

WHAT IF MEMO RIES HAD EXP IRATION DATES

"What if..." as a method to project reality to create alternative scenarios, through a surrealist approach.



What would happen if suddenly one had the power to control their memories? Being able to determinate their expiration date?



The Production Manual depicts the whole process behind Anachronic Stamp – a design project which speculates upon the possibility of selecting and erasing memories by focusing on a single character, thus exploring the human obsession and the boundaries between memory and identity – the final project of the bachelor in Communication Design at Lisbon's Faculty of Fine Arts.

FIRST INSTALLMENT MONOLOGUE

The first installment discloses the setting of this fiction as a departure from Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express*. It establishes its main underlying ideas and its structure and timeline, and reveals the character's vision of his own path of discovering and unconsciously destroying his own identity, through the script.

ADAPTATION

Chungking Express, the 1994 film by the Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai, distinctly captures the human obsession and is particularly immersed in the passage of time.



The concept behind this adaptation of Wong War wai's work builds itself around the idea that memories might have expiration dates — a thought presented by one of the main characters of the film: He Zhiwu, Cop 223.



Aided by a mournful voice-over narration, Cop 223 recurrently gives significance to dates and numbers in a film where time is a clear object of obsession. Driven by an idea of reconciliation with May, his recent ex-girlfriend, he begins a quest of buying almost-expired cans of pineapple — cans with an expiration date of May 1st, which is also the date of his birthday.

He, therefore, tells the spectator: *if May hasn't changed her mind by the time I've bought thirty cans, then our love will also expire*. Later in the film he also manifests the yearn to hold a memory eternally: *If memories ever come in a can, I hope that can never expires. If it has to have a shelf life, I hope it's 10,000 years*.



Bearing in mind the film's adaptation, another fundamental aspect is the characters' sense of alienation and dreaminess: they move about immersed in their peculiar thoughts and reveries paying no mind to their surroundings, almost as if floating. While they all remain in their self-contained universes, following the laws of desire and their eccentric paths in pursuit of an elusive state of happiness, Wong is able to invade the film's idiosyncratic character's fantasies — in virtue of his singular dazzling, fluid and experimental style. Voice-over narrations become devices that are able to display the characters' emotions and thoughts. Therefore, we likewise intend to make use of the monologue with the aim of delving into our lead character's mind.



SYNOPSIS

In this fiction, the leading character craves for a world where all the darkness in their life no longer exists. In order to build this world, they decree an expiration date for all their negative memories. Being able to select their memories, they are their own god, being able to manipulate their reality, living in a nostalgic time, in this unreal world they imagine, where there are no bad experiences and everything is an utopia. At first, living in this world seems like living for the first time, but later, the leading character falls into a void of emptiness. Their identity was taken by all the repudiated memories. They are no longer living. There's no past, present or future. Just emptiness.



STRUCTURE

PART 1 (Protasis)

