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid. p. xxiii
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape in I can't go on, I'll go on*, (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 495.
- 6 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 18.

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Steve Fagin

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