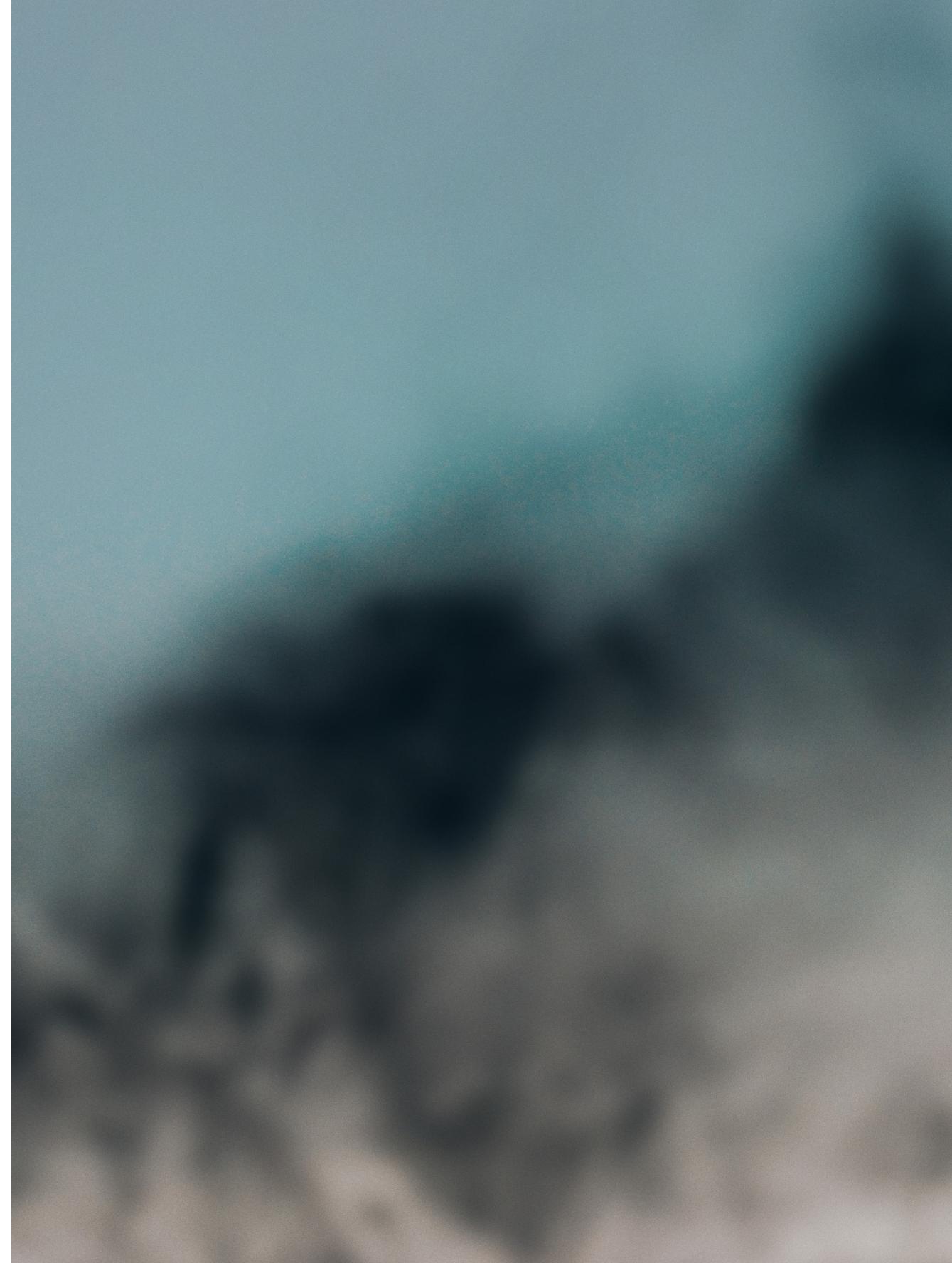
Tired of reminiscing the same negative and haunting memories, living a life bound by an endless sadness, the main character decides to erase these memories and combat its consequential adverse feelings so they're able to start a new and free life. As these yearnings and decisions are fruitful, the main character finds itself in a brand new and exciting man-made reality. Full of possibilities and hope, they rejoice their newfound freedom and urge to live life to the fullest without the shackles of their own mind.

PART 2 (Epitasis)

As their new sense of happiness starts to slowly fade away, obsession and restlessness take its place. No longer bound by the memories that afflicted him, having no recollection of the process of erasing itself, new memories take the place of the old ones. The main character starts to contemplate the erasure of these memories, not being aware that they had done this before.

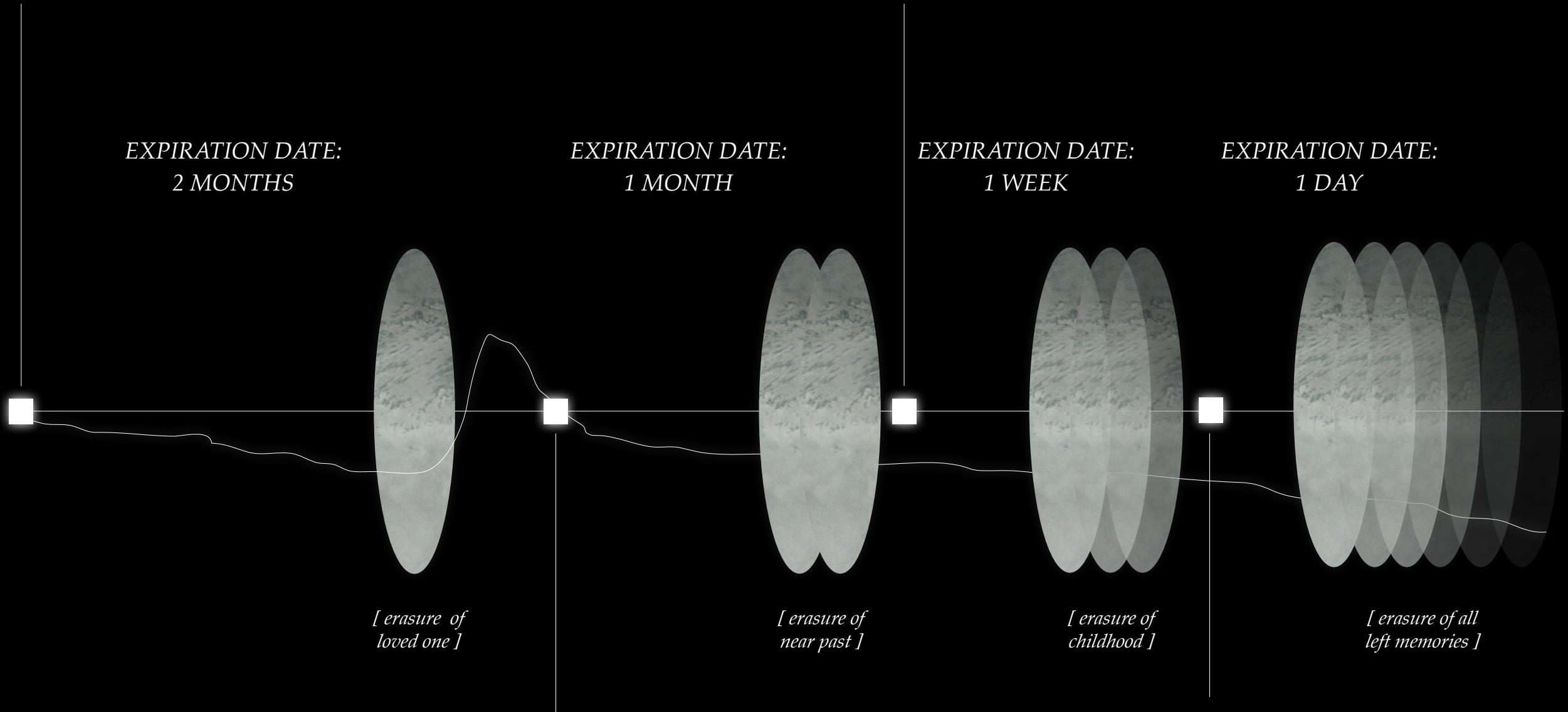
PART 3 (Catastrophe)

As the cycles of erasure become more frequent and demanding, otherwise positive labelled memories start to not be sufficiently satisfactory. Finding and attributing faults and errors to an ever-growing number of recollections, the main character finds itself being increasingly and subsequently hollowed out. Losing their references and consequently their personality, the leading character starts to lose their sense of reality.



Pining for a love that is never reciprocated, the character finds himself obsessing about it, letting it dominate the narrative of his every day. Not wanting to live tormented by these thoughts, he decides to set an expiration date to every memory pertaining to his loved one. Still holding some optimism, the date is set at two months.

By disengaging from these spaces, he is left with his childhood memories. Nostalgia for this period of time starts to manifest in conjunction with the resurgence of some repressed memories. As he is unable to retrieve these long-gone days, he decides to eliminate the memories by establishing an expiration date.



The only thing tying the character to his current place of living was the desired relationship with his love interest. As these memories are eliminated, a nostalgia regarding his past creeps in. Feeling disconnected from his surroundings and of the people he is in contact with, only pressures him to ruminate more and more about their past. Striving for happiness and serenity, he decides to attach an expiration date to his memories of a near past.

The previous cycles of erasure leave him in a state of alienation, which leads to a life of isolation and complete dissociation from reality. Having no frames of reference, his identity is increasingly fragmented. As he attaches himself to the dwindling elements of his core, he begins to over-analyze them. Thus, a discomfort towards the remaining parts of his personality and behaviour arises, so he starts to attach expiration dates to them. A state of haziness ensues as he loses control of the erasure process, which is instigated ever more frequently and thoughtlessly.

SCENE

1



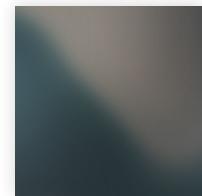
THE LEADING CHARACTER SEEKS AN EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH ANOTHER THAT NEVER COMES TO FRUITION, WHICH STARTS A LONG PERIOD OF SADNESS IN HIS LIFE. THIS IS THE INTRODUCTION OF THIS FICTION'S THEME, IN WHICH HE REFLECTS ON HOW HE FEELS AND ANNOUNCES THE DECISION TO FIGHT THAT DARKNESS, BY ESTABLISHING AN EXPIRATION DATE FOR ALL THE MEMORIES RELATED TO THE PERSON HE IS OBSESSED WITH.

Darkness and brightness have always lived together. Just like the moon and the sun need each other, darkness needs brightness. They are complementary, interconnected and interdependent. And it used to be like this since the very beginning.



Then I saw you and everything started shaking. At first it was something good. Your presence, even if distant, filled a hole in me that I didn't even know that existed. All the lights shine and the darkness dances along. But I started needing more. For the first time, giving you all my time wasn't enough for me. I needed one second, just one glimpse of your beautiful eyes directed to me. It never happened and once I realized it would never happen, the shadows started spreading like cancer in me. Now, the darkness is filling my body and infecting everything in me. It's hard to see the light of the day when the clouds are too heavy. I look at the mirror and don't see the reflection I used to see.

As long as darkness exists, it will never be tamed and it will keep draining like lava, burning everything it goes through and extinguishing all signs of light in me. My desire is to live in a world where brightness doesn't have to be scared to be covered by darkness. To live in a world where you can't haunt me in my own thoughts.



By tomorrow, all my memories of you will expire. You will no longer exist and with you, darkness will disappear and I'll let the light in, starting a new world where I can feel peace.

SECOND INSTALLMENT

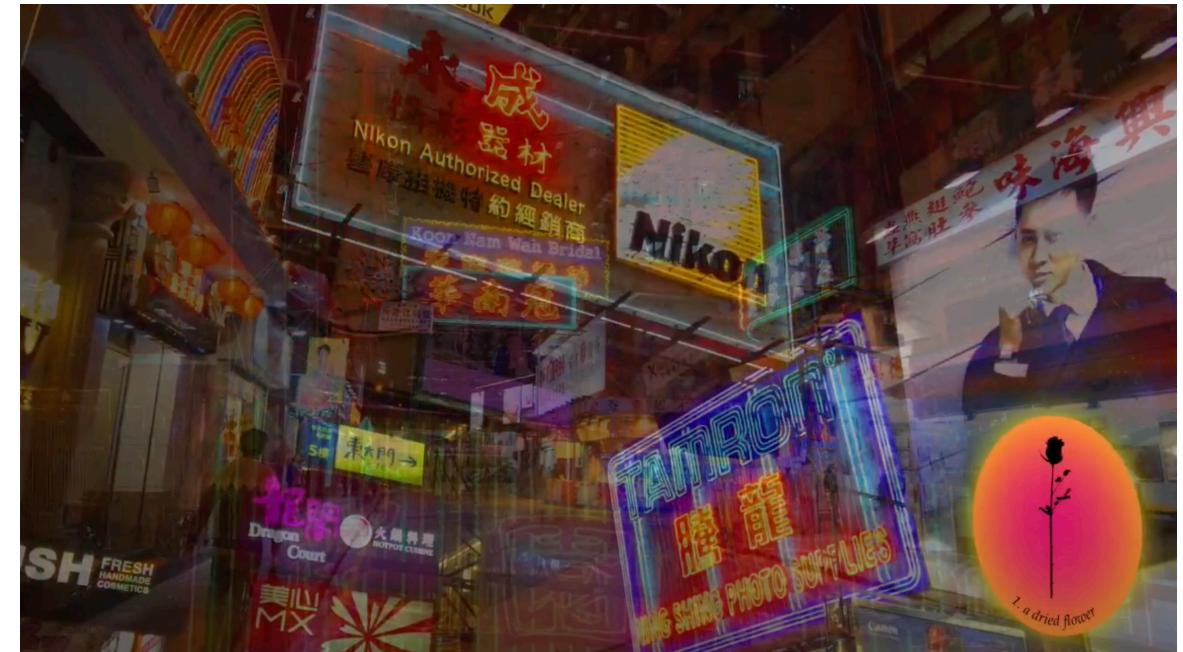
ANALOGUE

The second installment unveils a deviation of the fiction by exploring an alternative interpretation of the same timeline, this time from an outside view. It contains a four-part text that seeks to frame the fiction, each part amounting to a moment of memory erasure. It likewise explores further into the four-part series of videos created to enact the text.

Every day the city wakes but it never quite seems to fall asleep. Surely the sun falls down, disappearing slowly, but the night lights itself up. By day, there's the usual day-to-day with its typical rush hour commute. The streets are full of people, from all backgrounds and ancestries, it's cosmopolitan in every sense of the word. Rushing to work, doing their daily chores, or shopping in the nearest farmers market, the people make this city alive and they paint it with smells and vibrant colors, creating intense turbulent landscapes.

But as dusk arises, it carefully starts to grasp all the corners, and twists and turns of the mazelike city streets. Some alleyways fall into a deep slumber, marked a in thick layers of eeriness and discomfort. Its quietness is, however, cut by echoes that reverberate off the walls of the towering buildings and skyscrapers, revealing the intense commotion that lurks not so far away. As the setting changes, so do the people, as only a certain type of person comes out at night. The night is for the devious, the lost, the lunatics, the heartbroken and the enamoured, all searching for some type of solace. They populate the bars, late-night food stalls, and 24-hour convenience stores, trying at night to understand the world of the day. And as such, it was his favorite part of the day.

In fact, he didn't care about this city. He could now consider it home, as he had been living there for quite some time, but he didn't. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was out of place, that the people of the city saw him as an invader, with their smugness and indifference. Nevertheless, he was still more comfortable on the street, among the strangers, as he had always been. It was always better than staying home, where he was unable to mask his thoughts with the city's chaos. Spending countless hours obsessing about his short comings, and his lack of friendships, or any other kind of relationship for that matter. His intimate space, a small one-bedroom apartment, is dark and messy. Full of knickknacks and other useless things, he didn't attach meaningless sentimental values to these, collecting them as mere reminders of still being alive, reminders that time is always moving forward. He bought a fish some time ago, never forgetting to feed it, it became his only



confidant and the one thing that grounded him from all the noise in his head. He would enter the house and did what he had to do as quickly as he was out the door, never having the time to tidy things up, or at least have a good night's sleep.

As if he is commanded by his obsessions, above else his aching love, he lives each day aimlessly in the present, never reflecting on what could be or what could have been. He searches eagerly for connection, not knowing in fact what to do if he would ever find it. A hopeless romantic, and a bit of a voyeur, he lives vicariously through other people, more so the loving couples he encounters in the street. He watches them, trying, incessantly, to decipher what makes himself so different and peculiar, and what makes him be so much at odds with reality and the inner-workings of the world... He can't find an answer.

You can find him, usually, in a bar, the one he knows she frequents with her friends, trying to see if she will ever come in. He plays the same song on the jukebox almost every day, as to set a scene of their first encounter, but it seems the universe is acting actively against him. He frequently cursed the gods who made him, ironic

masochists he believed they must've been. Making him bound to an intense need for understanding and affection, while at the same time, making him so socially impaired, living in constant loops of desperation. Sometimes he wishes he had never met this love. Maybe it was an unfounded optimism he collected from somewhere, maybe it was the sheer strength of these same feelings, that made him believe that life without it would be meaningless. He still considered he could achieve it, but the trinkets he collected were starting to add up, and he started to question if the pain and suffering were worth the wait.

Despite all of this, he nonetheless considered he could find some form of love. He had to believe it, for it was engraved in his core, in his personality, these wants, and needs. But maybe, if he could forget this one, and be able to search for love somewhere else or from someone else, perhaps he would have more luck. Time had passed so much, he was imbued in the essence of this person. Sucked in by her charm, he lived for her and because of her. For it all to end, he had to make a final and stern decision, he could never look back. After reflecting and pondering for some time, he decided to define a date when upon he would forget all the time spent seeking her admiration, and the misery that it brought. He decided on three months of pure optimism, the final ones. As this impending transition came closer and closer, as he escaped the first doubtful feeling of the future, of knowing if he had made the right decision, a new feeling sparked. An unfamiliar sense of urgency and restlessness, his usual optimism was gone: now he wanted nothing more but to get rid of all these chains. He grew ever more tired, ever more impatient, a fleeting thought of hatred passed through his mind. He couldn't recognize himself in all this violent turbulence bubbling inside him.

As the last day came, he went one last time to the bar. Their music was already playing, and suddenly he felt a sudden sharp pain to the chest. He was having trouble breathing. Gasping for air, he went outside and sat on the curb. Longing for numbness, for peace and quiet, he thought he heard her whisper. He sat up and went home.

A feeling of displacement echoes and grows ever more tangible. What once was believed to be steady and reliable, is currently in a state of turbulent flux. He does not belong to the neon glow of this forever-moving and forever-changing city; the lurid flow is becoming disorienting and tormenting to the leading character. He feels as if he has abruptly been dislodged by his surroundings: either the space he stands at has suddenly become distorted or he has simply grown unadapted — even his already-cramped room seems to have shrivelled. He gets up, walks through his flophouse front door and buoyantly wanders on the dazzling and restless streets; however, they no longer feel familiar and no one out there is in truth recognisable to him. The light is even more artificial now than it used to be and it causes discomfort to the character's eye; even the sounds are somehow unreal — aerial, dreamlike.

The character feels detached, loosened: there is barely any space between him and the permanent tide of undisclosed faces (frantically moving, shouting, labouring, being); and yet, he is in fact in the middle of a void, floating far-off. As he walks down the flashy blaring streets, his head can't help but drift away and land on recollections of a neighbouring past — soothing memoirs of a mismatched place. As he perceives it, this place is a sort of illusive past where nothing ever changes; where everything remains coherently the same (the sort of coherence that he despairingly lacks in the present) — where existence oozes unhurriedly and nimbly, always in harmony with his soul. The memories that come to his mind, nevertheless, refer to a concrete physical place — a place where he lived in former days; a place dissimilar to the one which fiercely tramples him now. A deep feeling of nostalgia crawls into the character's head and begins to dominate his reality — and his subconscious. He recalls a warm welcoming place; he recalls the tender eyes and the closeness of his acquaintances; he recalls a neighbourly feeling, a sense of smooth belonging. And the enthusiastic sounds, the high spirits.

NOSTALGIA, A DISSOLVING HARBOR

2



He recalls the bright crimson colours, the bold images and the untroubled balanced motion of people, always delighted — never in a distraught pace, bitterly living. He recalls the balmy nights, the thick yet soft atmosphere, the soulful tunes and the untroubled shared drinking and mingling alongside the endless sea. He recalls the carefree breeze in the evening, the mellow light of the fainting sun — the calm fulfilment. There were no harsh neon lights, permanently flickering and piercing his eyes; there were no hyperactive waves of distressed people; there was no screeching; there was no bustling city. There was no isolation, no solitude, no heartache; there was a peaceful long-lasting embrace brought by the warmth of others and of the now-dissolved city.

And he unconsciously begins to magnify this close yet distant past, thus contemplating a feeling of craved unreachable bliss. He now hopelessly resides in a place he no longer belongs to, even though he is not able to explain his sudden change of heart. And he can only see himself as a lonesome drifter now. And therefore, the memories of that elusive time become burdensome to the character, as his idealised

perspective of an unobtainable existence overshadows all of his thoughts and actions. And his reality feels blurrier, thrown off balance.

Peace of mind is inevitably unachievable; living desolately in the delusion of a vanished past is insufferable. And therefore, the character commits himself to erase all recollections of this utopian place. He encloses the images of the unfeasible past by establishing an expiration date: in a month from then, all the memories would be lost eternally and serenity could once again be achieved. He woefully knows this is the wisest way to carry existence — the only viable way. And a month of oppressive living goes by, dominated by a state of exhaustive bewilderment, an unbearable feeling of emotional and physical dislocation and obsessive yearning — the past is gone and not retrievable; the reminiscence has grown unendurable. The character understands the time to obliterate them has come and that it is irreversible.

Memories stay for eternity if we don't erase them. Even if we don't particularly remember something, that doesn't mean we don't have that memory in us. Like that specific object we keep inside a box, in a big old bookshelf. The days pass by and, at some point, we don't remember what's inside the box. In a posterior time, it doesn't occur to us that we even had a box with something inside in our bookshelf.

Memories vanish but never truly disappear. Like the earth, memory has layers. They build themselves on top of each other and some of them, even if buried deep down, constantly emerge to the surface, like lava in a volcano. Others, however, are fossilized and will only be revealed if we remove the upper layers.

The leading character has been removing his memories by chronological order. First, the latest memories, associated with his loved one. Then, the ones related to a nostalgic place, preceding the one he is at now. At this point, the character is doomed to find the deep memories of his childhood. These fossils are now unveiled and became the upper layer of his mind, of his world. There's nothing else covering them. Only the dust of the short memories of the near past that don't even look like memories, of how fresh and unconscious they are. And even those short memories, when they float with the wind, they always find a place to land.

These fossilized memories were scattered across this layer and were not meant to be found all at the same time. Once the leading character found the first fossil, they all started showing up. The first one alludes to a beautiful sunny day.

He can almost feel the heat of the sun in his skin. The relaxing sound of the waves becomes more and more discernible. There is joy. Someone laughs. It's a woman but he is not sure about her identity. Her voice resonates in a very special way. Goosebumps. He hadn't heard that mellifluous voice in so long. The voice is getting distant. The woman is distracted with a man, whose figure is blurred. There's a kid running away



from that voice. Suddenly he remembers who they are. The woman is his mother and he is the kid. Running away from his mother, unaware it was going to be the last time he would see her. Like a magnet, he is pulled to the woods, with that thirst for adventure. His mother doesn't notice his disappearance, she is laid down in the sand with that man he can't remember the identity.

The fossil is emerging more and more and he remembers what happens next. When the kid gets back from the woods, it will be already night and he won't find his mother.

He starts screaming, swallowed by that memory. There's no present for him anymore. He screams to the child, thinking there's still a chance that the past can be changed. All he sees is that kid running faster and faster, with his childish unconsciousness. When the kid tries to go back, he gets lost and the sun sets. He hears nothing. Not even his voice of the future calling him. When he finds the beach where he was at, there's no one looking for him. He is alone. In the present, the leading character cries and tries to close his eyes violently, expecting to avoid seeing that painful image. There's nothing he can do, that memory has

been unveiled and that's all he can see now. His own past suffering, unable to change that.

The sadness in him commutes to rage. So many questions. "Why didn't my mother look for me? Who was that man that distracted my mom?".

Maybe if the leading character had some memories of his present time and space, he could reflect on how this episode of needing the concern of his mother influenced his need for the attention of the woman he was obsessed with. But he can't. As he understands he won't find the answers to the questions of the past, he starts wondering how to escape from this sorrow he is in. That reasoning didn't take much more than a few minutes. He decided to determinate an expiration date for this childhood memories. But this time, it was not a question of months. In one week, all these old memories would vanish forever.

In the midst of the latest events, a crack has just cast its shadows over the entire time span – from the past to the present and, almost inevitably, to the future. At this precise moment, the leading character is seated in the center of his room, just about to start another overthinking episode. But in all honesty, he is no longer there. He is no longer anywhere, if one could say so. It is as if his conscience kept oscillating from mere contemplation to a horrific vision of a brutal, mind-controlling state. As he gets up and walks around the room, feeling the sweat dripping from the palm of his hands, the perception is clearly blurred. These memory holes became a torture palace and almost a discouraging spectacle of a boot grinding into his face forever. Nonetheless, the rare memories still remaining, however disconnected, play their part.

He is now walking from room to room, in a hollow house, finding no traces of whatsoever of his past journey. Not that he is actually looking for them. The reminiscent memories are all tangible and mundane, just like a practical joke. The focus is set on what he became on this day, on this hour, even on this minute. And then again, the focus is reset on what he feels on this day, on this hour, on this minute. It is a wholesome but confusing and never-ending exhausting process. Just a moment ago it occurred to him that maybe scrutinizing every detail, every inch of his personality would be the right decision. And that is exactly what is about to be set in motion.

He began by mentally criticizing the conformity achieved lately. And from then on, he started debating the hypnotic persuasion he instigates on every task. The need to perfect in every single step of the way or the boundless consumption of objects he sees all around. It is again a confusing and unstable state of mind. All he knows at this point is that certain habits, certain personal characteristics should be given away. The exhausting quest for overachievement, the excessive self-critique that is never truly absent... Not only they seem unnecessary obsessions but also, they became painful and a complete burden.

INNER SPECTERS, OUTER SPECTATORS

4



And not just these but the small tendencies, the brief but repetitive patterns of his routines creep in as well. Whether it is the constant procrastination or even the urge to keep everything organized and clean, this too, is a familiar configuration of boring cycles, he recalls. Almost as if his body was a personification of a template of moves, predictable choices on a daily basis that unfold, every time, all the time. In which case, one would have to consider which template would be more fitted to fulfil the activities. Maybe one that wouldn't enclose these redundancies, these glitches and imperfections, he infers.

In the end, it is a mesmerizing sensation. All these handpicked targets are felt like belonging to a vast picture, yet the character sees only a small portion of that. It is an excruciating feeling, to watch mere fragmented images scattered through a time and space continuum that is impossible to perceive.

After walking, back and forth, for quite some time he pauses for a brief moment and looks around, only to realize he doesn't quite know where he is. The room is dark, and there is a slight moisty breeze in the air. The curtains are thin and seem to wave, propelled

by the wind that blows from the opened window. Strangely enough, he doesn't know why he insists on opening the window when it is clearly so much noise outside and the air is polluted. Probably, another vain and inconsequential habit that he surely must let go. He doesn't seem to be able to distinguish the rights from the wrongs, the likes from the dislikes.

And yet, "this too shall pass", he repeats loudly. By the end of this day he will set another expiration date and eventually burst these shenanigans. The decision is taken while he rips the curtains apart. Precisely in twenty-four hours, all these flaws will disappear. Even though they probably won't, for new ones will arise. But he will never know this. If anything, he is one step closer to an immense nothingness.

ENACTMENTS

Setting the previous texts as the foundation, a four-part series of videos was produced, seeking to broaden the contours of the fiction by simultaneously hatching some personal viewpoints, as each video was created individually.

REFERENCES

THIRD INSTALLMENT

TRAVELOGUE

The third installment focuses on the transformation of the fiction into public online experience, in times of a global pandemic.

FOURTH INSTALLMENT

EPILOGUE

The fourth installment concludes the project with a global vision on the entire process and the importance of all the questions and answers brought by this fiction.